

# Journal Entries of (Mis)Performing in World Politics: A Journey Towards Understanding (Mis)Performing and Transforming Everyday Normative Practices of Sense-making in World Politics and Social Practices



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## Introduction

(Mis)Performing gives a new lens to not only better understand world politics, but to also step out of the traditional and normative approach to politics. Now, the first question is why it is necessary to step out of the traditional and normative approach to politics, when it has worked so far, and it is continuously used by politicians, institutions, and as a result audiences receive it, more or less, well. The purpose of (mis)performativity is that it appeals to a wider range of audiences, who may feel more represented and seen, as contrary to the traditional and normative ways to politics.

(Mis)Performing World Politics was a class that incorporated a range of transformative acts of performance, in which students were encouraged and challenged to evolve and expand their ways of thinking. That included engaging in controversial topics, understanding the different positionality of various cultures, religions, genders, by exploring everyday practices, politics, and performances. But what is (mis)performing? It can be viewed in different ways, such as including new ways of exploring, interpreting, and performing, in that matter, politics and social practices, which break down certain standardizing concepts.

This paper will include journal entries to compartmentalize and structure all my thoughts, experiences, challenges of the class that changed my opinion of the everyday normative approaches to politics. The class triggered me to think of the whys, whens, wheres, whos, hows, and the ifs of politics. Additionally, the paper will cover different interpretations of (mis)performing by analyzing some of the readings covered in class. This journal will furthermore look into controversial topics (considered by some) colonialism, gender, citizenship by issuing the process of transformative acts in performance and challenging political and social practices which are cogitated as “correct, necessary, traditional, and moral.”

## **My First Exploration with Performativity in Politics**

When I began with this class, I would often find myself puzzled and discombobulated, not with group discussions or the class presentations, but specifically with understanding the readings and then applying or relating those themes to world politics. Now, this is because of regularly being taught normative, standardized, and traditional approaches to politics, which, in a way, disallows an individual from looking at different events and themes from a more performative lens. We, as international relations students, are positioned to look at the world and its position from a very traditional perspective by applying theories that, many view, as obsolete. Although, this is a strong stance that many might counterargue, international relations should evolve and adapt with its time, because the current political climate, for instance, the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Palestinian conflict, etc., could be observed from a different perspective, instead of the traditional one, to explore other possibilities of mitigating conflicts.

The class began with collectively watching a short Hungarian film called “Sing” and it features young students that are a part of a choir in their school.<sup>1</sup> The movie follows one girl’s unpleasant and discouraging experience with the choir teacher, which later appears to have been the case with other students. Furthermore, the child is told to not sing, and mimic singing instead, because she is not an advanced singer yet, and simply put the teacher dislikes her singing. However, by surprise a fellow classmate of the girl noticed, and then it turned out that many of the kids are not allowed to sing. The fellow classmate stood up, but because she was the only one, along with the girl who was first asked to lip-sync, the reaction of the teacher and the classmates was negative. By the end of the film, when the children get to perform at the choir competition, they all protest the teacher/conductor by lip-syncing to the

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<sup>1</sup> Kristof Deak, “Mindenki,” KIS KIS – keep it short, posted on May 12, 2020, Youtube video, 0:00-24:59, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0piiNk\\_jMrE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0piiNk_jMrE)

competition's song. This powerful gesture and form of protest against the teacher who unfairly singled out some students in the choir represents how (mis)performing can lead to a productive and influential change between the student/teacher relations and dynamic. When the film began, as always one attempts to connect the dots, and try to predict what will happen, and why is this video shown to us. The film showed its spectators that usually when an authoritative figure demands something, it is usually followed without questions asked, however, this film's storyline, which includes courage, controversy, and audacity was indicative of the class itself, and mostly what the (Mis)performing class stands for. Having watched the short film, I thought to myself, why have I never connected those dots, and related it to everyday practices. The children's protest against the teacher could be paralleled with a variety of day-to-day interactions and social practices, such as civil uprisings, demonstrations, revolutions, etc., which are practices in which citizens perform dissatisfaction of a leader, or policy, or scandal and demand for change.

