



## Dramaturgies of Change: staging political transformation

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**Abstract**

Against the backdrop of escalating climate change and widespread political dissatisfaction, calls are increasing for radical transformation of socioeconomic and political structures. But how such transformations could materialise remains an open question. In this article, we argue for alternative ways of understanding political stasis and change. Drawing on the established tradition of interpreting politics as theatre, we argue that dramaturgical analysis helps to spot problematic conventions and introduce productive alternatives. We introduce the notion of ‘dramaturgies of change’ to identify the dramaturgical interventions able to destabilise and reconfigure existing political regimes. We further offer the notion of the ‘dominant symbolic order’, a realm of stylistically stable but substantively flexible signifiers such as the crucifix and freedom, that actors must gain interpretive control of to lend legitimacy to their interventions. Using this framework to illuminate three examples – Nazism, the Civil Rights Movement, and Occupy – we argue that radical political change gains strength from symbolic conservatism.

Political change; Politics as theatre; dramaturgical analysis; political symbols; transformation

Contemporary politics has entered a radical age. On multiple fronts, people are calling for profound change. In the environmental sphere especially, there is a growing chorus of voices

calling for transformation. Yet from global summits to street activism, political institutions and actors struggle to trigger change at the speed and scale required. The failures of transformational politics are complex and multiple: from the self-serving nature of nation states (Crowley, 2021; Eckersley, 2022; Harris, 2013; Maltais, 2014); to state capture by vested interests (Bernauer, 2020; Diesendorf and Taylor, 2023; Mildemberger, 2020); to the outsourcing of energy production and concomitant defanging of worker resistance (Mitchell, 2013). But also at a broader and more profound level, people's capacity to imagine alternatives has itself been constrained, captured, and undervalued (Ghosh, 2017; Hajer and Oomen, 2025; Hoffman et al., 2024; Stacey, 2022, 2024). In this context, it comes as no surprise that contemporary climate politics fails to deliver the economic and social transformation that reputable bodies like the IPBES, IPCC, and the UN's IRP call for. Such failures to address environmental concerns echo broader shortcomings in and beyond Western politics, such as the inability to meaningfully respond to mass migration (Kapelner, 2024); ongoing racial and sexual discrimination (Tormos-Aponte et al., 2021); rising inequality (Menocal, 2021); and political fragmentation (Pildes, 2021). In short, despite widespread recognition of its failings, politics is stuck, reproducing and exacerbating both ecological and social harms. If anything, it is now movements in favour of maintaining or resuscitating modes of domination that are gaining ground. We urgently need new understandings of how political impotence gets locked in and how to trigger transformation.

Drawing on a theoretical tradition that sees political structures as importantly imaginary, existing mainly through their performance, this article looks for avenues of political change in the theatrical enactment of politics (Apter, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2015). When we interpret politics as theatre, we see that what is considered politically possible and desirable is partly shaped by the stages from which it is conveyed and the performances through which it is enacted. With this in mind, we

suggest that changes in the theatrical enactment of politics aid in changing political reality. We offer an analytic framework for understanding these ‘dramaturgies of change’ and speculate as to the dramaturgical features of success and failure. To do so, we introduce a three-part argument. First, we draw on existing theory to explain how political regimes are sustained and legitimized through ‘dramaturgical regimes’, that is, established theatrical conventions conditioning what is perceived as politically possible and desirable. We emphasise the capacity of dramaturgy to suspend people’s disbelief in political possibilities and configurations (Anderson, 2016; Ezrahi, 2012; Hajer, 2005; Oomen et al., 2021; Rancière, 2010). Secondly, we introduce ‘dramaturgies of change’ as a concept for understanding the dramaturgical innovations associated with enacting political change. Finally, we observe that these changes themselves draw their authority from more embedded cultural sources, which we refer to as the dominant symbolic order.

We illustrate this framework by analysing attempts at radical political change. Following our emphasis on politics as imagined and enacted, we define radical political change as *a widespread shift in perceptions of what political reality is, could, or should be*. To explore this, we revisit three well-studied historical examples: two examples of success – Nazism and the Civil Rights Movement – and one that did not succeed – Occupy. Our exploration leads us to a position that may seem counterintuitive and will certainly be troubling for activists taking an iconoclastic approach to the symbols they associate with the political status quo. We suggest that dramaturgical regimes derive their power from the dominant symbolic order, and that, in turn, gaining interpretive influence over that order is a crucial step in making radical change intelligible and appealing. In short, political radicalism gains strength from symbolic conservatism.

**Political practices as ‘dramaturgical regimes’**

In this section, we draw on dramaturgical theory to conceptualise how political legitimacy is sustained through dramaturgical enactment. No matter the coercive power of a regime, its proper functioning still requires that people are willing to play along with its rules. The empirical study of political legitimacy is focused on identifying how and under what conditions people become convinced of the authority of regimes and the desirability, appropriateness, and fairness of the exercise of power (Beetham, 2004; Netelenbos, 2016). The dramaturgical analysis of politics can be understood as a means of identifying the theatrical devices deployed to maintain, challenge, or claim legitimacy (Aykut et al., 2021; Ezrahi, 2012; Geertz, 1981; Hajer, 2009; Scott, 1989). For example, Ezrahi (2012) explains that symbolic moments such as the orderly transition of power, elections, and representative voting in parliaments are central to people's experience and acceptance of democratic politics. Political regimes, "must be imagined and performed by multiple agencies in order to exist" (Ezrahi, 2012: 1). Likewise, Hajer (2009) shows how politicians project authority in moments of crisis, performing a sense of political stability and safety.

