

Introduction. Ingenious Agency Democratic Agency and Its Disavowal

Two Tales of Democracy: Rethinking Democratic Agency

Ten days after the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, the American Ad Council, a nonprofit organization known for producing public service announcements (PSAs) to deliver civic messages to the American public on national television, launched a new advertising campaign. Called “I Am an American,” the campaign sought to unite U.S. citizens in the wake of national trauma.¹

As the reincarnation of the former War Advertising Council created during World War II to mobilize public support for the war effort, the Ad Council has collaborated closely with the federal government in promoting positive, forward-looking, and democratic civil behavior among U.S. citizens (see, e.g., its litter prevention, drunk driving prevention, domestic violence prevention, and AIDS prevention ads of the past several decades). In this particular post-9/11 campaign, made in tribute to the tragedy, the ad features citizens of varying ages, races, national origins, occupations, religions, and genders, each one firmly declaring, “I am an American.” Via delicate emotive and aesthetic effects—a banner carrying the U.S. motto “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of Many, One) appears at one moment on the screen, and the ad concludes with a girl waving an American flag—the PSA highlights diversity as

a unique strength of the U.S. national body, which is capable of regenerating hope, recovery, and democratic life following the terrorist-inflicted deaths and casualties.

Professor Cynthia Weber of Sussex University recently produced a multimedia project, “I Am an American”: *Video Portraits of Unsafe U.S. Citizens*, that compiles narratives and images that challenge the harmonious tale of diversity in the name of patriotic nationalism presented by the Ad Council (Weber 2011).² At the heart of Weber’s critique is the Ad Council’s vacuous vision of democracy, which subsumes racial, class, gender, and sexual differences into a unified citizenry in a time of national crisis. This celebratory vision is devoid of, and in fact represses, critical social discussion of structural oppression, injustice, and inequality, which could pose a danger to the cohesiveness of the U.S. nation-state in a post-9/11 climate (Weber 2010, 81).

Using the Ad Council’s declaration, “I am an American,” as a reference point and site of contestation, Weber staged a series of on-camera interviews with a number of individuals whose identities are not easily melded into the concept of “ordinary American,” who remain *othered* as, in her terms, “unsafe U.S. citizens.” These dissonant and dissenting subjects are imbued with unsettling differences: a Chinese American Muslim chaplain wrongly accused as a terrorist spy and imprisoned as an enemy combatant; African American Hurricane Katrina evacuees treated as “refugees” and divested of U.S. citizenship; the U.S.-born son of an undocumented Mexican immigrant on the verge of deportation; an Iraq War conscientious objector forced to seek political asylum in Canada. By looking into the video camera and stating emphatically, “I am an American,” they contest their nonbelonging as U.S. (second-class) citizens and voice a desire for equality and inclusion. Weber’s critical art thus exposes the unequal access to and realization of U.S. citizenship for these unassimilatory subjects and the unseen systematic marginalization of nonnormative citizens in everyday liberal democratic life. In doing so, her political intervention interrupts the Ad Council’s professed “tolerance of difference” and illusive celebration of “diversity patriotism,” the hallmark of contemporary U.S. national identity (Weber 2010).³

These two opposing media productions lay out seemingly contrasting juxtapositions of democracy as conceived in Western political thought. The Ad Council presents a mainstream ideal of liberal democracy that appeals to public “common sense,” embracing national loyalty and melting-pot harmony as its constitutive inclusive logic (“One Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,” as the Pledge of Allegiance has it). As Russ

Castronovo and Dana Nelson argue, however, this dominant articulation of constitutional liberalism presents democracy as “a sacred and reified thing” that must be guarded with “conservation and protection” and represses any antagonistic struggle staged by dissenting subjects regarding the naturalness of its own self-formation (2002a, 1–2). By assembling a diverse pool of ethnic subjects uttering resolutely in consensus, “I am an American,” the Ad Council’s advertising campaign mythically attunes citizens to a “fantasy scene of private, protected, and sanctified ‘American’ life” (Berlant 1997, 220), and “takes form as an antipolitical gesture that closes down disagreement, contestation, and meaningful conflict” (Castronovo and Nelson 2002a, 1).

In contrast, Weber’s multimedia project points toward a vision of radical democracy that, as the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) deploy the term, is constitutive of perpetual struggles for racial, class, gender, and sexual justice in political institutions and civil society. Focusing on difference, disagreement, and contestation from subordinate positions, radical democratic politics formulates itself as a critique of the dominant liberal emphasis on social harmony and consensus.⁴ It rattles the illusive naturalness of the liberal patriotic discourse of diversity and belonging and contests hypocritical closure to marginal struggles for social membership and inclusion. In calling attention to the precarious material conditions of social life on the margins, Weber’s work is meant to shock the pacified mainstream citizenry absorbed in a life of static privilege out of its complacency by confronting it with vivid narratives and imageries of violent exclusion and displacement. By rupturing the sterilized order of the Ad Council’s normative democracy, the unsafe citizens’ rendition of “I am an American” constitutes an agonistic disruption of the status quo and a contestation for democratic equality.

Weber’s critical project, in my view, provides an indispensable opposition to, and an important corrective of, the Ad Council’s hegemonic representation of liberal America. Yet the political campaigns’ contrasting ideologies notwithstanding, these two visions of democracy actually converge with and mirror each other. Specifically, both campaigns imagine and enact a similar kind of citizen subjectivity that fits within the familiar, conventional mode of “democratic agency”—that is, a capacity to act politically in ways that are public and collective, with generally forward-looking and romantic connotations. Crucially, this linear and one-dimensional construction of political agency throughout the genealogy of Western political thought has long been interpreted as, and comes to stand in for, the only (proper) way to enact oneself as a citizen.

Hence, the Ad Council's PSA, aligned ideologically with constitutional liberalism via the motto "E Pluribus Unum" flashing across the screen, connotes the proper forms of citizen activity, which include mainstream acts of voting, representing, deliberating, or campaigning. These ordinary forms of political participation are imbued with democratic agency and laden with public and collective qualities that are central to the making of democratic citizens.

Weber's multimedia project also manifests these same qualities, albeit in a dissenting and radicalizing fashion. For instance, the unsafe citizens are seen openly resisting the Iraq War, speaking out against unjust treatment of Guantánamo detainees, taking church sanctuary to fight a deportation order, and issuing public complaints about mistreatment of Hurricane Katrina evacuees. All of these political acts—in being vocal and openly contestatory—resonate with the civic ethos of democratic practices such as protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins. Although the general public tends to look at these contentious acts less favorably than, say, voting, they do converge with mainstream liberal forms of political participation in formulating the range of activities commonly understood as practices of democratic citizenship in Western political thought. Weber's progressive critique of the Ad Council's campaign thus expands the spectrum of the political, yet remains based in democratic agency. By laying bare the limits of the original "I am an American" ad as insufficiently democratic, Weber's "unsafe citizens" project supplants it with what she sees as a more genuine and substantive vision of radical democratic agency. In spite of the ideological differences between these two visions of democracy, their conceptions of citizen subjectivity and political agency actually constitute two sides of the same coin.

I begin this book with these two tales of democracy because, in their respective ideological inclinations, they roughly capture the predominant spectrum of modes of political participation among citizens in an actually existing democracy: from mainstream liberal (the Ad Council's PSA: voting, representing, deliberating) to radical democratic (Weber's multimedia project: protesting, demonstrating, sitting in). This suggests that the massive terrain of political participation and social activism in actually existing democracy is prevailingly contained within the preconceived vocabulary and trajectory of democratic agency in liberal and progressive thought.

But why does it matter if these citizens act out their political agency and citizenship in a democratic way? Is that not how we, as citizens, should par-

ticipate in a political community? In fact, not only should the historical struggles for suffrage staged by African Americans and women not be taken for granted, but both mainstream liberal forms of participation and the radical practices of dissent and protest have been employed by subordinate groups. Racial minorities, manual laborers, women, sexual minorities, and the disabled have embraced both positions as indispensable tools in advancing their interests and voices in society, empowering them to fight for the inclusion, rights, and equality that historically and continually have been denied to them as citizens. This democratic agency—especially the radical democratic invigoration Weber gestures toward—has continued to animate and revive our vision and aspiration for justice and equality, however fragile and precarious these ideals may in fact be in capitalist democracies.