The introduction of the class helped me enter the second class with a more open-minded, activated, and through-provoking attitude and perception of politics, and maybe not even politics in some instances, but also the act of being. We were assigned a short journal article by Orla Ní Cheallacháin called the "Feedback Loops." In this specific reading, the author was reflecting on the feedback she received from her student which made her self-evaluate.<sup>2</sup> The evaluation of the professor by a bright student in her class was "Your teaching style suits me perfectly so I'm really happy with the module. I do think you deserve to lecture with more confidence though."<sup>3</sup> This comment by the student triggered a defense in the professor, in which her whole childhood and young adulthood flashed before her eyes.<sup>4</sup> The comment awakened several instances which are explanatory of the professor's lack of self-

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<sup>2</sup> Orla Ní Cheallacháin, (2016) 'Feedback Loops,' *The Journal of Narrative Politics*, Vol. 3. (1) p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

confidence in her lectures.<sup>5</sup> The story follows how the professor, Orla, was a bright kid who loved learning random facts, and at school she would correct her professor, although shy she felt confident in what she had read or obtained as a fact, regarding two matters.<sup>6</sup> The first instance is how Orla corrected her teacher, James, regarding a mistake he made by calling “schools are for dolphins,” and Orla disagreed and said it was “pods of dolphins,” and later brought an encyclopedia to prove the teacher wrong, in which the professor reacted by telling her to quiet down and sit.<sup>7</sup> Now, this is a first instance of being shy but confident in what one knows but having it rejected by an authoritative figure, the teacher, which is the first example that attributes to her lack of confidence as a professor. A second instance was how Orla interrupted to correct the professor in another lesson regarding instruments, and the professor reacted negatively and labeled Orla as “being disruptive.”<sup>8</sup>

I personally do not agree with the notion that the student was “misinterpreting,”<sup>9</sup> referring to the professor’s self-confidence during lectures, because the student is the receiver of the knowledge provided by the professor, and as a spectator the student perceived her way of teaching as interesting but lacking self-confidence, which is valid. But this story gives us insight on (mis)performing in which we see how a child, the professor in this case, is usually discouraged from correcting their teacher or authoritative figure, similarly to the short film, then again social practices are challenged here, since this is not how a student is expected to act towards their teacher and yet we get to see a different approach to social practices that are opposite to what we think we know is right. So, the conundrum remains and will be explored regarding the performance lens of world politics and how it manages to overlap with many IR concepts and theories, such as feminism, gender, citizenship, and colonialism.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 65.

## **Diving Into the Unknown: Exploring the Notion of “Performance” in Understanding Current Issues in World Politics**

What incorporates “performing” in politics is wide ranged, therefore creating a disparity of how one interprets certain events, theories, or concepts. Misperforming permits the pathway to understanding the incomprehensible and perplexing side to social practices and politics. Readings regarding misperforming and challenging the normative everyday practices makes politics more contemporary, fathomable, and humanistic, rather than calculated, standardized, cold-hearted, and intricate. Performance and politics come hand in hand, in many instances, and according to Rai (2014) representative politics is a form of performance.<sup>10</sup> Citizenship and gender identity is something that is widely discussed on daily basis, and Rai (2014) argues that everyday practices such as our own identity is drawn to have a fixed division between being, for instance, “British” and then having the “Other.”<sup>11</sup> Another example would be Judith Butlers notion of what makes one a woman, and it is not solely that we are born male or female but that we become one.<sup>12</sup> That being said, these two examples help us understand how we are positioned to view and perceive our being, which includes gender and citizenship as fixed and normative, when in contrast it is a social construct. Power relations is imperative in further understanding the “performance” in everyday politics, and Rai (2014) further examines how these “performances” “reflect, resist and refurbish existing and shifting power relations.”<sup>13</sup> The reading further touches upon government and citizen relation which further challenged everyday social and political practices. How I envisioned and comprehended this in class discussions and readings is that there is transparent power relation and political hierarchy between those that are in position

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<sup>10</sup> Shirin M. Rai, “Political Performance: A Framework for Analyzing Democratic Politics,” *Political Studies* 63, no. 5. (2014): p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

of power and then those that are not. However, to better understand that the author analyses that the “interaction between political performers and their audience – actors anticipate an audience, bring it into play, respond to its reaction, shape, and reshape the performance in the light of their reading of the audience and many times make the audience part of the performance.”<sup>14</sup> This form of performance can easily be paralleled as a theatrical performance in which we have protagonist and antagonist actors (states, governments, etc.), and then the audience (citizens). The audience is as important as the play and actors in the theater, because whether the play is successful or not depends entirely on the way the audience receives it. Rai (2014) explains that,