Two shared notions emerge from the literature: Firstly, political action takes place in routinized, codified, and habitual practices (Anderson, 2016; Billig, 1995; Hilgartner, 2000; Jasanoff, 2015; Oomen et al., 2021). Secondly, it is therefore possible to identify specific genres and practices through which politics comes into expression. For example, in monarchies, dramaturgical repertoires like coronation rituals deify an all-powerful monarch; in democracies, in contrast, it is often the legislature or popular sovereignty that is sacralised through, for example, annual openings of parliament (Ezrahi, 2012). Because of this tight association between political regimes and the repertoires they employ, we use the term 'dramaturgical regimes', defined as "routinized sets of performances and conventions through which politics are enacted" (Hajer and Oomen, 2025: 49). If political regimes are the "ensemble of patterns" that determine what is politically possible, by

whom, and how (Schmitter and Karl, 1991), then dramaturgical regimes are the means by which these patterns are expressed, legitimised, and maintained. Dramaturgical regimes are, simply put, behavioural and theatrical rules. As the examples of monarchies and democracies indicate, these conventions are regionally and temporally distinct. The deployment of monarchical repertoires in democratic societies, for example, can invite outrage because they fail to align with audiences’ idea of what constitutes a legitimate political process. And more subtly, US democratic repertoires that emphasise the authority of the president can feel jarring when deployed in more cabinet-oriented European contexts.

Dramaturgical regimes condition social and political realities in each context: what and who matters, what can be said and seen, what is deemed appropriate, and how things ought to happen. They create a “pattern of supposing how things must be” (Purdy, 2015: 22). Generating such patterns of supposing, dramaturgical regimes tend to get traction through repetition and gradual normalization. Over time, they come to condition what is perceived as possible in the political imaginary. As a result, successful dramaturgies are normally implicit. Their power is rooted precisely in that they have become an authoritative, appropriate, and taken for granted frame of reference.

**Elements of a dramaturgical analysis**

To analyze the strengths of dramaturgical regimes, it is important to attend to the theatrical aspects of their reproduction. We focus on six elements. The first four draw on and develop Hajer’s (2009) widely-adopted framework:

- *Performance* refers to the contextualized interaction itself, as this interaction creates an understanding of what is at stake, frames debates and knowledge, and configures power relations.
- *Scripting* refers to the narrative arc of a sequence of performances; the assumed order of events; the roles and characters assigned (protagonists and antagonists); the social cues assumed; and the response anticipated. For example, the script of environmental summits is always similar: “the progression from initial hope, through conflict, moving to the brink of despair as negotiations inevitably falter, followed by eventual redemption” (Death, 2011: 9). Specific moments are then picked out to bring this narrative to life, such as the widely circulated image of world leaders holding their hands aloft in celebration to mark the signing of the Paris Agreement.
- *Staging* describes the way a performance is organized: who the protagonists are, who steps onto the stage, the ways boundaries are drawn between actors and audience, and the minutiae of the performance’s design, its symbols, colours, materials. There are multiple stages on which political change is performed: summits, parliaments, courts, the streets. Each stage has its own distinctive dramaturgy that limits the range of available moves that actors can make.
- *Setting* refers to the physical setting in which events unfold: from the natural and built environments that provide a backdrop, to the spaces in which the action takes place. Returning to the example of environmental summits: partly on account of the huge volume of people involved and the need for microphones, recording devices, and desks, summits take place in enormous complexes that allow for extraordinary control of the elements:

lighting, temperature, and sound. This setting affords a particular form of theatrical performance.

Each event or set of events sits within a wider social and political context. We therefore develop Alexander (2004) to offer two further elements:

- *Production*: The many stages from which political reality is performed are neither autonomous nor discrete. They operate within a broader network. We suggest that attending to the subtle balance between stages, and how this balance is policed, is crucial to understanding how a regime operates and how it can be challenged. For example, whereas autocratic regimes are overt and coercive in determining what kinds of performances are acceptable, by whom, and on what stage, in liberal democracies, the policing is far more subtle, with leaders often publicly celebrating the dedication of protestors, while behind the scenes restricting the kinds of action that are permissible. Subtler than merely attending to who has control over the means of cultural production (cf. Alexander, 2004), we consider which performances people perceive as appropriate on which stage, the broader web in which they see that stage as sitting, and through this, how they believe power ought to operate.
- *Mediation*: Even if those on stage can exert a strong influence over their immediate audience, they nonetheless must take the wider resonance of their actions into account. The ‘media echo’ of a performance is as crucial for its public impact as the performance itself. The range of effective (and even possible) political performances changes as media infrastructures change (Cammaerts, 2012) and new publics are created. It is therefore crucial that a dramaturgical analysis attends to the individuals, groups, and channels by



which performances are conveyed to different publics, and especially to which elements get "picked up" and to whom they are conveyed.