I wish to suggest, however, that when this democratic mode of enactment takes hold as the only (proper) way to imagine oneself as a political subject or participating citizen, it implicitly valorizes democratic agency as something sacred and heroic, while insidiously defining other forms of political agency as less proper and honorable. This romance of democratic agency, in envisioning “acting democratically” as the central mode of political action, crystallizes an invisible form of ideological judgment and normative exclusion that systematically remainders other forms of political agency. Even more important, its linear delineation of political agency forecloses a serious and open-ended investigation of how marginalized subjects lacking access and resources may contest and resist in surprising and even unthinkable ways to improvise and expand spaces of inclusion and belonging, thus obtaining “citizenship” via nonlinear routes.

This book explores agency from abject positions in lived conditions as well as the larger social and political lessons that such agency offers for rethinking critical intellectual intervention and social movement activism from a nonlinear perspective. To the extent that democratic agency constitutes the dominant frame for thinking about and articulating political life and social change, critical blind spots also punctuate its constructed vision, preventing it from fulfilling its potential strength. The preeminence of democratic agency is attributable to its articulation in Western political thought in its liberal, civic republican, communitarian, deliberative, and radical democratic variants.⁵ This has framed the mainstream and progressive understanding of democratic citizenship in both discursive and material forms and cohered as the common perception of “proper” political subjectivity.

Saba Mahmood has previously examined how the normative liberal as-

sumption that “all human beings have an innate desire for freedom” has become “integral to our humanist intellectual traditions” (2005, 5), including feminism. Mahmood writes, “Freedom is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism” (10), such that human agency is conceived in forms of “acts that challenge social norms” rather than those who inhabit norms (5), and “critical scrutiny is applied to those who want to limit women’s freedom rather than those who want to extend it” (10). Indeed, what happens when political agency is exercised via a deliberate subjection of oneself in order to realize freedom—or other desired values or ends—in other ways? As I argue, democratic agency in Western liberal and progressive thought has exerted disseminating effects and become the way in which many commentators, scholars, and activists apprehend and conceive the “political.” I suggest that we reexamine this normative assumption, particularly the ways in which it can preempt an engagement with forms of agency that are not necessarily democratic, but nonetheless engender fluid configurations of change.

To further clarify this point, I pinpoint two critical blind spots that existing conceptions of democratic agency persistently disavow via normative repetition: (1) the subtle and roundabout improvisation of resistance every day by subordinate people; and (2) the nonlinear and circuitous social change that is *always occurring* in liberal social life. These two blind spots will be made progressively clear throughout this introduction and the book’s chapters, but I provide a brief explication here.

First, the preeminence of democratic agency prevents many political theorists and activists from seriously tracing and uncovering the minute yet myriad ways in which episodes of social resistance might be subtly staged by marginalized populations in everyday liberal social life. The textures and qualities of these mercurial forms of quotidian resistance may not necessarily follow conventional democratic trajectories. The protean multitude of such resistant acts and practices, however limited they might be, can be understood as creating momentary fissures and ruptures in the seemingly rigid and immobile terrain of hegemonic liberal life.

Second, the recognition that political contestation is constantly staged further suggests that change and movement are instigated in ambiguous and indirect ways in everyday social life governed by liberal sovereignty. Here, Asef Bayat’s insights on sociopolitical transformation can help provide a glimpse into how such nonlinear change might take place. Bayat points out that “the vehicles through which ordinary people change their societies are

not simply audible mass protests or revolutions,” but often involve what he calls *social nonmovements*—the collective endeavors and common practices carried out in everyday life “by millions of noncollective actors” who remain dispersed and fragmented (2010, ix, 20). In contrast to social movements that advance “organized, sustained, self-conscious challenge to existing authorities” (Tilly 1984, 304) through “the unity of actors” (Bayat, 20), Bayat argues, “The power of nonmovements rests on the *power of big numbers*”—that is, “the (intended and unintended) consequences of the similar practices that a ‘big number’ of subjects simultaneously perform” (20–21; emphasis in original). Although they lack a common ideological front and the extraordinary staging of mobilization and protestation, the effects of these multitudes are not to be underestimated. As Bayat asserts, first, “a large number of people acting in common has the effect of normalizing and legitimizing those acts that are otherwise deemed illegitimate. The practices of big numbers are likely to capture and appropriate spaces of power in society within which the subaltern can cultivate, consolidate, and reproduce their counterpower” (20). Second, “even though these subjects act individually and separately, the effects of their actions do not of necessity fade away in seclusion. They can join up, generating a more powerful dynamic than their individual sum total. Whereas each act, like single drops of rain, singularly makes only *individual* impact, such acts produce larger spaces of alternative practices and norms when they transpire in big numbers—just as the individual wetting effects of billions of raindrops join up to generate creeks, rivers, and even floods and waves” (20–21; emphasis in original).

These nonmovements of big numbers, which describe “the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propped, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives” (56), constitute what Bayat calls the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” which effects change in microscopic and manifold ways. Here, Bayat’s observation moves away from the conventional linear concept of democratic social movements by indicating that the cumulative encroachment of nondemocratic acts and practices, “without clear leadership, ideology, or structured organization” (56), can nonetheless lead to change and movement in society. As James Scott has similarly observed, “the accumulation of thousands or even millions of . . . petty acts can have massive effects on warfare, land rights, taxes, and property relations” (2012, xx). Bayat’s nonlinear delineation of social change, though grounded in the Middle Eastern context, bears im-

portant implications that subordinate people's subversion in other contexts may similarly generate cumulative and encroaching effects, albeit through differential trajectories and varying compositions.⁶

In sum, the subtle and roundabout improvisation of resistance, with its nonlinear and circuitous production of social change disavowed by democratic agency, suggests a needed shift of angle in viewing the horizon and potential of social justice activism. In the predominant progressive social justice paradigms, democratic agency has long functioned as motor and *modus operandi*. Driven by the democratic motor, social justice is often articulated as being *critical of* and *oppositional to*—in a linear fashion—the structural conditions of injustice, especially in racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized forms. To create change means that we must seek out the structural roots of social problems and overturn any undemocratic structures of social relations—to imagine a *purer* world, so to speak. To a large extent, democratic agency precludes social justice movements from the kind of impure ethos that would reproduce unjust logics and unequal conditions. Such incomplete social transformation cannot be considered *bona fide*.

Yet in this way there is a general tendency to render the social world in starkly binary, black-and-white terms—justice versus injustice, equality versus inequality, democratic versus antidemocratic, and good versus evil—that impossibly ignores innate complexity and variability. Indeed, in its most romantic (and problematic) form, the conventional social justice paradigm can progress into an implicit belief that its vision and operation are (or should be) quintessentially sacred and untainted. Thus, the illusion that democratic ideals and progressive activism can transcend, without being implicated in, the instrumental exchange of liberal economy is created. This overlooks how—living in a liberal social world, with our bodies immersed and embedded in its structural material economy—we as human subjects cannot be immune to that world's instrumental effects. We may, in fact, actually need to negotiate with instrumentality (thus inextricably replicating conditions of injustice and inequality) in order to generate configurations of social change.⁷ This impossibility of transcendence, and the messy entanglement and complicity of all political actors in the liberal economy, may in effect constitute the *given basis* for us, as critical scholars and activists, to recover and generate a complex and contingent process of transformation.

This is not a refusal of the exhortation of democratic agency (which we sorely need), but a sobering acknowledgment. The impossibility of detaching social justice from the necessity of instrumental calculation and demo-

cratic progressivism from the reinscription of a liberal hegemonic order cannot be ignored. As Joshua Gamson argues in another context, social change may inevitably involve “walking the tight rope” between purifying and contaminating elements and moving through “the turbulence of these attached conflicts” (1998, 220)—if only because, as he puts it on a nonlinear note, sometimes “the more diverse and democratic” the transformative process, “the more the dilemma,” and thus contamination, may also come alive (224).

