

# Book Review: Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic by Emily Apter

*In Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic, Emily Apter investigates and offers a vocabulary for 'the microphenomenology of political life' – ways of thinking the political in its 'messier everyday guises' that have hitherto seemed to elude conceptual grasp and intelligibility in political theory. This is an impressive mapping that brings together different phenomena and writings, resisting an easy analysis but responding poetically and urgently to the pressures of the present, recommends Lilly Markaki.*

***Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic.* Emily Apter. Verso. 2017.**

Find this book: 

*Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic*, the new book by [Professor Emily Apter](#), presents readers with an impressive investigation of an array of terms and tactics – or 'modes of politicking'(4) – that are operative everywhere today and, being resistant to theorisation, have remained unintelligible in political theory.

From the 'performative incivility' (15) of Donald Trump to 'experiments in micropolitical living' (47) by those such as The Invisible Committee (*Comité Invisible*) and the collective of *La Quincaillerie*, today we witness a politics that, as Apter writes in her introduction, 'eludes conceptual grasp, confronting us with the realisation that we really do not know what politics *is*, where it begins and ends, or how its micro-events should be called' (1).

The problem lies, in part, with classical political theory and philosophy, which in treating politics as no more than the field of 'the empirical and concrete manifestations' of another, 'ideal sphere' – i.e. 'the Political', and political philosophy's *real* subject – end up positioning concrete reality outside their purview. 'By framing the Political in terms of that which is extraneous to or other to problems of statecraft, constitutionalism, and institutionalism', Apter argues, 'many thinkers have left undertheorized the formless force field of "smallest p" politics that keeps the system of capitalo-parliamentarism in place and prevents emancipatory politics from taking place' (10).

To remedy the situation while remaining committed to certain, 'retreated forms of the Political' – of which Alain Badiou's philosophical politics (25-28) is one example – Apter attempts to think politics '*as it happens*' in its 'messier everyday guises' (10). Indeed, although her approach 'conceptually engages'(1) theories of sovereign exceptionalism – a way of thinking politics that, as Apter observes, 'acquired renewed traction and impetus [...] during America's Iraq invasions' (5) – it is not this dialectical other, but its emphatic everydayness that gives Apter's politics the name 'unexceptional'. As Apter writes:

While exceptionalism may be an unexceptional feature of routinised war and staple of American jingoism, I would rather construe unexceptionalism less as the logic of "exception to the rule," and more as one of "just politics as usual," an attitude that inevitably shores up the status quo (6).

Throughout the book, divided into four parts, Apter thus aims to provide not a theory, but a glossary – 'a vocabulary for the microphenomenology of political life' (4).





Image Credit: ([Brian Brennan CC BY 2.0](#))

After a first, largely ideational part that serves to situate her politics in a field that is simultaneously ‘micro’ and plural – from the micropolitics of Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari to the microsociologies of Pierre Bourdieu and Stéphane Beaud and the nanoracisms captured by Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe and Alexander G. Weheliye – Apter moves on to articulate unexceptional politics in three interconnected yet distinct ways. These are ‘Scenes of Obstruction’, where Apter describes unexceptional attitudes or ways of politicking; ‘Political Fictions’, where the focus is on narrative accounts – by Stendhal, Emile Zola, Hippolyte Taine and Marcel Proust, among others – ‘of scams, seductions, backroom deals and [...] diplomatic intrigues’ that deliver ‘the weak, down-graded, or ironically deflationary version of the historical novel’; and, finally, ‘Economies of Existence’, where the number takes over and society becomes calculated.

In keeping with her aim ‘to breach the fire-wall between philosophy and so-called real politics’ (28), Apter continuously weaves theory and life together in the book, mapping them onto one another. Real beings and fictional characters too come together everywhere in the writing, sharing the weight of the task of communicating a mode of being or type of behaviour.

In ‘Obstinacy,’ for example, Herman Melville’s character of Bartleby the Scrivener and his signature phrase ‘I would prefer not to’ – from the homonymous short story published in 1853 – are considered alongside other, real-life negative articulations – from Kim Davis’s statements following her decision, as the Rowan County clerk, to ignore a Supreme Court order to issue marriage licences to gay couples in 2015 to the civil disobedience of the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 and the radical refusal of the various waves of Maidan in Ukraine. In the final pages of the chapter, to a series of other Bartlebys is added that of the French writer Louis-René des Forêts. A founder of ‘Action Committee of Intellectuals against the Algerian War’ in 1955, des Forêts would later discover in the political turmoil and protests of 1968 ‘the political force of silence’. Des Forêt’s Bartleby, then, is characterised by a mutism that stands, in his own words, for ‘the dream of rupture without return with the world of calculation’ (130).

Cutting across life and literature, the chapter on ‘Obstinacy’ prevails also as an instance of Apter’s serious commitment to delivering complexity, with the same term (here ‘obstinacy’) or name (‘Bartleby’) coming to describe, as the above summary suggests, ‘opposing fractions on the political spectrum’. As Apter notes:

It is hardly a hyperbole to assert that Bartleby, the character, outlives all rivals in the long history of political literature (including Plato’s Socrates, master of the annoying rejoinder), perhaps because Bartleby, the concept, is synonymous with the obstinacy that a concept performs at specific historical conjunctures (119).

It is Apter's sensitivity to what prevents a general theory from emerging, and the ability to identify and acknowledge small pockets of resistance that interfere with and disrupt the force of their negative counterparts, that is the strength of her book. It is this, also, that prevents its contents from ending up on the side of those TV serials taking 'government back offices as their settings', such as *Tanner '88* and *House of Cards*, which Apter sees as 'stay[ing] in the thick of obstruction and a kind of bleakness', 'offering no escape from the rentability of politics' or political impasse (266-67).

Ultimately, Apter's *Unexceptional Politics* takes the form of an atlas, mapping situations and drawing different phenomena and writings together in a way that feels more like cartography than an attempt at a singular definition. As such, not unlike the phenomena it explores, it too resists an easy analysis. Its constellations consist of so many points that one can only hope to communicate a few, very general observations in a review of this length. Thankfully, the book is written to be read; if it points to a hundred other books, its language is clear – at times, indeed *poetic* – and its message is, finally, comprehensible, if not comprehended. If we are to understand what politics is or how it works today, a political theory without living subjects will not do. We must instead pay attention to the human agent involved in its instances and also include in thinking that 'debased foil of the Political, this micro, unexceptional politics', which, although 'often barely perceptible', is, as Apter writes, 'there nonetheless, manifest at its most minute scale as *a hum, a whisper, a mood, an atmosphere, a trade wind...*' (13, emphasis added).

What an unexceptional approach to politics might reveal when applied to environments and phenomena that fall outside the author's chosen context – that of 'neo-liberal Euro-America'(4) – remains to be seen. Of course, no book can do it all and as an effort to respond to the pressures of the parts of the present she examines, Apter's already does, one could argue, more than enough.

---

**Lilly Markaki** is a PhD researcher in Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. In 2014, she graduated from the University of Glasgow's 'Art; Politics; Transgression: 20th Century Avant-Gardes' MLitt programme, having previously received a BA in Art History from the same institution. Her research project examines French-American artist Marcel Duchamp in an attempt to renegotiate his position in relation to movements such as Dada and Surrealism and to rethink canonical understandings of the figure, arguing, finally, for an ethical and political dimension in his work. [Read more by Lilly Markaki.](#)

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*