Together, these six elements form an analytical toolbox through which we can study dramaturgical regimes and how they are unsettled.

### **Conceptualising dramaturgies of change and the dominant symbolic order**

The imaginative hold of dramaturgical regimes is never absolute. Their self-evidence can be disrupted by those who creatively, effectively, and provocatively perform politics differently (Alexander, 2002; Aykut et al., 2021; McAdam, 1996; Rödder et al., 2023; Tufte, 2020). That is our focus here: the potential of alternative dramaturgies to enable people to imagine that the world could and should be very different. Doing so requires persuasive performances that encourage people to accept an alternative way of looking at the world. In line with our definition of radical political change, we define these dramaturgies of change as *attempts to shift what political reality is, could, or should be by disrupting and reconfiguring dramaturgical conventions*.

Given the wealth of research into the role of dramaturgy in explaining the political status quo, the role of dramaturgy in enabling political change remains remarkably underexamined. There is discussion of how structural changes, societal events, and performative glitches create opportunities for new stages to open and new performances to emerge (della Porta, 2020; Isin, 2009; Meyrowitz, 1990; Rancière, 2010; Sewell, 1996). There is also an increasing body of research adopting dramaturgical language to explain how social movements express themselves (Benford and Hunt, 1992; Tilly, 2008; Tufte, 2020). A number of studies identify the dramaturgical techniques adopted by climate activists to negotiate and challenge the political status quo (Aykut et al., 2022; Rödder et al., 2023). Further research explores the role of dramaturgy in prefiguring

alternative futures (Asara and Kallis, 2023), and cultivating atmospheres in which such futures can be imagined (Hoffman et al., 2024). Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that it is not only bold actions but also small dramaturgical tweaks that enable change. Hajer and Oomen (2025) posit that these dramaturgies of change may have the potential to reconfigure environmental politics at large. Finally, Alexander (2004) has sought to identify the conditions of dramaturgical success and failure in complex, differentiated societies. Our contribution to this literature is threefold. First, by drawing the lens outwards to look at moments of radical political change we can speculate as to broader patterns. Second, our emphasis on dramaturgical regimes clarifies the backdrop against which innovations are developed. Third, by drawing on semiotic literature to posit the dominant symbolic order, we offer an account of from where people gain the authority to enact their innovations.

At their core, dramaturgies of change are culturally and temporally distinct interventions responding to reigning dramaturgical regimes. They can only be understood in relation to the dramaturgical conventions they reconfigure. For example, as we will see, actors can seek to unsettle the production by fusing the dramaturgies of different stages, or by adopting performances deemed inappropriate to a given stage (Reed, 2005). By counter-scripting, antagonists can interrupt the course of events and how they are interpreted (Hajer, 2009; see also Aykut et al., 2022). And by adopting unexpected stages and settings, it is possible to convey alternative ideas of what politics is and could be (Chanter, 2023; Rancière, 2010; Rödder et al., 2023).

Importantly, the ability to create dramaturgical innovations in themselves is rarely sufficient to explain shifts in political reality. It is crucial to ask, on the basis of what authority are actors able to make these changes? In moments of political turmoil, both those seeking to maintain the status

quo and those seeking to trigger change adopt dramaturgical styles that draw on similar symbols. For example, as we shall see, the crucifix; and the image of the good, Christian citizen serve as such symbols in 1930s Germany and 1960s US respectively. These symbols are deeply embedded in a given cultural context, only very slowly changing. Drawing on Durkheimian readings of why some ideas are able to inspire deep and widespread political commitment (Alexander, 2006; Bellah, 1967; Berger, 1990; Lynch, 2014; Reed, 2020), we suggest that these symbols are the means by which a group represents itself to itself. They constitute what we call a ‘dominant symbolic order’: *the realm of collectively held symbols and notions that embody people’s sacred ideas*. These symbols form a “consensus on the sense of the world” (Bourdieu, 1977: 167) and thus sustain and legitimize regimes. By skilfully drawing the dominant symbols of a targeted audience into their dramaturgical repertoires, we will show, those aiming for change can bring that audience with them.

In social theory there is a broad recognition of the importance of dominant symbols in maintaining the political status quo (Edelman, 2013; Hayward and Dumbuya, 1983). Change, on the other hand, unfolds when these symbols melt away (Diehl 2024) or are undermined (Santino, 2011) and replaced (Reed 2020). Alternatively, we posit that dramaturgical performances and political realities always correspond to and navigate a dominant symbolic order that is at once more durable and more encompassing. As such, both those seeking to maintain the political status quo and those pushing for change must capture interpretive control over this order if they are to convincingly construct a political reality (see also Coll, 1985).

Crucially, aesthetic continuity does not imply political continuity. Like a realm of floating signifiers (Barthes, 1977: 39), the dominant symbolic order is stylistically stable but substantively flexible (Levi-Strauss, 1987: 64). As such, it allows actors to offer the appearance of continuity

even as political circumstances shift. This openness does not diminish the symbol's power (Márquez, 2025). Think, for example, of how the crucifix is mobilised for diverse and conflicting agendas. The dominant symbolic order is both deeply meaningful and fundamentally open to interpretation. Drawing on a constructivist approach to language, we can see this substantive flexibility also applies to some of the words and ideas by which societies define themselves. Hence we treat the ideas of democracy and freedom as symbols – ones which have been evoked to sure up divergent political visions.