My comments in this introductory section are thus offered in the spirit of continuing the generation of democratic social change, calling forth a reinvestigation of what we can learn from nondemocratic manifestations of agency in everyday liberal social life in order to pluralize and expand the spheres and potency of such change. Such inquiry, however, is preempted and disavowed if we continue to be trapped within the discursive assumptions of liberal and progressive thought by upholding democratic agency as the “truest” enactment of political subjectivity.

Ingenious Agency:

The Immanent Coexistence of Purity and Contamination

To open this inquiry, I wish to identify and conceptualize an unpredictable and flexible way of acting politically that I term *ingenious agency*. The word “ingenious” suggests being clever, original, inventive, and resourceful. I use the term “ingenious agency” to refer to the capacity of creatively devising and contriving different ways of enacting oneself politically with limited tools and resources to generate change in one’s immediate surroundings and even the larger social sphere. I provide a more detailed articulation of this agency through a four-pronged frame (i.e., oppositional, negotiated, interstitial, and subcultural) in chapter 1. Here, the above characterization provides a preliminary understanding of the term.

My conception of ingenious agency owes intellectual debt to several scholars who have artfully delineated the ever present emergence of creative resistance staged by subordinate people under repressive conditions (Hebdige 1979; de Certeau 1984; Scott 1985, 1990, 1998, 2009; Kelley 1994). Of crucial importance is the political anthropologist Scott, whose inventive concepts, from “weapons of the weak,” “hidden transcripts,” and “infrapolitics,” to “*mētis*” and “ungovernability,” have provided exceedingly helpful vocabularies and directions by which to analyze the varied and multitudinous dimensions of subversive contestation. While some suggest his idea of every-

day resistance is more about defensive coping strategies that preserve “an already achieved gain” than an aggressive “making [of] fresh demands” that advances its own claims (Bayat, 54–56), I think subversive contestation more often than not demonstrates a fluid motion between these two characteristics and blurs the lines between aggressive “encroachment” and defensive “survival strategies” (56). For instance, unauthorized migration can be seen as a defensive survival strategy for undocumented migrants as well as aggressive encroachment on their destination countries. In addition, as Scott’s work illustrates, weapons of the weak—in the forms of theft; pilfering; foot dragging; arson; and sabotage of crops, livestock, and machinery directed at slave owners, landlords, and employers (Scott 1985, 288)—are not merely defensive but can be aggressively deployed vis-à-vis “the state, the rich, and the powerful” (Bayat, 56). As Scott argues, “Infrapolitics is . . . always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the permissible” (1990, 200). An especially valuable contribution of Scott’s formulation of creative resistance is thus its organic and polymorphous character, which takes on both defensive and aggressive qualities.

However, despite this versatile notion of subversive contestation, I argue that Scott’s overall conceptual frame leaves the binary of purity and contamination intact as *exogenous* opposites. As such, in spite of his astute awareness of subordinate people’s pragmatic disposition and practical knowledge, there is a strong interpretive tendency in his work to retrieve the “purity” of subaltern resistance (and even their entire way of life, as shown in his *The Art of Not Being Governed*) away from the “contamination” of state control rather than seeing the two elements as intricately intertwined. By “purity,” I refer to the inviolable ideals and vision for justice, equality, and freedom; by “contamination,” I mean the immersion and enactment of one’s thoughts and behavior—in varying ways and degrees—in alignment with the dominant logics of existing power structures. In my view, the tendency of Scott’s work to interpret subaltern struggles as a retreat from the contaminating influences of all-seeing sovereign states and their embodied high-modernist regimes (Scott 1985, 1990, 1998, 2009, 2012) misrecognizes the intimate connection between purity and contamination, as well as between creative resistance and social movements.

Hence, as Tom Brass points out, Scott consistently aspires for the resistant purity of “state-evading” agency and regards “state-making” projects such as “development, progress and modernization as three historical evils” (Brass 2012, 127). But it is not clear that subordinate people’s state-evading

acts necessarily preclude their involvement in, and support for, certain state-making projects. Brass thus remarks in his critique of Scott:

Broadly speaking, grassroots agency labelled by Scott as a process of “resistance” against the state frequently entails attempts to get the state involved and, thus, does not correspond to a wish to “avoid” this institution. Much rather the opposite, in that agency by slum-dwellers and poor farmers on occasion is designed to make the state proactive on their behalf and put into practice its own policies or legislation enforcing minimum wage levels and land reform programs. Accordingly, his unambiguously all-embracing concept of anti-state agency overlooks the presence of contrary instances. (126)

In fact, Scott himself acknowledges the poor’s enthusiastic support for land reform in his early work on Southeast Asian peasants (1985, 326), suggesting that the weapons of the weak are intricately connected with, rather than radically detached from, the operations of the modern state and global capitalism.

Nonetheless, Scott’s conceptual avoidance of contamination and attempt to set it apart from the resistant purity and humanity of subaltern subjects carries forward throughout his empirical analysis, which preempts a critical linkage between these subjects’ creative contestation and a potential reformulation of collective movements. In fact, his disposition toward purity leads him to position *infrapolitics* as being fundamentally at odds with formal organizations and institutional politics (which he regards as being part of the contaminating apparatus). He writes,

The strategic imperatives of *infrapolitics* make it not simply different in degree from the open politics of modern democracies; they impose a fundamentally different logic of political action. . . . The elementary organizational units of *infrapolitics* have an alternative, *innocent* existence. . . . If formal political organization is the realm of elites, . . . of written records, . . . and of public action, *infrapolitics* is . . . the realm of informal leadership and nonelites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance. The logic of *infrapolitics* is to leave few traces in the wake of its passage. (1990, 200; emphasis added)

This binary construct thus precludes an investigative inquiry into the transference between these two types of political activities.

To sum up, what is missing at the heart of Scott’s empirical analysis is a

conceptual redisposition that sees the ineradicable, *endogenous* coexistence of purity and contamination in the eruption of subordinate contestation. This redisposition would enable a rereading of how subaltern subjects' improvisational complicity with the existing system—or, to put it another way, their active reuse of contamination—may actually offer valuable lessons for a useful reformulation of democratic organizations and movements. Therefore, while my concept of ingenious agency is indebted to Scott's conception of creative resistance, I nonetheless depart from his formulation by repositioning purity and contamination as organically and interactively constituted in the formation of such agency. Contra Scott, I suggest that the notion of ingenious agency offers a theoretical illumination, via its inevitable immersion in the dominant logics of existing power structures, that we need to inventively engage rather than negatively repel. Ingenuity, in my frame, embodies the notion that contamination is intrinsic to struggles for change and purity.

This dilemma compels us to confront the ineradicable coexistence of purity and contamination in any struggle for social change within the vicissitudes of liberal democratic life. There is always contamination in purity, just as there is always purity in contamination. That is the paradox, but also the opportunity: *purity and contamination may never fully annihilate each other, but actually require each other to survive and thrive*. Indeed, if contamination is an endogenous part of purity, the forces of contamination may circuitously lead to the material realization of purity in unpredictable and nonlinear ways. And if that is the case, perhaps the way to achieve and realize greater purity in the direction of social justice is not to futilely run away from or eliminate contamination, but rather to more positively, and even ingeniously, engage, reuse, and reorient it in order to improvise and generate social change in potent and surprising ways. It is by recentering this notion of ingenious agency at the core of political theorizing—both *with* and *against* the normative current of democratic agency—that this book hopes to offer a renewed lesson on contentious politics and social change.

This lesson runs contrary to much of what we have been taught by the existing critical scholarship on social transformation, which assumes that to realize transformative change, we must move toward the visions and values of purity (i.e., equality, justice, freedom) at the center of our struggles and away from any contaminated association with the governing normative logics of the dominant power structure. This normative desire for “decontamination” and “purification” is a prevalent ethos embedded throughout varying critical theoretical traditions (from Marxist, post-Marxist, and radical demo-

cratic to critical racial, feminist, and queer theories) as well as progressive ethnographies. We must unlearn our participation in structural oppression, so the thinking goes, in order to purify our consciousness and engage in democratic struggles for social justice.

