



# The Scandal of Reason: A Critical Theory of Political Judgement (New Directions in Critical Theory)

By Albena Azmanova

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Theories of justice struggle to balance vision and practicality. As with Habermas, the more demanding the ideal of justice, the less connected the theory is to political reality; as with Rawls, the more politically realistic the theory, the weaker its normative criteria, rendering the theory unreliable. Brokering a resolution to the “judgment paradox,” Albena Azmanova advances a “critical consensus” model of judgment, which serves the normative ideals of a just society without resorting to ideal theory.

Tracing the evolution of two major traditions in political philosophy—critical theory and philosophical liberalism—and the way they confront the judgment paradox, Azmanova critiques prevailing models of deliberative democracy and their preference for ideal theory over political applicability. Instead, she replaces the reliance on normative models of democracy with an account of the dynamics of reasoned judgment, produced in democratic practices of open dialogues. Combining Arendt’s study of judgment with Bourdieu’s social critique of power relations, and incorporating elements of political epistemology from Kant, Wittgenstein, H. L. A. Hart, Weber, and American philosophical pragmatism, Azmanova centers her inquiry on the way participants in moral conflicts attribute meaning to their grievances of injustice. She then demonstrates the emancipatory potential of the model of judgment she forges and its capacity to guide policy making.

The model’s critical force derives from the capacity to disclose common structural sources of injustice behind conflicting claims to justice. Moving beyond the conflict between universalist and pluralist positions, Azmanova grounds the question of “what is justice?” in the empirical reality of “who suffers?” to detect attainable possibilities for a less unjust world.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

Concerned with the links connecting ethical positions and political reality, this ambitious and appealing contribution to critical theory guides our understanding of power and judgment, democracy and justice. Ranging wisely across multiple literatures and considerations, *The Scandal of Reason* offers compelling arguments about the level, type, and validity of ordered reflection most likely to advance good judgment and decent values under vexing conditions.

(Ira Katznelson, Ruggles Professor of Political Science and History, Columbia University)

With this original and incisive book, Albena Azmanova develops a new hermeneutic for reconciling two models of reasoning that have long been opposed to one another: contextually sensitive political judgments on the one hand versus procedurally-oriented models of discursive validity on the other. She argues that the more ideal a model of judgment, the less applicable in practice, and the more applicable in practice, the less morally rigorous?this has been the dilemma. She tries to resolve this by developing a model of critical political judgment, sensitive to shared matrices of meaning as well as hierarchies of reference. This is a major contribution to theories of judgment and is also written with flair and humor.

(Seyla Benhabib, Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Philosophy, Yale University)

Can deliberation avoid reproducing structural injustice? Dissatisfied with standard procedural models of public reason, Albena Azmanova proposes a new approach that foregrounds the ways in which power asymmetries prestructure deliberators' judgments. Combining philosophical rigor with sociological sensitivity, she extends the reach of critique to crucial regions that liberals ignore: namely, the sociocultural frames that simultaneously enable and constrain our capacity to perceive injustices. The result is a fascinating and convincing book that clarifies reason's 'scandalous' ability to serve both domination and emancipation.

(Nancy Fraser, Henry A. and Louise Loeb Professor of Political and Social Science, the New School for Social Research)

Albena Azmanova navigates between abstract, universalist conceptions of justice and legitimacy and situated, particularistic claims that disguise their implicit norms. Her work on judgment solves many of the problems of existing theories of deliberative democracy without surrendering normative justification. What is especially valuable in her work is that she transforms deliberative theory in a way that will be more usable for both empirical analysis and political orientation.

(Andrew Arato, Dorothy Hirshon Professor in Political and Social Theory, The New School for Social Research)

Albena Azmanova identifies what seems to have been a paradox in deliberative theory--that it be either

relevant or normative but not both. She resolves this paradox with her own 'critical consensus model,' which shows that we need not give up on social criticism and political relevance in order to develop a theory with normative force.

(Noëlle McAfee, Emory University)

Azmanova's original and theoretically incisive book reveals new connections between deliberative democracy and judgments about social injustice. Highly relevant for those interested in connecting critical theory to democratic deliberation.

(James Fishkin, director, Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University)

Moving well beyond the earlier generation of discursive theories, [Azmanova] open[s] up new modalities of politics and provide[s] us with new ways of thinking about them.

(Kevin Olson *Constellations*)

## Review

*The Scandal of Reason* enriches the tradition of critical theory by exploring how it can benefit from incorporating the insights of the judgment paradigm and of Bourdieu's sociological theory, and contributes new options for bridging the gap between universalism and pluralism.

(Alessandro Ferrara, Professor of Political Philosophy, University of Rome "Tor Vergata")

## About the Author

Albena Azmanova teaches political theory at the University of Kent in Brussels and is senior associate researcher at the Institute for European Studies of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Born in Bulgaria and educated in France and the United States, she lives in Belgium. Her writing focuses on political judgment and social justice; the transformation of capitalism and the emergence of new political ideologies; and Eastern Europe's postcommunist metamorphosis.

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