Despite its relative stylistic stability, we do not suggest that the dominant symbolic order is fixed. There are plenty of examples in which the development of new symbols has been central to the instantiation and consolidation of new political realities. We are simply suggesting that *at least* in the early phases of social change, the ability to persuasively interpret already dominant symbols can prove vital.

**Staging change**

Our interest here is in radical political change. With this in mind, in selecting examples to illustrate our approach, we searched for attempts at shifting what political reality is, could, or should be. Four further criteria set the baseline for our selection. First, aiming to balance qualitative depth with the capacity to generate comparative insights, we wanted just a few cases. Second, interested in illuminating our approach rather than revealing fresh evidence, we focused on cases that were widely-known and well-researched. Third, to ensure that we were working with actors with similar levels of reflexivity, we limited ourselves to cases for which there was evidence that the organisers themselves had considered the dramaturgical nature of their actions. Finally, interested in contexts in which, in principle, people were free to adopt the dramaturgical styles and symbols that suited them, we focused on changes that had unfolded against a liberal democratic background.

Beyond this baseline, we were attentive to how our examples would speak to one another and, through this, to the field. Particularly in our present political moment, we were eager to address the field's – and our own – bias towards progressive social movements, which we felt might be limiting understandings of how dramaturgical innovations become persuasive. We therefore sought examples from opposing ends of an ideological spectrum. This led us to two cases: National Socialism in Germany, which created a political space in which it was possible to commit genocide in Europe; and the Civil Rights Movement in the US, which made the end of racial segregation imaginable. Inspired by the STS principle of symmetry (Pels, 2003), we decided to compare the two positive examples with a counter-case in which actors had sought but failed to engender radical change: Occupy. We acknowledge that each case involves a range of different material conditions that make comparison tricky. Naturally, such conditions must be addressed to provide a comprehensive assessment of how attempts at change succeeded or failed (Reed 2020). Yet following the tradition of social scientific pragmatism, our interest here is not in providing a causal account (Bowen et al., 2020; Wills and Lake, 2020). Instead, ours is a more humble, exploratory attempt to observe commonalities in the dramaturgical approaches of groups seeking to engender radical change.

### *Nazism: Seizing control of the production*

To this day, Nazi propaganda is legendary for its insidious efficacy. Yet Nazi dramaturgy arose in a particular context. Overlooking that context makes it harder to identify what made the dramaturgy so convincing. Both the widespread identity crisis among Germans following the defeat of the First World War and the collapse of its monarchy are well documented, as are the tumultuous economic circumstances of the Weimar republic. Clearly, such a setting provides fertile soil for dramaturgical disruption. Importantly, however, the Weimar Republic was not as

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3 symbolically impotent as is often suggested (Canning, 2010: 571). In fact, Nazi dramaturgies  
4 adopted many dramaturgical conventions initiated in the Weimar years.  
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9 Under the guidance of Edwin Redslob, the Republic developed innovative public ceremonies  
10 characterised by the honouring of the dead and the celebration of the constitution through mass  
11 participation and parades. These ceremonies were designed to ensure that the “sentiment of state  
12 [could] establish itself and also fulfil the citizens in their hearts” (Achilles, 2010: 668). These  
13 innovations were not destroyed but “continued, expanded, and perfected in the Nazi period”  
14 (Rossol, 2010: 631). It was even designers under the Republic – and not, as is often assumed, the  
15 Nazis – who first used a crowd to form a living flag.  
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26 Yet there was one crucial difference between Weimar and Nazi dramaturgies: the production. The  
27 Republic took a secular liberal approach that emphasised religious and ideological freedom. Much  
28 care was taken to ensure that the symbols employed were inclusive and adopted voluntarily. While  
29 churches were encouraged to celebrate the Republic’s central ceremony of Constitution Day, their  
30 participation was invited rather than demanded. Meanwhile, little pressure was imposed on  
31 dissenting states like Bavaria or groups like the communists that resisted or refused to mark the  
32 occasion (Achilles, 2010: 680; 688). The Weimar Republic thus endorsed the idea that society  
33 consists of multiple, decentred stages, each with its distinct political role and dramaturgical  
34 repertoire: national stages, party political stages, religious stages.  
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49 The Nazis, on the other hand, re-fused the multiplicity of stages, cultivating a religious aura around  
50 their political vision. It is instructive to explore the aesthetic means by which they gained the  
51 authority to make this bold move. At the same time as the Republic was pedalling its soft secularist  
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agenda, a strong anti-religious sentiment was growing among socialists and communists, influenced partly by the rising power of atheist Russia. Many Christians felt threatened. Early Nazi dramaturgy played on this sense of victimhood, positioning the Nazis as the inheritors and protectors of Christianity (Weir, 2015: 230; Weir and Greenberg, 2022: 17).