In fact, in some of the most astute recent scholarship, critical scholars have fiercely exposed the ways in which even progressive movements may perpetuate and reproduce the enactment of injustice and inequality such that they enable freedom for certain subjects while furthering the marginalization of others. For instance, Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* provides a powerful account of the complicit operations of U.S. sexual exceptionalism, white ascendancy, and homonationalism, which enfold gay-rights advocates and mainstream queer subjects into the privileged liberal U.S. war on terror while ostracizing other "monstrous," racialized queer bodies (Puar 2007). Similarly, Lisa Marie Cacho's *Social Death* points forcefully to the replication of dominant cultural and political grammars and logics in social justice and rights-based politics and pushes for a radical, purified vision of inalienable personhood and humanity (Cacho 2012).

While this aspiration and hope for purity vis-à-vis global capitalism, whiteness, and racialized sexualization is crucial, such critical analysis can nonetheless misrecognize or underestimate the degrees to which and ways in which the relational forces of social change may actually hinge on complicity in the given system. What if the way to reach a vision of purity is actually to traffic through an inevitable journey of contamination? Just when critical scholars and progressive activists are seeking purity through the refusal of contamination, I suggest that recognizing the immanent presence of contamination as inseparably linked to purity is not defeating to the progressive cause, but can actually be used in a creative and resourceful way toward such a cause—if interpreted properly through what I call the method of "critical contextualization," discussed below.

While existing critical intellectual literatures have made an immense contribution in pointing sharply to the massive prevalence of *injustice* in every aspect of liberal democratic life, I wish instead to foreground the endogenous relationship between purity and contamination as a given in order to open up a space for a different theory of social change to emerge. This alternative theory and politics calls on us not to position purity and contamination as distinctive opposites (and to forsake the latter in order to save the former), but to reconsider them as endogenous entities that organically coproduce each other. In fact, if purity may only arise from and through a deeply con-

taminated matrix, then instead of foregrounding purity as the standpoint of critical intellectual and activist inquiry, I suggest that it might be more helpful to foreground contamination as the very context and condition we need to work with in order to bring its immanent purity from its dim and obscure background in actually existing democracies into light.

Linking Object Subjects, Ingenious Agency, and Social Change

I further argue that it is those whom I call object subjects who can most productively illuminate the improvisations of ingenious agency and the lessons such agency holds for the regeneration of social transformation. I use the term “object subjects” to refer to people who are located in lowly, marginalized, and impoverished material conditions defined and produced by liberal societies. As such, they often have to act in ingenious ways to survive within a liberal social order that systematically exploits or remains them. Their objectness is especially acute when seen in light of their unequal relations to the normative Western liberal subject (i.e., white, male, middle class, educated, professional, able-bodied, and heterosexual). In a sense, object subjects are thus not entirely different from persons who are designated as marginal or subordinate subjects. However, I argue that *object/objectness* contains three levels of meaning, which are particularly useful for the current investigation in thinking about ingenious agency and social change.

First, at the basic, conceptual level, “object” carries meanings that are commonly defined in the English dictionary: lowly, cast-off, and discarded. In this respect, “object” shares many connotations with marginalized, subordinate, or excluded. Yet “object” also specifically conjures up affective qualities of being contemptible and degraded. What is it, then, about the object that evokes such emotive feelings? This will become clear when we get to its final level of meaning. What is important to note at the first level is that, for my purpose, “object” as a term offers more nuance and intricacy in describing the experience and dynamic of exclusion. One critical caveat I will provide here is that, like “marginalized,” “subordinate,” or “excluded,” “object” as a referential designation does not suggest the subjects’ natural condition. Rather, it underlines a material and political force that determines, marks, and “throws” the subjects into such a condition. As Peter Nyers argues, “‘being object’ is, in fact, always a matter of ‘becoming object’” (2003, 1074). Nikolas Rose elaborates:

Abjection is an act of force. This force may not be violence, but it entails the recurrent operation of energies that initiate this casting off or a casting down, this demotion from a mode of existence, this “becoming abject.” Abjection is a matter of the energies, the practices, the works of division that act upon persons and collectivities such that some ways of being, some forms of existence are cast into a zone of shame, disgrace or debasement, rendered beyond the limits of the liveable, denied the warrant of tolerability, accorded purely a negative value. (1999, 253)

The conceptual description of “abject” thus cannot be understood outside the historical-political context of liberal socialization—its continuing material production of inequality, displacement, and abjection.

Second, as critical social theorists who examine abjection have argued, not only is the abject always defined in relation to the normal, but the normal also requires the existence of the abject as its own precondition. Julia Kristeva writes that the abject “is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (1982, 4). In other words, the normal subject defines itself by always being in relation with what it rejects: the abject. Judith Butler puts it more explicitly: “The forming of a subject requires . . . a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge” (1993, 3). She writes, “The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. . . . In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (3).

The abject is thus an inherent constitution within the normal/subject, or, in Kristeva’s words, “a precondition of narcissism” (1982, 3). Indeed, if we take citizenship to be a narcissistic embodiment through which democratic citizens can realize themselves as legitimate and authoritative insiders, then those populations that we call abject subjects located in lowly and impoverished conditions are not merely rejected by citizenship but are also necessary to its constitution. As Engin Isin argues, citizenship is made possible only by its alterity/otherness (e.g., strangers, outsiders, aliens): “It requires the constitution of these others to become possible” (2002, 4). The abject and its

converse—the pure, the normal, the subject, and the citizen—are thus mutually constitutive.

Finally, extending this crucial observation regarding the mutually constitutive relations of normality/abjection, I argue that we might further understand such relations not as remaining in a fixed and static state, but as continually challenged and disrupted by the abject themselves, such that these relations are always shifting in liberal social life. That is, on this third level of meaning, what is salient about the abject is that they are subjects imbued with agency who use and improvise the elements in their surroundings in response to their abjection. In fact, because they resort to whatever tools and resources are available to ameliorate their abjection and to survive, such agency does not manifest in any predictable or predetermined way but flows in diverse directions. Abject subjects thus are perceived as wretched and contemptible not only because of their marginality and exclusion, but also because of the general public's fear of their unpredictable agency, which threatens and disrupts the existing social order, as well as moral assumptions and power relations. Kristeva gestures toward such agency when she writes, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). She continues, "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (15). The properties of the abject, in short, in Isin's words, "are experienced as strange, hidden, frightful, or menacing" (2002, 3).

Without prejudging ethical character or presuming the emotive effects such agency might evoke (since these often depend on the eyes of the beholder, varying according to political-ideological position), I use a more neutral term, "ingenious," to describe such unpredictable agency of the abject. This term recognizes how, in their limited and oppressive conditions, abject subjects come up with original and resourceful ways to enact themselves politically. Regardless of whether we agree or disagree with such acts and practices, it is important to recognize, without prejudgments or presumptions, the political *ingenuity* of these acts and practices. This acknowledgement is crucial for us to see how abject subjects contest and resist in inventive and nonlinear ways when democratic agency is not possible or effective. One may thus say that the abject are feared and rejected precisely because of their ingenious acts, which politically disturb the given liberal order while generating more inhabitable spaces.

This ingenious agency signals fluidity in the abjects' status and quality, since they might, through the constant deployment of such agency, normalize themselves by appropriating spaces of inclusion, belonging, and citizenship, thus unsettling the existing relations. In fact, even abjection itself may be strategically embraced and redeployed as a weapon through which to obtain normality/citizenship. While abject subjects will remain abject vis-à-vis liberal citizenship, the limited degree and extent of normality they obtain also helps alleviate their abject conditions and place them in relatively more "advantageous" positions.

So what, then, if abject subjects do not act democratically but instead improvise their actions? Given that the general public would rarely consider such acts or practices politically worthy, what larger political lessons can we draw from ingenious agency? As I argued earlier, the preeminence of democratic agency emanating from Western political thought disavows the subtle and roundabout improvisation of resistance in everyday marginal spaces by the abject. It is even less likely to conceive such hidden contestation as being linked to meaningful social change. Yet even though such ingenious acts and practices are enacted in nondemocratic ways, they create hope—both for the subjects and those affected by them—for more humane spaces in liberal life.