The audience can also bring particular performances into being – through insisting on performance of political rituals, for instance. In this way, the relationship between the audience and the performer is a dialectical one: it is the interaction between the two that gives performance its affect.<sup>15</sup>

Social and political movements such as Black Lives Matter, which expresses the dissatisfaction and mistreatment of Black citizens in the US and across the world, or even using social media platforms such as Signal, which avoid high-level surveillance,<sup>16</sup> can be seen as misperforming, but when discussing performative politics, it is worth mentioning artistic ways of expressing dissatisfaction with certain political principles.<sup>17</sup> Opposite to my interpretation of performative politics and theatrical performance, Marina Abramovic’s work suggests that theater is “artificial,” because it lacks reality and portrays someone else’s life.<sup>18</sup> Her interpretation of performance art is contrary to theatre because according to her, theatre lacks reality, and she argues that “performance art preserves a modicum of reality in its connection and allows the most realistic forms of human interaction.”<sup>19</sup> According to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Roytburg, Daniel. “Abramović as Sellout: Performance Art in Neoliberal Politics.” *New Trier Political Journal*, <https://newtrierpoliticaljournal.org/642/international/abramovic-as-sellout-performance-art-in-neoliberal-politics/>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Roytburg (2021), Abramovic's notion of performative art is as unrealistic as her own interpretation of theatre, and also branded as "fake."<sup>20</sup> This view is indicative of different perceptions of not only art in itself, but also performativity. I merely oppose the view of Roytburg (2021), because the author depicts art as distant from politics, and therefore branding performance art as simply an observation.<sup>21</sup> Performative art, and specifically Abramovic's, could be observed as diverging from the normative interpretation and political statements by exploring a new way to protest or raise awareness regarding a specific matter.

Another key argument is gender which is a topic that varies depending on upbringings and political views in today's society, but Butler manages to challenge the notion of gender by arguing that "we construct gender through expression and do not create this characteristic at birth."<sup>22</sup> Again, looking at gender as an expression is another instance of misperforming, because it breaks the normative concept of womanhood and manhood. One can look at gender by mainly understanding that our actions and our way of being is constructed because when one is born as woman, they are exposed to repetitive acts, that later determines their manliness or womanliness.<sup>23</sup> The reason behind comparing Butler and Abramovic's performance is to explore whether the emotional responsiveness from the audience is based on gender.<sup>24</sup> Women are associated with vulnerability, passiveness, gentleness, motherliness, etc., while men are associated with manliness, toughness, and aggressiveness. Therefore, looking into Butler's notion of gender helps us cognize the performative act of Abramovic's "The Artist is Present," and the audiences association and responsiveness depending on the performers gender. This correlates to Abramovic's performance in "The Artist is Present,"

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Lader, Ryan. "The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real: Time, Vulnerability, and Gender in Marina Abramovic's Performance Art." *The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real: Time, Vulnerability, and Gender in Marina Abramovic's Performance Art | Writing Program*, Boston University Arts and Sciences, <https://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-6/lader/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

because it embraces the body to express an act (performativity), and Butler's notion of "becoming a woman" rather than "being a woman from birth" also embraces the body to express an argument (performativity).<sup>25</sup> Misperforming can be found not only in politics, but in everyday practices that triggers the mind to think about what has our social norms and practices taught us about being, also how we perceive the world around us.

### **Performative Citizenship and The SEEK Retreat Project and Migrant Women**

Performative citizenship is not something that crosses one's mind when thinking about their passport and nationality, but it does play a part in understanding our positionality and breaking norms and costumes that were once created and are still actively performed. Conversely, Isin (2017) argues that this can be viewed as "the regime of citizenship of any polity."<sup>26</sup> The way to explore the problems that come with citizenship is to look at the political and social struggle that comes with citizenship and the rights that it carries, which might positively or negatively affect a citizen.<sup>27</sup> The problems that come with citizenship are rooted back to the characteristics of various social groups in which there is a clear disparity between a social group that follows the prevailing "norms and practices" which originate mainly from colonialism and imperialism, such as "adult, male, rational, white, Christian, heterosexual, and able-bodied."<sup>28</sup> And then another social group that includes the misfits or the "Other" such as "the poor, young, women, irrational, black, non-Christian (Muslim, Indigenous, Jewish), ethnic minorities, queers, and disabled people," are the ones that are subjected to failing or misperforming their duty as a citizen.<sup>29</sup> These are predominantly referring to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, to include contemporary instances, police brutality towards African-Americans and women are still marginalized due to the fact that these two