Whereas persecution of Christians would later be systematic, in the early years Christian symbolism was instrumental in casting Germans as the chosen people (Kühne, 2013). A colonially-inflected sense of racial superiority was, of course, rampant throughout the West. Yet particularly for a nation dispossessed of empire, “traditional Christian hostility towards the Jew” was key in producing a polluted other against which ‘true’ Germans could define themselves (Munson, 2018: 6; see also Kertzer and Mokosch, 2020).

It was from this position of cultural continuity that the party was able to appropriate the mass spectacles of democrats, as well as the bannered marches of socialists and communists, without alienating cultural conservatives. By first depicting themselves as the legitimate custodians of Christian symbols, the Nazis gained the legitimacy to later replace those symbols altogether (Akland, 2012; Kelty, 2004; Munson, 2018; Taylor, 1981). This later work was, of course, reinforced by the destruction and censorship of alternative modes of cultural expression, including in churches. Hence, as Rossol puts it, “[r]ather than inventing mass spectacles, the Nazi movement brought them under the state’s control” (Rossol, 2010: 638).

The move of first emulating and then replacing Christian aesthetics found its way into every aspect of Nazi dramaturgy. This point is exemplified by the Nuremberg Rallies. In the 1934 rally, a host

of Christian symbols remained, with, for example, crucifixes being placed alongside swastikas. Yet only a year later, in 1935, the crucifixes had largely disappeared. Party leaders actively compared their popularity to that of the church. One official claimed triumphantly that Nazi festivals provide “more intense experiences than the sermons of the priests in the churches” (Thamer, 1996: 179), while “Goebbels himself frequently talked of the need to emulate the mysticism of the Roman Catholic church” (Taylor, 1981: 513).

The *performances* “catered to an audience accustomed to the rituals and symbolism of Christianity” (Akland 2012, 49). Hitler entered spaces as a messiah, through partings in the crowd, embracing adoring children as they were presented to him. He stood before a pulpit, thousands of adoring followers spread out before him. The *scripting* positioned Hitler “as the Christ of the Second Coming” (Taylor 1981, 515), grounding nationalist symbolism in older Christian myths that “[t]he Volk are the chosen ones” and “the blood of the fallen is 'holy'” (Taylor 1981, 513).

Albert Speer’s famous *staging* provided the perfect backdrop. Speer’s aim was to blur the boundary between actors and audience, giving the impression that all were united as one (Reed 2015, 77). His primary means of achieving this was the so-called “Cathedral of Light”. Shooting one hundred and thirty airplane search lights into the sky, and allowing them to converge hundreds of metres above, “the light seemed to form the great pillars and ceiling of a vast room, enclosing the audience within a luminescent architectural marvel together, in the church of Nazism” (Reed, 2015: 77). Church is the operative word. Despite being innovative in style, the substance was substantially rooted in symbolic references that the public understood and accepted. Sir Nevil



Henderson, the then British Ambassador to Berlin, described the effect as “sacred and beautiful at the same time” (Reed 2015, 77).

The staging was augmented by the *setting*. Nazis deliberately emphasized Nuremberg’s Holy Roman heritage (Hagen and Ostergren, 2006: 172) to evoke the imperial, Christian past. The grounds of the rallies themselves included a well-attended memorial to the fallen soldiers of the First World War, while the city centre received a makeover to highlight its imperial Germanic elements and erase signs of modernism (Hagen and Ostergren, 2006: 168).

The Nazis deliberately designed their rallies in a manner amenable to emerging forms of *mediation*. The ground-breaking films of Leni Riefenstahl, in particular, translated the transcendent effects of Nazi rallies into a compelling symbolic language, accessible to the nation as a whole. In her 1935, *Triumph of the Will*, one of the three highest grossing films of the year, she constructed “Hitler as a god-like figure descending from the heavens through the clouds over Nuremberg to visit his adoring worshippers” (Sennett, 2014: 57).

Nazi dramaturgies were a crucial part of the party’s success, as they lured people into a story of exceptionalism and rapture. Even those who claimed to disagree with Nazism found themselves swept up “into a fervor of passion and support” (Reed 2015, 76; see also Akland 2012, 7). Regardless of whether Nazism was genuinely Christian in either substance or style, the party clearly recognised the cultural dominance of Christian symbols, and drew much of its early legitimacy from positioning itself as the inheritor of those symbols.

*Civil Rights Movement: Flipping the script*

Dramaturgies of change obviously do not need to end in genocide, especially if they're fighting established social hierarchies instead of entrenching them. Symbolism and theatricality have also played a crucial role in progressive political developments. One such development was the American Civil Rights Movement (CRM). Like the Nazis, Civil Rights activists were keenly aware of their theatricality. They deliberately reproduced layers of symbolism in order for their protests to become legible and convincing. Martin Luther King Junior's famous "I have a dream" speech, for example, makes clear reference to Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and was delivered from the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, the nation's capital city. Moves such as these served to enshrine the principles of American democracy (Gorski, 2017: 148).