Each instance of such agency is certainly fraught with limitations and contradictions. In chapter 1, I describe how the domestic worker Lita's refusal of dehumanizing exploitation is enabled not through an emancipatory realization of her human rights but through a self-demeaning act that fools and manipulates her employer. In chapter 5, I consider how Ayat Akhras's enactment of suicide bombing in an effort to revive the political cause of a sovereign Palestinian state must eventually traffic in the liberal discursive language of "life, liberty, and property," given the reality of the international system of states governed by the liberal world order. Neither subject is capable of transcending the liberal structure that governs, disciplines, and regulates her life; in fact, both subjects are implicated in it even as they seek to create change. Despite these limits, they nonetheless resort to creative and unordinary means, with the tools they have, to generate spaces of greater inclusion, dignity, and belonging. In fact, one may say that these limits actually provide the tools and channels the abject creatively reassemble and redeploy in expanding livable spaces. All of this suggests that ingenious agency indeed induces change and movement, not according to any linear or predetermined trajectory, but through ambiguous and indirect means. And to think: these two examples are merely a minuscule sample of the protean multitude (or the

encroaching “big number”) of ingenious acts and practices staged in heterogeneous ways every day by the abject in liberal social life.

The observation that the process of social change creates transformation even as it replicates the normative liberal order can be further illustrated by examining the tangled linkages between abject subjects. Specifically, their agency may normalize and redeem them in ways that simultaneously abjectify others. For instance, while Lita is marginalized in her position as an impoverished migrant, her occupation as a dignified and rightful domestic worker may stigmatize other female migrants who make a living as “wayward” prostitutes. At the same time, the orientation of the migrant sex workers discussed in chapter 3, who participate in the sex trade to acquire a better living standard, raise their children, and even marry their prospective (white) clients and form a heterosexual family may also provide a semblance of “normal life” that offers them certain degrees of opportunity and belonging in capitalist democracies. Such opportunities are denied to Akhras, the female Palestinian suicide bomber who is condemned and vilified for violently and lethally breaking with this liberal pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Yet, conversely, Akhras’s awful act of sacrificial violence also enables her community to recast her as a noble martyr whose heroic deed contributes immeasurably to the potential founding of Palestinian (liberal) statehood, by which standard the acts of other abject subjects might pale in comparison.

These linkages among abject subjects, which are seemingly invisible in their disparate social positions, demonstrate the impossibility of transcendence but also the spectrum of opportunities for disruption and appropriation vis-à-vis liberal citizenship. No one is completely oppressed or abject in relation to the other; everyone is relatively normalized in certain ways and abjectified in others, depending on contingent contexts and circumstances. The abjects’ agency may never fully recover them as normative subjects. However, their ingenious improvisations may ameliorate their abjection, even if in such amelioration they also reify the standard order that sets others in relative places of abjection. These fluid and unpredictable relations to abjection vis-à-vis liberal social life suggest that the hegemonic terrain is not wholly fixed. Rather, it leaves room for malleable reshaping by political subjects to assuage their abjection and create change (albeit with complicities and within limits). Such abjection may never be surpassed or transcended within the liberal lifecycle, but it can nonetheless be mitigated, sublimated, and transformed.

What these flashes of ingenious agency signal is that the process of cre-

ating change may not be able to escape complicity in reproducing the hegemonic liberal order, which forever circumscribes any radical potential of social justice movements to exceed its transactional terrain. Social justice movements are always already lodged inside the liberal economy, and their hope for change may similarly hinge on their submitting to a complex process of instrumental negotiation with this economy, a transformative process that is tainted by complicity and never completely achieved. All of us, critical theorists and social activists alike, do not stand outside or above this contaminated cycle, but are ourselves implicated in tangled relations of normality and abjection. But even though there is no “outside” to the liberal economy where one may stage transformative change, the episodes in this book point to the possibility that we, like the abject, may devise more clever and unordinary methods to remold and recraft the given “democratic terrain” in manifold ways and thus generate more livable spaces for all citizen-subjects. It gestures toward an ingenious futurity that entails creative reconfiguration of the system at a collective level (with whatever means are available), and inventively reshapes the terrain of the battlefield, without transcending the battlefield.

Returning to the example that opened this introduction, even for Weber’s radical democratic project, the appeal to “I am an American” contains a certain layer of meaning that evokes the same narcissistic desire for “America the Beautiful” that is embedded in the Ad Council’s campaign (Ling 2010, 99). Those citizens marked as unsafe courageously indict the U.S. government even as they reinscribe the liberal myth of American exceptionalism. As L. H. M. Ling notes, these statements, “ranging from the geographical (for example, I live/work in this space) to the legal (for example, I have/want the papers) to the psycho-cultural (for example, I am entitled to certain rights)” (100), appeal to American audiences through the high principles of “democracy, freedom, and justice for all.” Bonnie Honig has argued that dramatizing consent validates the “universal charms of American democracy” by showing the continuous streams of immigrants voluntarily consenting to the constitutional liberal regime (2001, 92). In Weber’s project, American democracy is persistently critiqued but also continually shored up by the unsafe citizens who consent explicitly, and who would “suffer exile, indignities, and loss to be a real American” (Ling, 100). What does this critical, socially conscious project thus tell us about complicity, contamination, and social change?

Perhaps Weber’s project not only exemplifies democratic agency, after

all, but also contains an ingenious element. Specifically, the complicity of the project in reifying “America the Beautiful” may be read as partially strategic. That is, for Weber to achieve her desired political effect—winning support for the cause of her project—she may actually need to traffic in this kind of nationalist-cum-American-exceptionalist language to establish identification with the public viewing audience, showing how these unsafe citizens are just like “us.” They strongly identify with being Americans, they love “our” democracy, and they are even more democratically conscious and engaged than most citizens are. How could “our” government deny them fundamental rights and liberties when every bit of their character deserves to be American?

Thus, Weber’s project may be reread not as merely producing a linear replica of democratic agency, but as circuitously and cleverly using the representation of democratic agency and consent to the liberal constitutional regime as a critical instrument to achieve her larger goal of obtaining rights and inclusion for unsafe citizens. In addition, for her radical democratic project to generate her envisioned social change, it has to work with limits and operate *inside* the given hegemonic liberal construct that circumscribes its radicalizing vision. In the end, like Lita and Akhras, Weber’s critical art can in this instance be read as an ingenious political act, one that uses whatever tools and resources are available (including limits and complicities) to generate transformative change.

Toward a Political Theory of Social Change

In asking how we may look at abject subjects’ quotidian acts and practices as creative resistance and how such resistance may offer lessons for us to recraft ways to generate transformation, the foregoing sections lay out the central themes of this book. What *Ingenious Citizenship* seeks to advance, then, is a *political theory of social change* that turns to and draws on the everyday lived experiences of the abject as contextual resources and inspirations for its critical theorization. I suggest that the customary spaces of the abject that generally have been assumed to be apolitical, insignificant, or even deviant in Western political thought (bound by its constrictive vision of democratic agency) may actually offer valuable insights and lessons regarding alternative modes of political intervention and social justice. Although much contemporary scholarship in political theory from critical and progressive angles is also essentially about normative theorization of social transformation, I wish to accentuate *social change* as a descriptive qualifier of this work, because I think

the way we conceive the term needs to be creatively and fluidly rethought. To do so requires a departure from, and a recrafting of, the predominant methodology of political theory.

While racial, anticolonial, feminist, queer, and comparative political theories have made important advances in recent decades, the predominant works of political theory still look to Western (male) philosophers and theorists for their intellectual resources on agency, democracy, and transformation. Without taking away the important contributions these works have made to the reconceptualization of democratic politics, there is nonetheless a way in which such disciplinary practice and methodological imagination can both confine and skew our perception of resistance, citizenship, and social change toward certain cultural mores and political contours. Specifically, I argue that restricted intellectual sources can inhibit our notions about the possible and desirable forms of agency, politics, and social change within a prevalently Western democratic landscape and value system, which have a tendency to prescribe democratic agency (whether in liberal, communitarian, postmodern, or radical terms) as the universally preferred form of political subjectivity to confront any unjust conditions without attention to contexts.

