

## BOOK REVIEW

# Rieke Trimçev, *Politik als Spiel*. Zur Geschichte einer Kontingenzmetapher im politischen Denken des 20. Jahrhunderts. Baden-Baden: Nomos 2018, 398 p. ISBN 978-3-8487-4469-5

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It is still common to accuse others of reducing politics to a mere game or an object of playing. This is an old rhetorical topos that was already used by Jeremy Bentham, for example, who—in his *Book of Fallacies* (1824)—accused William Gerard Hamilton of turning parliament into a “gaming house” in the latter’s maxims of a long-term MP collected as *Parliamentary Logick* (first published 1808). Hermann Kantorowicz in his remarkable Anglophile book *Der Geist der englischen Politik und das Mythos der Einkreisung Deutschlands*, from 1929, compared English politics with playing golf, and opposed it to the German ideal of playing chess.

Rieke Trimçev’s book is a thorough analysis of certain recent uses of the *Spiel* figure for politics. She follows the practice of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* lexicon by discussing the vocabulary found in the mainly French and German lexical and encyclopaedic works. She has acquainted herself with a number of classical works dealing with playing or games, from Johan Huizinga via Georg Simmel to Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The link with political theorising consists in regarding the *Spiel* as a mark of contingency: to play a game presupposes that the result is not known in advance and the rules are fair—match fixing is always a scandal. The author’s focus lies in the *Spiel* as a ‘figure of political order’ (24–26), from a perspective that domesticates the problematic to the reduction of contingency through the experience of contingency in the works of the authors discussed (358). This gives me the impression that the contingency dealt with is still that of the *fortuna*, following works such as John Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975). Trimçev does not discuss the Weberian concept of *Chance* that I opposed to the *fortuna* in *Das ‘Webersche Moment’* (1998).

A problem in writing a review of the book in English is that the German concept of *Spiel* refers at the same time to the action of playing, to the genre of a game, and to any single match, something the author might have given some thought to. The complex and ambiguous concept of the *Spiel* can, of course, be studied from multiple directions. Trimçev quotes my *The Struggle with Time* (2006) for speaking of *Spiel* as a metaphor; today I would no

longer use this terminology. I would rather analyse the political aspect in all forms of playing and games; for example, a single football match in terms of political moves, tactics, rules of game etc. Neither am I sure whether the theories of metaphor history have done a service to Trimçev's work.

The theatre is the author's favourite genre of *Spiel*. Of course, we know that in ancient Athens, theatre plays were an inherent part of its democratised politics, an extension of the debates at the *ekklesia*, *bule* and other assemblies. Even later on the theatre has been a major arena of controversies with a political quality (see for example Quentin Skinner's *Forensic Shakespeare*, 2014). Such early twentieth century theorists of theatre as Bertolt Brecht or Erwin Piscator could definitely be read as innovative theorists of political action; the 'Politics and the Arts' network has occasionally offered readings of this kind.

The dualism between 'appearance and reality' is another deeply rooted rhetorical *topos*, used even among many politicians. Denouncing politics as 'mere theatre' or 'play for the galleries' has for a long time been commonplace. Some authors have inverted the terms and claimed that theatre could serve as a model for studying politics. Ferdinand Mount, a British journalist and sometime adviser to Margaret Thatcher's government, in his *The Theatre of Politics* (1972), exemplifies this approach. In regarding parliament as a theatre, the parliamentary cultures of Westminster and French styles could be worth comparing, beginning with their different seating arrangements.

Although many parliamentarians claim that 'the real work' is done in closed committee sittings, TV reports tend to focus on the plenary sittings. Parliamentary channels in some countries might have learnt to contextualise the debates with background information, including a focus on the temporal aspects of parliamentary debates. Indeed, parliamentary debates are comparable with theatre plays with several acts, including the 'readings' in plenum and committee, as well as the regular (amendments, adjournments) or tolerated (spontaneous remarks on the floor) forms of the politics of interrupting debates. Trimçev does not, however, discuss whether the authors dealing with politics as theatre have examined such finer aspects of parliamentary time.

Trimçev has chosen to deal with the relationships between *Spiel*, theatre and politics in the work of certain academics or other authors, mainly from the second half of the twentieth century: the French situationists, Jean-François Lyotard, Hannah Arendt, Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière. She has elsewhere discussed Ulrich Beck's work. Despite her uses of 'agonistics', I wondered, does not Chantal Mouffe's rhetoric of "us vs. them" contain too much Marxist-Schmittian *esprit de sérieux*, to put it in Sartrean terms? Also, Trimçev's judgement follows this direction (291–309).

This choice of thinkers also sets her work apart not only from the classical tradition of *Realpolitik*, but also from the dominant empiricist and analytical currents of post-war political science. It also separates her work from the normativist traditions developed around John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas and their more conservative counterparts among the followers of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. For all of them, politics appears as deadly serious. She doesn't study the so-called game theory, the application of mathematical or economic models to politics, neither of which has anything to do with the playfulness of politics.

The most interesting aspect of Trimçev's book is her typology of the *Spiel* conceptions. In the third chapter she sketches a scheme with reference to authors such as Hans Blumenberg and Johan Huizinga (presented on p. 87) (translations mine).

*Spiel* as civilising

*Spiel* as break out of the world

*Spiel* as world model

*Spiel* as distancing within the world

I would have preferred that she would have indicated paradigmatic games or ways of playing theatre corresponding to each of the types. Now the scheme remains rather abstract, and it is sometimes difficult to follow how the authors discussed are located within it.