Overtly emphasising the legitimacy of the state while repurposing its dominant symbols and narratives, the CRM's main dramaturgical innovation was in unsettling the *script*. The early 60s were the height of American exceptionalism and trust in government (Bell, 2024). The notion of America as the "City on a Hill" – a great and pure experiment in democracy – had become a central symbol (Gamble, 2012: 133–135). Understanding itself as the bulwark against the ideologies and crimes of Nazi Germany and the communist East, the United States was lauded as a champion of freedom and civility. At the heart of this self-understanding was the myth of the United States as governed for the people and by the people (Lechner, 2017: 41). In this myth, one arrives at political change through open institutions, not through open revolt. The standard script is that the democratic state is a fair and impartial arbiter of citizens' multifarious and conflicting demands. Progress is possible through the legal process. In this logic, civil disobedience is automatically illegitimate, as it bypasses democratic conventions.

Civil rights activists turned this script around, exposing the violence of the state towards apparently upstanding citizens. Once again, it is crucial to attend to the means by which they gained the authority to do this – not only as non-state actors, but as people deemed, by virtue of their ethnicity, a threat to cultural purity and political stability.

The strategy had two elements: First, they goaded the state into deploying its monopoly on violence through civil disobedience and protest. Second, they had to make state violence appear unjustified. For this to work, as Jeffrey Alexander (2006) has shown, the CRM had to render the victims of state violence relatable for (largely) White audiences in (mainly) northern states. They did so by appealing to the sacred principles of the American body politic: democracy, Christianity, civility (Alexander, 2006: 389). The image had to be of brutish state officials attacking the idea of America itself (Alexander, 2006; Colaiaco, 1986; McAdam, 1996).

To ensure that the state appeared reprehensible and a suspect racial underclass the embodiment of the body politic required a flawless *performance*. Images abound of protestors dressed in their Sunday best. But getting the performance right was more than a question of choosing the right costume. Following centuries of oppression and a lifetime of fear, protestors themselves required rigorous training. Activists rehearsed possible confrontations with police officers and members of the public, using techniques drawn from theatre to practice remaining calm in the face of racist abuse and violence (McGinley, 2021).

These performances were enhanced by the careful selection of *stages* and *settings*. When civil rights leaders sought to speak to the broader American public directly, they did so from buildings representative of the sacred principles of American democracy, such as parliaments, churches, and public libraries. When they wanted to protest, they made segregated buses, schools, and shops into

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3 their stages. And they deliberately chose cities renowned for racist violence. Protests in  
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5 Birmingham, Alabama epitomised the latter approach. Under Commissioner of Public Safety  
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7 Eugene ‘Bull’ O’Connor, Birmingham police were known for their brutal tactics. Protests there  
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9 would be sure to invite egregious violence. Sure enough, after months of sit-ins and marches,  
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11 photographers were able to capture images of churches bombed by white supremacists, police dogs  
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13 attacking peaceful protestors, and the fire brigade hosing sitting protestors.  
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18 Strategists recognised that if it were down to local, racially-biased *media* alone, these events would  
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20 not have had the desired impact. But as Alexander (2006) details, strategists worked closely with  
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22 journalists from the northern press to ensure that protestors were depicted in a manner that  
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24 sympathetic white people in northern states would find relatable. For instance, Rosa Parks had not  
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26 been the first person to refuse to sit in the back of the bus. Instead, she was chosen as the media  
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28 image of this movement because she was recognisable by white America: an upstanding young  
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30 woman; a Christian; a librarian (Fackler, 2016).  
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35 The by-then near-ubiquitous medium of television played an especially important role in  
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37 “communicating and dramatizing” both triumphs and atrocities (Gould quoted in Bodroghkozy  
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39 2012, 113). Following the March on Washington that culminated in King’s prophetic “I have a  
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41 dream” speech, famous television critic Jack Gould (ibid) claimed that it was TV coverage of the  
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43 march that had “finally penetrated [the] huge camp of the uncommitted”. And in the wake of the  
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45 infamously bloody voting rights march in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, King proclaimed that  
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47 “we are here to say to the white men that we no longer will let them use clubs on us in the dark  
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49 corners. We’re going to make them do it in the glaring light of television.” (quoted in Bodroghkozy  
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51 2012).  
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Clearly, the CRM did not have the Nazis' access to the means of symbolic *production*. But through dramaturgical flare, artful persuasion, and meticulous organising, they had developed a significant ability to project their narrative. This makes it more significant to observe their respect for conventions. Unlike the Nazis, the Civil Rights activists were careful to avoid threatening the fine balance between different stages. For example, they deliberately avoided staging King's "I have a dream" speech at the Capitol Building, which hosts both houses of parliament, on the grounds that this could be interpreted as a threat. By choosing the Lincoln memorial instead, they were able to position themselves as fulfilling the promise of America without undermining incumbent institutions. Similarly, while King saw breaking southern state segregation laws as integral to his plans, he refused to break federal laws (Alexander, 2006: 321). King was lauding, rather than challenging, American democracy, calling on its current representatives to uphold its ideals (Gorski, 2017: 150).

Like the Nazis, the Civil Rights activists overhauled a core aspect of the dramaturgical regime, persuading people of the possibility and permissibility of a new political reality. But, as with the Nazis, gaining the authority to do this meant leaning into already well-established dramaturgical conventions and social meanings. They drew on existing symbolism, such as public buildings, memorials, and churches, to drive home the point that they were the true inheritors of the American promise.