Take, for example, Romand Coles's radical democratic scholarship, *Beyond Gated Politics*. In it, Coles shrewdly moves beyond "democracy" as it is commonly understood by arguing that democracy is always about *democratization*—that is, the continuous effort to "embark beyond democracy's dominant forms to invent greater equality, freedom, and receptive generosity toward others" (2005, xi). Significantly, this intent of perpetual democratization leads him to move beyond traditional practice in political theory by pointing to the insufficiencies of prevailing Anglo-American and European democratic theories for their disengaged, inward-looking, and hermetic character. Instead, he advocates for a more radical mode of democratic theory and action that orients toward "strangeness, risks, and world-making" and "multidimensional modes of public engagement" (xix).

However, even with this admirable challenge to the core terrain of political theory, Coles's aspiration for perpetual democratization (beyond prior political theorists) as the foreground of his interpretive lens remains shaped by, and confined within, the universalizing democratic ethos of Western political thought and ignores the critical question of contexts.⁸ What if, for instance, the generation of greater equality and freedom sometimes, and in certain contexts, actually requires that we take other routes besides democratic politics? Like that of many critical scholars before him, Coles's interpretive

schema creates an exogenous binary between “democratic” and “antidemocratic” without accounting for the intricate ways in which antidemocratic powers—such as global capitalism and corporate technology—may already constitute an essential, endogenous part of the matrix and infrastructure of democracy (including radical democracy).

As Inderpal Grewal observes, “The forms of civil society that enable democratic citizenship are the new technologies and new media that are controlled by multinational corporations” (2005, 26). In the new information age, democratizing existing forms of citizenship, civil society, and social consciousness often entails using, and relying on, global capitalist-consumerist circuits of media and information technologies to deliver and disseminate a message, which enable its critical disruption but also perpetually delimit the contours of its rupture. When one attends to material contexts, it reveals that what Coles takes to be the two contrasting spheres of “democratic citizenship” (rights, equality, justice) and “corporate culture” (neoliberal, neocolonial, antidemocratic) have become so deeply interwoven in their liberalized global dissemination that the former cannot be untangled from the latter simply by way of democratic consciousness-raising or counterhegemonic politics.

All this is not to refute the value of democratic politics, but it does point to the problem of the prevailing ethos of democratic agency derived from the existing intellectual resources and methodological practice of political theory, which constrict its interpretive framework toward a universalizing conception of (democratic) political agency and (democratic) social change without attention to contextual intricacies. As such, we need a different kind of interpretive methodology to read abject subjects’ nondemocratic agency properly and to help us conceive a more fluid horizon of making political change.

Critical Contextualization as Interpretive Strategy

To move us toward this goal, I propose an alternative strategy, what I call *critical contextualization*, to shift our interpretive lens from the “high” vision of Western political theorists to the “low” angle of the lived experiences of the abject to reopen a once foreclosed horizon in understanding abject subjects’ everyday practices as original and creative ways to act politically. This method of critical contextualization, I argue, consists of three steps.

First, it makes a methodological shift to decenter political philosophers

and theorists and recenter an eclectic assemblage of abject subjects—from migrant domestic workers and global sex workers to trans people and suicide bombers—as resources for a critical reinterpretation of political agency, citizenship practices, and social transformation. The political theorists Shannon Bell and Paul Apostolidis have reread subordinate subjects such as prostitutes and immigrant workers, respectively, as political philosophers, thus destabilizing the epistemological assumptions and trajectory of Western political thought (Bell 1994; Apostolidis 2010). This move is significant, for it opens up a way for “the subaltern to speak” (and to be heard) in political theory and not simply be irrelevant, discarded, or invisibilized objects in intellectual “high theory” conversations. Yet both of them still operate within the democratic theory tradition and present their subjects primarily through a counterhegemonic, radical democratic lens.

To move past this confinement, I wish to look for something even more fluid and polymorphous in the retrieval of the agency of the abject. Specifically, instead of setting up the subjects as speaking explicitly and directly like democratic theorists, I look into and reinterpret their everyday acts (which are not visible to us as political at all) as *already* politically significant—that is, as often subversive improvisations of citizenship in everyday liberal social life that do not conform to the linear democratic trajectory. In other words, I do not require the subjects to be in the position of being like “political theorists” for them to provide lessons about democratic change. I simply take them where they are and look for meanings that might offer us a different way to approach agency and change. Also, while I recognize that what I characterize as abject subjects are not all abject to the same degree or in the same way, I deliberately use the term “abject” in conceptualizing their shared lowly and marginalized locations vis-à-vis Western political philosophers and theorists to accentuate the distinctive lessons these subjects could bring us as compared with the dominant standard formulation.

Second, in addition to placing abject subjects’ everyday acts at the center of political theorizing instead of canonical texts, critical contextualization further calls for a decentering of our unitary subjectivity (e.g., as theorists, intellectuals, professionals, the educated) to relate to the abject and see things from their social positions in more fluid and organic ways. This does not entail our identification with all of the acts and deeds committed by the abject, but it does call on us to imagine and embody a contextual shift of our locations between us–them, normal–abject, spectator–gazed, and subject–object positionings to blur these boundaries and enable the possibility of an

alternative interpretation of their acts and deeds. As James Ferguson argues from an anthropological perspective, “What we see . . . depends on where we are looking from” (2006, 29). When we practice looking at the everyday acts and practices of the abject through their “low” vantage point rather than from our unbendable “high” positions, it could bring “into visibility things that might otherwise be overlooked and [force] us to think harder about issues that might otherwise be passed over or left unresolved” (29).

One way to approach this decentering of self-subjectivity might be by going through the simple exercise of asking oneself: *What if any of my friends, loved ones, or children—or even myself—is in the position of being an abject subject? What kinds of limitations, dangers, violence, or precarity would they or I be facing? How would their or my needs, desires, and dreams shift? How would that make me think differently about the occurrence or eruption of their or my abject acts and practices? And if I become one of the abject (say, a domestic worker), what happens to my worldview and life outlook when I shift again to the position of another abject figure (say, sex worker)? Contextually shifting our imagined or embodied locations helps challenge and destabilize our existing assumptions and open up new possibilities of interpretation.*

Kobena Mercer’s critical essay, “Just Looking for Trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and Fantasies of Race,” illustrates how our interpretive lens could be expanded through such a decentering shift of our locations and contexts. In it, Mercer discusses his initial shock and disgust on seeing the grotesque photos of nude black men in the white gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic artwork, with images such as a black man whose face is out of the frame “holding his semitumescent penis through the Y-fronts of his underpants” (Mercer 1997, 242). Mercer’s initial emotive interpretation of the images is constructed via his ideological perception of Mapplethorpe’s racial fetishism and colonial fantasy, which, in his eyes, reduces “these individual black men to purely abstract visual ‘things’” (243). However, this ideological framework is destabilized and transformed when Mercer comes to acknowledge a shifting context of his own embodied subjectivity: as a gay black man, he is also “a desiring [gay consumer] subject . . . [with] an identical object-choice” in his “own fantasies and wishes” (247). From this changed location, he begins to recognize “another axis of identification—between white gay-male author and black gay-male reader—that cut across the identification with the black men in the pictures” (247). In fact, here the reader may even expand on Mercer’s example to enact another kind of shift and conceive

oneself as the desired object (the nude black man) in the photos, which can further destabilize the boundaries in other ways and open up other kinds of cross-identifications.

Significantly, the shifting location from being strictly critical of Mapplethorpe's racism to being identified with his homoeroticism enables Mercer to expand his interpretive horizon in seeing Mapplethorpe's deliberate subversion in the larger material context of "the exclusion of the black subject from one of the most valued canonical genres of Western art—the nude" (248). Mercer writes, "One can see in Mapplethorpe's use of homoeroticism a subversive strategy of perversion in which the liberal-humanist values inscribed in the idealized fine-art nude are led away from the higher aims of 'civilization' and brought face-to-face with that part of itself repressed and devalued as 'other' in the form of the banal, commonplace stereotype in everyday culture" (249).

