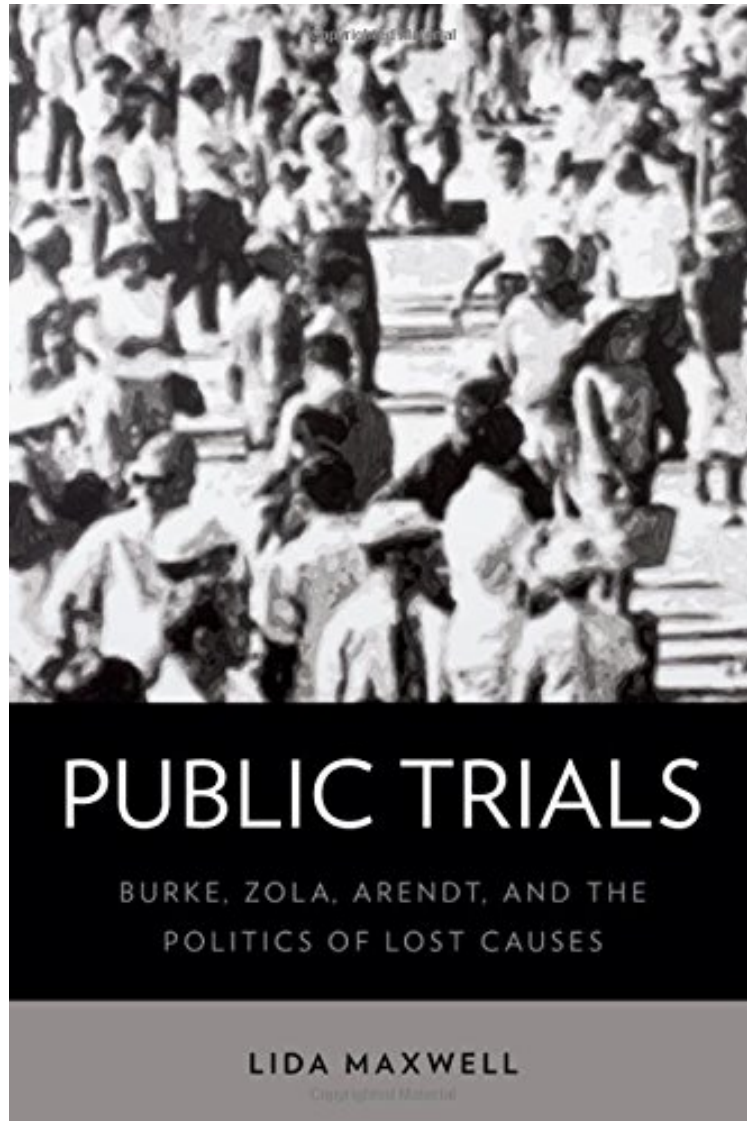


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# Public Trials: Burke, Zola, Arendt, and the Politics of Lost Causes

*Lida Maxwell*

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**Lida Maxwell : Public Trials: Burke, Zola, Arendt, and the Politics of Lost Causes** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Public Trials: Burke, Zola, Arendt, and the Politics of Lost Causes:

There are certain moments, such as the American founding or the Civil Rights Movement, that we revisit again and again as instances of democratic triumph, and there are other moments that haunt us as instances of democratic failure.

How should we view moments of democratic failure, when both the law and citizens forsake justice? Do such moments reveal a wholesale failure of democracy or a more contested failing, pointing to what could have been, and still might be? *Public Trials* reveals the considerable stakes of how we understand democratic failure. Maxwell argues against a tendency in the thinking of Plato, Rousseau and contemporary theorists to view moments of democratic failure as indicative of the failure of democracy, inasmuch as such thinking leads to a deference to authority that unintentionally encourages complicity in elite and legal failures to assure justice. In contrast, what Maxwell calls "lost cause narratives" of democratic failure reveal the contingency of democratic failure by showing that things "could have been" otherwise -- and, with public action and response, might yet be. A politics of lost causes calls for democratic responsiveness to failure via practices of resistance, theatrical claims-making, and re-narration. Maxwell makes a powerful case for the politics of lost causes by examining public controversies over trials. She focuses on the dilemmas and diagnoses of democratic failure in four instances: Edmund Burke's speeches and writings on the Warren Hastings trial in late 18th century Britain, Emile Zola's writings on the Dreyfus Affair in late 19th century France, Hannah Arendt's writings on the Eichmann trial in 1960's Israel, and Kathryn Bigelow's recent narration of (the lack of) trials of alleged terrorist detainees in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Maxwell marshals her subtle, historically grounded readings of these texts to show the dangers of despairing of democracy altogether, as well as the necessity of re-narrating instances of democratic failure so as to cultivate public responsiveness to such failures in the future.

"If it is a commonplace that democratic causes are often defeated, even by the people themselves, it does not (indeed, it cannot!) follow that democratic thinkers and actors should abandon their commitments to realizing more just ways of living. Lida Maxwell's *Public Trials* advances an altogether original and inspiring alternative. Through rich readings of Burke, Zola, and Arendt, Maxwell exemplifies the 'art of losing causes.' *Public Trials* demonstrates how to create new ways of speaking, writing, and acting in the face of past and present injustice. Vigorously, it summons readers to do the same." --Lawrie Balfour, Professor of Politics, University of Virginia, and author of *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W.E.B. Du Bois* "Lida Maxwell has produced a provocative and thrilling book on the 'politics of lost causes.' Seeing in democratic failure opportunity as much as loss, promise as much as pessimism, Maxwell shows how failure solicits action, demands accountability and builds counter-intuitive and unpredictable affiliations committed to lost causes and the possible futures they reveal. This is a risky and unconventional work on the art of losing." --Jack Halberstam, author of *The Queer Art of Failure* "Maxwell's book is a highly innovative work that proposes to see public trials as exemplary sites for democratic politics. She brilliantly reads the 'lost cause' narratives of three public intellectuals, Burke, Zola, and Arendt as offering a productive reformulation of democratic failures and as occasions for responsiveness rather than resignation. It provides a fresh reading of these trials, by going beyond the legal texts to less familiar terrain of the literary imagination. The major contribution of the book lies in its ability to redirect the literature on transitional justice from attempting to tame politics in order to allow for justice, to encouraging a politics of resistance as essential to the pursuit of justice." --Leora Bilsky, Professor of Law, Tel Aviv University, and author of *Transformative Justice: Israeli Identity on Trial* "*Public Trials* is an excellent book. Clearly written, well organized, and jargon free, it will be of interest to a wide range of scholars of democracy and law. Highly recommended." -- CHOICE "It is a rare gift to encounter a book as historically textured and politically provocative as *Public Trials*... Drawing from a wide range of historical and contemporary political phenomena--from the abuses of the East India Company in the eighteenth century to the recent case of the alleged terrorist mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and from Hannah Arendt's review of the comedic writing of Nathalie Sarraute to an original and persuasive reading of Kathryn Bigelow's 2012 film, *Zero Dark Thirty*--Maxwell puts these disparate subjects into conversation with one another in exciting, unorthodox ways. Maxwell treats her readers to a rich, productively paradoxical, nonlinear story of democratic promise and downfall, the realization and impossibility of justice, and the indispensability and limitations of law." - *Perspectives on Politics* About the Author Lida Maxwell is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.