### *Occupy: Unsettling too much*

The importance of capturing sacralised principles of the body politic becomes particularly evident when attending to the dramaturgies of failed political movements. Often, they share the same problem; they seek to unsettle too much, carrying an heir of irreverence towards symbols that

broader publics hold dear. In this section, we zoom in on one example: the Occupy protests of 2011. Occupy swiftly spread across the world, making wealth inequality a much more prominent topic in public discourse (Roberts, 2012) and developing repertoires that have since become central to the climate movement. But inequality has continued to increase since 2011; projects of state neoliberalisation have continued; and trade union power has declined. Despite their visibility, then, Occupy encampments did not succeed in reconstituting political reality.

Like Nazism and the Civil Rights Movement, Occupy was steeped in theatricality. With the 2008 economic crash still palpable, and subsequent austerity politics gutting public services, they showed deft symbolic awareness. Their performances were perhaps most felicitous in the context of their adopted *stages* and *settings*. By literally occupying space in close proximity to stock exchanges, Occupiers simultaneously exposed the creeping privatisation of land and presented elusive global capitalism as a tangible enemy. Moreover, the makeshift nature of the camps juxtaposed against pristine steel, glass, and granite buildings offered attractive David vs. Goliath imagery. Yet while it was easy to see what the Occupiers were against, symbolic clarity about what they were for was hard to pinpoint.

Originally, Micah White, who co-wrote the email that is credited with instigating Occupy Wall Street, had hoped to follow the usual dramaturgical conventions of civil disobedience, in which protesters disrupt a public facility and present a set of demands (Anthony, 2021). However, in an important innovation, rather than presenting demands to a political establishment they had anyway lost faith in, the Occupiers instead opted for a *performance* that combined Carnavalesque subversion of dominant symbols (Tancons 2011) with prefiguration of the anti-capitalist democracies they wished to bring about. A so-called “people’s microphone” was used whereby speakers spoke in half-sentences to ensure that their words were repeated by all who could hear,

turning ‘ordinary statements into ritual performances...of participatory democracy’ (Calhoun, 2013: 30). Pop-up libraries and classrooms emerged. And most importantly, they subverted the purportedly captured democracies they were confronting by making decisions in public and refusing to act without consensus. This emphasis on consensus led Occupiers to repudiate the power of charismatic leadership, often rejecting the patronage of popular politicians and celebrities (Anthony, 2021; Roberts, 2012). Collectively, these performances amounted to a transformation of the *script*. Rather than presenting demands, Occupiers presented an alternative model for democracy.

To make this radical reinterpretation land among publics schooled in the sacred tradition of representative democracy, the Occupiers would need to reach for symbols that already had mass appeal. Yet it is crucial to remember that the Occupiers were in fact *targeting* democracy as most people understood it. With civil rights, anti-Vietnam, and nuclear disarmament campaigns now carrying a symbolic resonance of their own, the street was widely seen as a legitimate stage of dissent in vibrant democracies. But the relationship between national politics and the streets was carefully managed. The convention was to conduct an orderly march, leading to the presentation of clear demands to politicians whose authority was thereby reproduced. Drawing on the “American radical tradition” (Mendel, 2020), Occupy unsettled this approach to *production* – not only defying conventions on their own stage but also claiming to be more democratic than the purported democracies against which they were protesting (Duncombe, 2013: 201). In so doing, they repudiated some of the most sacred rituals of Western representative democracy – rituals that most Americans and Europeans still had faith in.

In the absence of symbolic clarity about what they were for, this irreverence made the Occupiers into easy targets. Like the Nazis and Civil Rights activists before them, the Occupiers were

famously savvy in their use of emergent *media*, spreading their David vs. Goliath message across Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Reddit (Milner 2013). Yet if social media proved useful in inspiring likeminded observers, Occupiers underestimated the continuing ability of mass media to shape the perceptions of the uncommitted (Meraz, 2009). In a range of highly dramaturgical critiques, broadsheet journalists drew on their audience’s petty-bourgeois aspirations of orderly conduct, private luxury, and pristine public spaces to pour scorn at the protestors. They criticised Occupiers’ lack of clarity (Lynn and Williams, 2018; Saputra, 2019; Xu, 2013). They accused them of implicitly endorsing capitalism by drinking Starbucks coffee and ordering takeaway pizzas (Kingsley, 2011). And they captured images of the Occupiers in scruffy attire, trying to depict them as naïve or work-shy, and their encampments as underworlds of conspiracies, homelessness, and drugs.

Despite perhaps being more democratic than the purportedly democratic regimes it was challenging, Occupy didn’t *look* like democracy as Americans – or indeed Brits or Spaniards – knew it: people dressed in pristine suits, standing before illustrious and pristine neoclassical buildings, delivering polished speeches to the news media. Emerging as it did off the back of the 2008 global economic crisis and widespread dissatisfaction with governments’ responses, Occupy enjoyed mass media attention. They also tilled a fertile soil for popular revolt, creating a radical sense of equality and participation. Yet what the Occupy movement lacked was a discernible link to an already dominant and accepted set of symbols that a wider public could lastingly rally around.