As Mercer concludes, the textual ambivalence of Mapplethorpe's artwork "foreground[s] the uncertainty of any one, singular meaning" (248); it is precisely meant to deny "a stable or centered subject-position" and arouse "an emotional disturbance that troubles the viewer's sense of secure identity" (247). The decentering of subject position that Mapplethorpe opens up enables readers, from their fragmentary subjectivities and pluralized contexts, to bring conflicting and open-ended interpretations to the image that are foreclosed by certain ideological predispositions with their dichotomous "good and bad, positive and negative" frame (247).

Taking insights from Mercer, our embodied locations always already shape and formulate our interpretations. As Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer writes, "The knower is part of the matrix of what is known, and . . . the location from which we speak is one from which other voices . . . [or even] those within ourselves, may be sanctioned" (2004, 795). And if a contextual shift of location can open up a once sanctioned or foreclosed interpretation, then the method of critical contextualization helps facilitate this goal by requesting that we embody ourselves through the located subjectivity of others—or, in Kuan-Hsing Chen's words, "to actively interiorize elements of others into the subjectivity of the self" (1998, 25).

Indeed, as an analogy, I suggest that the reader take this book like Mapplethorpe's artwork, in its "subversive strategy of perversion," in the material context of the prevailing exclusion of abject subjects from being protagonists and architects in political theory, and consider abject subjects as being in a position similar to that of the nude black man in the racialized homoerotic

photo. Together for me as the author and you as the reader, it is by following Mercer's example, undergoing "a thorough investigation of . . . [his] own subject position and identifications and disidentifications, his desires and investments, and his use of a single interpretive category . . . versus the adoption of a dialogical mode of interpretation for specific knowledge claims" (Lorenz-Meyer, 796), that we may shift from the dominant interpretive lens of democratic agency in political theory to retrieve, reread, and recover abjects' nondemocratic agency—in their given contexts—as possibly dynamic, organic, and ingenious political enactments.

Finally, as the last step of critical contextualization, I argue that this interpretive method cannot be complete without resorting to its own intellectual resources to actually conduct its alternative interpretation of agency and change through the lived experiences of the abject. Moving beyond the terrain of Western political thought, I find works in other interdisciplinary fields—namely, cultural theory and cultural anthropology—to be especially helpful in enabling me to craft a different political theory of social change: one that does not take democratic agency as its automatic starting point. Specifically, *Ingenious Citizenship* bridges and interweaves cultural theory with existing ethnographies; qualitative interviews; news reports; films and documentaries; and autobiographical statements, writings, and documents through a critical layering of textual rereading, reinterpretation, and reconstruction in advancing an ingenious story of citizenship that is grounded in, and informed by, the lived experiences of the abject. This methodology is necessarily interdisciplinary, working at the interface of cultural theory and ethnographically informed analysis. While I have not carried out ethnographic research on my own given the diverse range of populations in the current study, I have been consciously attentive to the human narratives in existing ethnographic and autobiographic accounts to ensure that the theoretical story I weave is built on and illustrated through their concrete experiences in everyday life—specifically, in the ways these subjects negotiate their daily struggles within the hegemonic liberal order.

This combination of cultural theory and ethnography enables me to conceptualize "citizenship" differently. While common understanding of citizenship focuses on institutional rights, political participation, or street activism (formal channels that embody the enactment of democratic agency), I understand it as a *cultural script* inscribed and utilized by liberal sovereignty to govern and regulate how citizen-subjects should conduct themselves in different realms of social life (the political realm, economic realm, gender realm, etc.).

As I explicate in chapter 1, this liberal citizenship script produces normality (proper citizens) and abjection (abject subjects) as mutually constitutive relations. At the same time, this notion of script also serves as a critical template for us to trace and investigate how abject subjects may be read as disrupting and appropriating the script in informal and nondemocratic ways to improvise more humane and inhabitable spaces for themselves.

The term “ingenious citizenship” specifically describes how the abject, who are remaindered by the script and lack status, power, and resources to access “full” juridical rights and social acknowledgement as normative citizens, come up with original and creative ways to reinsert themselves into the script. Because such improvisations do not go through formal channels, the forms of citizenship generated are not (yet) officially recognized. I call the kind of citizenship thus appropriated and acquired “nonexistent citizenship”—that is, inclusion, belonging, equality, or rights that are not formally guaranteed and codified.⁹ By delineating how abject subjects appropriate and reuse the script to assuage their abjection and make themselves “count,” ingenious citizenship enables a viewing horizon of the liminal change and movement that are effected in the hegemonic liberal terrain.

Note that this is certainly not to say that such change is sufficient or that abject subjects’ politics should remain at this informal, precarious level. There is no doubt that such subversive contestations are limited—in fact, even formal citizenship itself is a limiting political concept that is never instituted to effect social emancipation. But, placing such creative resistance in context, I wish to ask: What is the value of these limits? What if this limited change and movement actually offer unexpected lessons for us to tap creatively and fluidly into the unending, shifting field of abjection and strategically create more livable spaces for human subjects to inhabit, in their discrepant and differential contexts?

In all, the three steps of critical contextualization—(1) recentering abject subjects as critical resources for political theory; (2) decentering our unitary subjectivity by imagining ourselves or our immediate affiliates through shifting contexts; and (3) the intellectual borrowing from cultural theory and cultural anthropology to chronicle abject subjects’ simultaneous disruption and appropriation of the citizenship script—formulate the interpretive method that constructs the ensuing story of ingenious citizenship. This new interpretive method brings into view a new horizon of creative agency.

A New Horizon of Fluid Politics: Reconceiving Rights-Based Movements

As I wish to further suggest, this renewed interpretation of creative resistance at the individual level offers important lessons for collective movements and intervention strategies. Employing critical contextualization to elicit a political theory of social change leads to a more flexible and variable notion of politics than is often conceived in democratic political theory, especially concerning democratic political theory's emphasis on "rights" and "rights-based movements" in social justice struggles. Specifically, I argue, whether critical scholars and activists ought to resort to rights-based politics at all should depend on contexts rather than presuming its values and effects (or lack thereof) in advance.

The issue of rights has been subject to intense debate by progressive and left scholars. On the one hand, in addition to the early critique by theorists such as Wendy Brown (1995), recent works in the fields of critical ethnic studies and queer of color critique have tenaciously indicted the limitations of rights and the complicity of rights-based politics in perpetuating normative violence (Reddy 2011; Spade 2011; Cacho 2012). On the other hand, those working within political theory have sought to engender new rationales through the constellation of radical democratic theory to advocate for the continuing importance of rights, rights discourse, and making rights claims as an agonistic and performative democratic practice that perpetually thwarts and disrupts normative liberal foundations (Chambers 2004; Zivi 2011).

From my view, both sides contain their own insufficiencies. I agree with radical democrats that an excessive focus on the limits of rights may obscure the fundamentally unpredictable character of democratic politics and social change. As Karen Zivi asserts, "No language or practice of resistance can bring about the end to political debate and struggle, no matter how liberated from an ancient theory of sovereignty" (2011, 81). However, as I have indicated throughout this introduction, to foreground democratic politics as the immanent basis of social change (as radical democrats suggest) can also become an inflexible and predictable politics. As the method of critical contextualization shall remind us: there exist contexts and moments in which rights may constitute the contingent bedrock for the expansion and furtherance of social change, just as there exist contexts and moments in which it may be impractical or ineffective to resort to rights-based politics as tools

of advocacy—for instance, when abject subjects live in certain authoritarian regimes, socialist republics, or non-Western cultural contexts that are not readily prone to persuasion by rights discourse.

Taking cues from abject subjects' ingenious citizenship, critical contextualization would suggest that social movements adopt a more variable use of political strategies, creatively negotiating with complicitous logics and anti-democratic powers to recraft spaces of social change in varied locations and contexts. In particular, this would imply that social movements may need to deemphasize their rights claims, or even drop their focus on rights in specific circumstances, in order to achieve a *de facto* actualization of humane life for the abject in concrete situations.

Such nondemocratic political processes, I argue, can appropriate and generate “nonexistent rights” for the abject—that is, *de facto* realization of inclusion, belonging, and rights that are not officially guaranteed or codified. Insisting that we must either renounce or embrace rights, then, prevents us from invoking and deploying the diverse tools and repertoires we need to crack open the manifold, interstitial spaces of transformation in different locations. Hence, while scholars such as Monisha Das Gupta have articulated a flexible and moveable “transnational complex of rights” that traverses local, state, national, and international contexts (Das Gupta 2006), I suggest that we need to cultivate an even more fluid and elastic relation with rights, including making political claims and doing social advocacy through non-rights-based and nondemocratic discourses and channels.