In the chapter, however, Trimçev offers indications about the types of political actions and regimes to which her scheme refers. Roughly speaking, the contingency of the *Spiel* increases from left to right and from up to down. On the horizontal axis, she divides the *Spiele* on the basis of the justification of the freedom between those of a subjective *Stimmung* and of the dynamics of the *Spiel*, whereas the vertical axis reflects the question of whether the rules of the game are internal to the *Spiel* or challenge the regular order.

On the upper line, the *Spiel* refers to ways of reducing contingency. *Spiel* as civilising refers to an institutionalised political conflict with shared rules. The author presents this, rather surprisingly, with the German constitutional lawyer Rudolf Smend's 'integration theory', which clearly domesticates the constitutional conflicts (93–96). With the lower left corner, the author refers to a type of *Spiel* as rupture with the order, to a playful thinking, or perhaps including the type of high-risk games that I discussed in *The Struggle* as gambling.

The responses of the adversaries are constitutive for the increased contingency of the *Spiel* in the two types in the right column. To put it simply, in the world model, the changes of rules are part of the *Spiel* itself, whereas the fourth type is self-reflexive, and consists of a *Spiel* that includes challenges to the rules of the game—in the name of the ideal type or the regulative idea of the *Spiel* as such.

The author's discussion of placing the theorists to this scheme is certainly interesting. The general tendency of her partly historical narrative is to move away from simply denouncing the talks on theatre or *Spiel*, which can be judged as a greater acceptance of contingency into both directions, but without finding any definite alternatives. The provocative moment against institutionalised politics is strong in the works of the situationists and the early Lyotard. All the authors can be counted as critics of the established forms of political representation, or at least for the Schumpeterian form that sounds like a parody.

In line with this critique, Trimçev sees the discussion of most authors mainly moving on the right side of the scheme, between the world model and distancing within the world. Slightly surprising is her view that Rancière, with his disruption of the traditional theatrical division between the stage and the audience, in a sense rehabilitates the rather consensual civilising model (see the summary on p. 354).

Instead of discussing the situating of the authors in detail, I want to speculate with Trimçev's scheme in more general political terms. Within the mainstream media discourse, the political game takes place only on the left side of the figure. To simplify the constellation, this holds especially for a jargon that denounces the 'civilising' moment of the *Spiel* as one in which the 'establishment' determines the rules, and even exercises pressures to determine the outcomes. The populist or revolutionary critics of institutionalised games, of course, reject all views of politics as *Spiel*, but appear nonetheless quite frequently as gamblers taking extreme risks. Donald Trump's attempts to break with the institutionalised rules of the US constitution are gambling with anti-establishment provocations, and the French extreme right, for example, is known for resorting to similar means.

The ironic playfulness of the *Spielverderber* is, in contrast, an attitude of provocative outsiders; the situationists, as discussed by Trimçev, being close to forming a paradigm. The works of many satirists, caricaturists, cartoonists and such can be counted as clever analyses of this kind, although some of them tend to reject all politics as such.

The parliamentary game of the Westminster type can be situated on the right column, and moves between changing the rules as part of the ordinary practice and the extraordinary

occasions of conscious second-order debates on the rules of the game. Trimçev connects the fair play ideal with the group pluralism of Ernst Fraenkel (106–109), which is a sociological vulgarisation of the key principle of parliamentary procedure: fair play is a regulative idea that transcends the actual rules and allows their criticism and revision from within. Especially in Britain, with the absence of a written constitution, a certain flexibility has led to important changes in the rules—such as institutionalising the backbenchers' initiatives—within the ordinary parliamentary procedure. As external challenges that are in the spirit of the game, we can identify the trans- and supranational forms of doing politics, such as the European Union, which the British have, strangely enough, been the most reluctant to understand as another triumph of the parliamentary culture. Still, the complex construction of the EU, with all its strangeness, exemplifies interesting attempts to continuous innovations in including the new without breaking the old.

The parliamentary ideal of fair play has been decisive in separating football from other competing games, and the origins of its rules are indebted to the Westminster procedure. Although formal rule changes in football happen quite seldom, changing events within the game constantly provoke examples of moves and situations that require a reinterpretation of the rules, both within single games and regarding the global rules and practices, referring perhaps to Trimçev's lower left column.

From time to time, new tactical variants appear, to which suggestive names are given, such as *tiki-taka* or *Gegenpressing*. They refer to the upper right column in Trimçev's scheme. Such tactical innovations face the obvious danger of dogmatism. If teams and coaches follow the same tactics in every game, sooner or later this will be foreseeable to the adversaries, and the innovation loses its momentum. The world model cultivates a broader repertoire of tactics, which can then be varied according to the type of the game, the adversary or the scores in the game. Radical innovations tend to have their sources outside football, not least in political practices. For example, the Bosman ruling has strengthened players' rights and de-nationalised the leagues. Matters such as financial fair play and gender equality between players are major political challenges to the current football practices and require changing rules.

It would also be fascinating to discuss individual politicians and their varieties of *Spiel* on the level of matches, games and playing. For instance, how far could Rieke Trimçev's scheme be applied to differences in their playing profiles? To which kind of situations would each of the ideal be best suited? Nowadays, when parliamentary debates are well documented online and at least some politicians—such as Erkki Tuomioja, a rare case of a Social Democratic intellectual who acted as both the parliamentary group leader and foreign minister in Finland—still keep detailed diaries. Combining parliamentary speeches and diary entries, we could analyse in detail their rhetorical moves, in particular, their ways of using political time.

Rieke Trimçev's book opens new lines of research, both in her analysis of the works of some political thinkers and in her typology for understanding politics as a *Spiel*. Further studies on political practices, debates and wider controversies—related to real games—should connect to it, apply the scheme and revise it, or replace it with different schemes.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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