**Discussion**

What does the analysis presented above tell us about the dramaturgical patterns associated with radical political change?



We find that a central and underexplored aspect of political change revolves around the question of what is being retained as much as what is being upended or introduced. Researchers have made much progress in recent years in identifying dramaturgical innovations employed to challenge the status quo. Yet little attempt has been made to account for where actors gain the authority from to convincingly introduce their innovations. To explain this, we drew on semiotic literature to posit the dominant symbolic order. For dramaturgies of change to succeed, we contend, there is a crucial stage at which they have to successfully speak to the dominant symbolic order of their time and place – even if ultimately they aim to topple that order.

The Nazis unsettled the Weimar Republic's secular liberal production, blending the political stage with the religious stage. Doing so required first inheriting, then replacing Christian symbolism. Similarly, the success of the Civil Rights activists depended on their ability to reproduce and embody elements of the prevailing regime, painting themselves as the inheritors of the American promise of freedom and democracy. As such, we contend that, while it is tempting to zoom in on aesthetic changes in both these periods, it is equally crucial to attend to symbolic continuity (see also Gill, 2013, 2020).

The importance of symbolic continuity is clearly visible in the relative failure of the Occupy movement. Despite their prefigurative authenticity, their dramaturgical brilliance, and their widespread press coverage, Occupy failed to shift public perceptions of what was politically possible and desirable. We suggest that this failure can partly be understood through Occupy's failure to convincingly embody dominant symbols.

Whereas 21<sup>st</sup> century secular readers might find it anachronistic to invoke the power of symbolism, two points are important to make. First, there is clear evidence across the world of right-wing extremists surging to power on a wave of Christian, Hindutva, and Islamic symbolism (Cremer,

2022; Gorski and Perry, 2022). As we saw with Nazism and the CRM, dominant symbols become especially potent in uncertain political times (see also Hayward and Dumbuya, 1983). And so once more at present, symbols that might have seemed astonishingly out of place as recently as a decade ago, are whipping up public passion in purportedly secular spaces. Second, being free of religion, or indeed past symbols, does not mean being free of symbolism altogether. On the contrary, as we saw with the CRM especially, sacred ideals do not diminish but rather evolve. And so while Western societies may appear to be radically diverse, they are nonetheless characterised by shared values like freedom (Jackson and Medvedev, 2024). Of course, what freedom means in substance radically differs from one group to the next – but that is a key part of the point we are making. The symbol remains stable even as the content shifts. Savvy political operators have long tapped into freedom’s symbolic strength and substantive flexibility (Easter, 2008; Gustavsson, 2014).

Our emphasis on the role of dominant symbols in mobilising change allows us to speak to three prominent readings of the relationship between symbolism, drama, and the political order. According to the first, change unfolds when dominant symbols melt away (Diehl 2024) or are undermined and reconfigured (Reed, 2020: 197; Sewell, 1996). Alternatively, according to the second, the symbolic context is a given – failure occurs when audiences remain unconvinced of an actor’s authenticity in embodying dominant symbols. (Alexander, 2004: 551, 2012). Finally, more activist scholars tend to treat the destruction of dominant symbols and the development of new aesthetic styles as integral to their cause. They wish to be rid of anything reminiscent of the regimes by which they and their allies have been oppressed. Addressing all three positions simultaneously, we have shown that while dominant symbols are slow moving and encompassing, and thus require significant cultural credit to challenge, it is by no means a given that actors will

recognise and embrace them. Doing so requires a high degree of symbolic fluency and political pragmatism that often escapes those committed to revolution.

These findings introduce important lines of inquiry for those seeking to understand and trigger political change. Four stand out: First, establishing what constitutes symbolic dominance. Second, identifying the dramaturgical means by which people gain interpretive authority over dominant symbols, and investigating how old symbols get toppled and new images achieve dominance. Third, and related, specifying the relationship between dramaturgies and material factors such as finance, law, and coercive power. Finally, interrogating how flexible symbols really are, and under what conditions adopting them into one's repertoire undermines one's normative aims.

## Conclusion

With this study we have provided a new way of looking at political impotency in contemporary politics and possible ways forward. The three examples of Nazism, the Civil Rights Movement, and Occupy, show that success and failure in fostering radical political change can be effectively understood through the ways in which dramaturgies of change play into and displace the dramaturgical regime. The dramaturgical language of performance, scripting, staging, setting, production, and mediation, allows one to see why some storylines embedding political change are persuasive and gain traction, while others do not. In particular, the examples illuminate that radical political change does not necessarily imply the utter repudiation of cultural conventions. Rather, to the contrary, persuading people of a different set of political possibilities requires a familiarity with and acceptance of the conventions in use. Dramaturgies of change gain their authority from persuasively interpreting the dominant symbolic order. As such, we tentatively conclude that political radicalism requires symbolic conservatism. Change must appear to be in continuity with, if not the fulfilment of, deeply entrenched ideals. Even as they radically rip publics into an

alternative future, indeed *in order to do so*, political operators need to in some manner relate a promised future to a positively imagined past and present.

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