Here is also the central lesson of ingenious citizenship for organized movements: social movements need to be reconceived in an ever more fluid and creative fashion in order to maximize their effectiveness in helping the abject in global capitalism. My discussion in this book by no means rules out the critical role of rights-based movements in struggles for social justice; it does, however, decenter taken-for-granted assumptions about social movements and suggest that they take on a more flexible and amorphous orientation beyond a predetermined “pure” and “democratic” character. As abject subjects' creative acts will show, while contestation is often inspired by a vision for purity, change is often mobilized and advanced by contamination and complicity—and the more ingenious the uses of contamination, the more transformative the results we might expect to see.

This book should thus be understood as angling for an alternative kind of left politics, advancing a different conception, and political theorization, of

ways to produce social transformation in much more fluid and open-ended terms than are commonly assumed in progressive and radical thought. It suggests that once we reexamine the process of social change and recognize it as always embodying the endogenous elements of purity and contamination, it opens up a nonlinear view that what are usually thought of as non-democratic approaches (sometimes working in conjunction with democratic politics) might circuitously and deviously lead to social change in minute, polymorphous ways. What is more, we might *seize that change to create further change* in concrete circumstances and situations. Conversely, when we insist that only a method of purity can lead to “genuine” change—that is to say, when our thoughts and actions are already confined to, and constricted by, a preconceived democratic schema—we commit the mistake of overlooking both how complexity can beset and thwart the most inviolable vision and plan and how we are always entangled in the intricacies of contamination, even without our conscious recognition.

Other scholars have similarly signaled this direction in their work. Ferguson, for instance, has argued that the popular practice of left critique often repeats the same unsurprising conclusion of “the politics of the ‘anti’” (i.e., anti-neoliberalism, anti-globalization, anti-imperialism) that leads to “a rather sterile form of political engagement” (2011, 62). He asks: “But what if politics is really not about expressing indignation or denouncing the powerful? What if it is, instead, about getting what you want?” (2009, 167). Ferguson suggests another kind of left politics beyond denunciatory analyses: a “left art of government” that would “*take advantage of* (rather than simply fighting against) neoliberal rationality and “identify new possibilities and openings in the current transnational regime” (2011, 64; emphasis in original).

Such reconception of agency and change beyond the normative democratic contour and interpretation in political theory and social justice literatures, I argue, is crucially needed in these neoliberal times of ours. As Bayat asserts, “In a world of un-equals, the weak will certainly lose if it follows the same rules of the game as those of the powerful. To win an unequal battle, the underdog has no choice but to creatively play different, more flexible and constantly changing games” (23–24). And, I would add, the pivotal lesson on ways for social movements to win the perpetual battles of neoliberal times might come from the most unlikely places: the abject themselves.

The Book's Chapters

This book is divided into three parts: part I: “Beginning” (chapter 1); part II: “Episodes” (chapters 2–5); and part III: “(Un)Ending” (conclusion). Part I provides my central theoretical frame of ingenious citizenship. As indicated earlier, I look at liberal citizenship as a cultural script, a standardized way of life brought into being by European capitalist modernity that governs ideologically and materially how human subjects ought to live and participate as “proper” citizens. I then suggest a four-pronged frame to theorize how abject subjects may disrupt and appropriate this hegemonic citizenship script into the constellation of ingenious citizenship.

Chapters 2–5 weave together part II as each of these chapters presents a momentary example of ingenious citizenship performed by different abject subjects. Specifically, I investigate how migrant domestic workers stage hidden tactics to appropriate political citizenship (chapter 2), global sex workers use calculated abjection to appropriate economic citizenship (chapter 3), trans people adopt morphing technologies to appropriate gendered citizenship (chapter 4), and suicide bombers exert sacrificial violence to appropriate life itself (chapter 5).

By interpreting how these subjects can be understood as disrupting and appropriating scripts of citizenship, I do not suggest that their ingenious agency defines their essence as humans. Rather, I focus on one aspect of their complex lives to illustrate and illuminate recurring and persistent episodes of ingenious agency and the unexamined lessons about social change inherent in the improvisations of these acts. Thus, rather than dwelling on the personal qualities of the subjects, what I am focusing on (and what I want the reader to take away from these episodes) is how the momentary and recurring eruptions of ingenious acts and practices generated through these myriad subjects enable more livable spaces for themselves and others, without assuming any totalizing understanding of these subjects. This is addressed by looking specifically at how different abject subjects appropriate the scripts in their own distinctive and challenging ways given their respective conditions, so as to accord them crucial specificity in their humanity.

It is also important to contextualize my use of the word “episodes” here, since the implicated approach of “viewing” abject subjects seemingly borders on a voyeuristic “spectator–gazed” relationship that reinscribes the power hierarchy between the “normal” and the “abject” (Mulvey 1975). The concept of episodes is closely connected to the property of ingenious agency.

Given its inventive quality, ingenious agency is not a stable state of being as the subject undergoes the flow of life, but is necessarily fleeting and ephemeral. I thus present in this book a collage of flashing scenes (drawing from myriad sources) in which ingenious agency takes momentary hold before it evaporates and vanishes, even as it also continuously reemerges. Since the materials I draw from are existing sources available for public viewing, I cannot control how other audiences may read, interpret, or view the subjects in these documents. Rather, I wish to refocus the reader's attention on the very moments in which these subjects can be understood as acting politically in ingenious ways. Abject subjects are as complex as any other human beings, and the following portraits are not meant to describe their subjectivity in any reductive or totalizing sense (as if that is what they are in *essence*, whether in a celebratory or an indicting tone). Rather, each episode simply signifies and magnifies *one* of the manifold and heterogeneous aspects of each subject—an aspect that I argue offers significant lessons for all of us in reconsidering political agency and recognizing ways to improvise social transformation. I also hope that this exercise can help unsettle and disrupt the problematic binary between the “normal” and the “abject” by causing readers to see the abject within themselves and understand these subjects' nondemocratic agency and enactment as having always already been part of the liberal democratic norm.

Each episode of ingenious citizenship also offers unconventional insights and lessons for generating fluid social justice strategies. As I illustrate in chapters 2–4, while the current rights-based movements for migrant domestic workers, global sex workers, and trans people have displayed notable signs of ingenious agency, the foregrounding of democratic agency in their formal *modus operandi* prevents them from adopting a more extensive incorporation of ingenuity into their organizing strategies. In each case, I point to some tentative directions in which rights-based movements may incorporate the lessons of the ingenious politics of hidden tactics, calculated abjection, and morphing technologies, respectively, into their repertoire of intervention and activism strategies when advocating for the abject. In chapter 5, I take a different approach, using the recent neoliberal reforms spearheaded by the Palestinian Authority to illustrate how its deployment of the sacrificial violence of neoliberalism (appropriating the sacrificial logic of suicide bombing) to mobilize and enhance its claim for sovereign statehood provides a nondemocratic lesson on social change for critical scholars and activists concerned about the Palestinian rights of return and self-determination.

Finally, I construe the concluding part of the book as “(Un)Ending” not only because it constitutes the end of the book, but also because it gestures to the continuous formation of ingenious citizenship in liberal social life that lives on unendingly, flash after flash. What these unending episodes of ingenious citizenship improvised by the abject teach us, I suspect, is a futurity in which we make fluid use of political intervention and movement strategies in recrafting the lived spaces of social change. Here I turn to an unlikely figure, the Chinese diasporic martial artist Bruce Lee, as a resource to characterize the guiding position that I call “politics without politics” in this nonlinear transformation. This refers to an art of combat without combat, engaging in political contestation without it appearing so, and eclectically drawing on the use of different tools for different situations without any preconceived method or approach. My hope is that this positioning will inform critical scholars and activist groups regarding ways to incorporate the lessons of abject subjects’ ingenious citizenship into political intervention and organizing strategies. It is to these lessons that I turn in the chapters that follow.