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Engin Isin, "Performative Citizenship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, ed. Eyelet Shachar et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 501.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

examples are considered to lacking the capabilities that are citizen should acquire.<sup>30</sup> What can be interpreted here as misperforming is the act of separating oneself from the polity by transforming from citizen to non-citizen, and additionally to reject or accept certain rights, or lack thereof, depending on whether or not it fits ones beliefs and ideology.<sup>31</sup>

Performative citizenship allows us to explore the fight against domination which includes racism, discrimination, oppression, etc., because performative citizenship entails political and social struggles, and the trouble with exercising rights and duties.<sup>32</sup> The author enters Butler's elucidation of performativity,

As Judith Butler puts it, performativity often involves the 'moment in which a subject—a person, a collective—asserts a right or entitlement to a liveable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place'.<sup>33</sup>

What this means is exactly what brands citizenship performative, the act of opposing and contesting normative and traditional practices by transforming their struggles by enforcing their right of "equality, justice, liberty, emancipation, and solidarity."<sup>34</sup> This collective political and social struggle is what brings social groups together to tackle issues as citizens or non-citizens.<sup>35</sup> Through performative citizenship struggles of marginalized groups such as Muslims, black and indigenous citizens prevail. According to Isin (2017), Canadian or Australian citizenship given to indigenous people is another form of portraying or categorizing indigenous people as "Other," strangers, aliens, when in fact it diminishes or disguises the dispossession and stealing of lands of the indigenous people who were there first.<sup>36</sup> These forms of social practices such as citizenship, gender, art, politics, they all share

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 504.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 224. As cited in Engin Isin, "Performative Citizenship," in *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, ed. Eyelet Shachar et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 507.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 510.

commonalities in which the hypocrisy, discrimination, positionality, progressiveness of people, which have been taught to conform with certain social practices, prevails.

Throughout the course, groups were able to implement the new approach and perspective to world politics they have obtained by participating in a SEEK Retreat Project. SEEK as an organization is looking at protecting, listening, and encouraging women's voices, specifically migrant women, in order to reintroduce the approaches that are taken when including migrant women in discourses.<sup>37</sup> Our role in this collaboration with SEEK was to create a retreat in which we could reintroduce ways of communication and knowledge production with migrant women, by enforcing comfortable activities which involve painting, photography, group discussions, etc. Our group managed to curate various activities in which the main objective was to make the migrant women share their stories, but also let them express their journey and experience through various forms of expression, without implementing our own perception or idea of their journey. This project was fundamental to the class, because we diverged from the academic part of the course which involved intensive and thought-provoking discussions and readings for better understanding different approaches to world politics, to a more hand on and active role which helped us better understand the journey of the course regarding performativity and (mis)performing.

## **Conclusion**

Politics tends to fixate on certain perceptions and approaches that demoralize and deter people to certain political and social practices. Performativity in politics allows us to diverge from the male-dominated, war driven, and single-minded method, and instead aims to investigate different topics such as colonialism, gender, sexuality, citizenship in provocative and realistic lenses. Therefore, making the course somewhat challenging, not because as a

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<sup>37</sup> "About Us." *SEEK*, <https://www.seekresearchnetwork.eu/about-us>.

generation that does not want representation and transparency, but because our society still runs with the normative and traditional practices and approaches to everyday practices.

Courses like *(Mis)performing World Politics* gives us an opportunity to learn and listen to various methods, perspectives, and ways in life, without having to belittle ethnic groups, indigenous people, black people, Muslim people, etc., but instead understand the underlying issues that dominate our society and work towards changing the way we look at politics with the process of performativity.

What I have learned from the course and the new lens to view world politics is stepping out of the fixed agenda, norms, and customs because every individual has different experiences, perceptions, and needs in life which diverges from what one might believe is what every single individual needs. Therefore, contemporary politics can take an experimental leap to view the audiences (citizens) demands and wishes as varying and conflicting. Consequently, allow the citizens to express their opposition by breaking the normative and traditional social and political practice that deems certain practices as rigid and immutable to the extent that it actively affects society. Everyday practices are performances, whether it is through art or through politics it is still a form of performance. A valid perception of this performance can be seen as a theatrical performance, in any instance political, social, economic, we have the actors (the politicians) and then the audience (the citizens), and when one looks at world politics through this simple yet effective lens, it allows us to end and deviate from the normative and traditional approaches and perceptions.

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