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1). The trouble with 'liberalism'

Over the last decade or so I have been learning how to do research in and about South Africa. In this context, I have had to think explicitly about just what 'democracy' meant, and how it means what it means, since people talk a lot about democracy there. Far from being an 'empty signifier', it really is an 'essentially contested concept', with different normatively infused meanings deployed by different actors in the middle of political contestation. An empirical programme for research on democracy in geography would build on this sense of the worldliness of the concept of democracy, by tracking the way in which discourses and devices of democracy are deployed by political actors. Such a programme might reorient geographers' approach to normative democratic theory, by disclosing different understandings of what 'democracy' is meant to be good for, what harms it is understood to be a remedy for, and what dangers it is expected to avert. But in order to realize this potential, it might be necessary to abandon some of the habits of radical theorizing in geography, including an unthinking attitude to all things deemed 'liberal', and a tendency to idealize democracy by recourse to ontologized styles of conceptualization. Thinking of democracy geographically might require more ordinary ways of theorizing.

Democracy's uneasy standing as a topic in human geography is a reflection of the incomplete and contested shift in the normative paradigms which underwrite self-consciously radical and/or critical geography. Geography's almost systematic evasion of the revival of political philosophy from the 1970s through to the 1990s still resonates in the ongoing negative construction of 'liberalism' in current conceptualisations of 'neoliberalism', and in the attraction to theories of power derived from Foucault's work on governmentality.

In debates about the brilliantly chaotic concept of 'neoliberalization', it is presupposed that neoliberalism cannot and does not foster genuine democracy. Neoliberalism is preconstructed as inimical to norms of state-centred accountability and electoral representation. This means that 'real' democracy is automatically elevated into a vector of fundamental socio-economic transformation, which might be over-selling the concept a little. Theories of neoliberalization do not allow that the rise of 'neoliberal' policy agendas might well be an effect of democratic processes; that neoliberalization might itself unfold its own distinctive democratic practices; or that the new forms of governance identified as the expressions of the anti-democratic trajectory of neoliberalism might actually represent sites in which new forms of democratic politics are innovated, and new criteria of democratic legitimacy are discovered.

In Foucauldian scholarship in geography, 'liberalism' is also subjected to stylized presentations that restrict efforts to understand the contemporary dynamics of democratization. Any contribution that Foucault's work might make to the non-reductive analysis of democracy must negotiate the fact that Foucault himself settled upon a singularly strategic concept of action in his work on governmentality, without ever specifying how this dimension of action articulates with 'communicative' aspects of action. In its prevalent form, Foucauldian scholarship is therefore systematically unable to account for the distinctively *normative* force of norms. If one thinks of the concept of democracy as 'essentially contested' in the fullest sense, and if one recognizes democratic politics as a form of politics which is practically oriented by normative horizons – by reference to claims regarding the common good, fairness, freedom, and so on – then this inability to acknowledge the communicative force of norms means that there must be severe doubts about

whether dominant interpretations of Foucault's work are able to throw light upon the distinctive normative modalities of democratic politics.

2). Democratic theory as radical idealization

Certain strains of democratic theory have recently come to prominence through critical human geography's ontological turn, in which the imperative is on rethinking 'the political'. This imperative is informed by the work of Ernesto Laclau and of Chantal Mouffe, but also by ideas drawn from actor-network theory on 'onto-politics' and from political theorists such as William Connolly and Jacques Ranciere. 'The political' actually has rather different resonances across this range of work. It sometimes refers to a dimension of constant agonistic energy (the dominant emphasis in Laclau, Mouffe, Ranciere and Connolly for example); sometimes to a process of ordering (the dominant emphasis in Latour and other theorists of onto-politics); and sometimes to the dimension of life that is shared in common (the operative sense in writers such as Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, Sheldon Wolin and Pierre Rosanvallon). All these approaches share a rather precious disdain for ordinary politics, which is interpreted as the scene of the shrinking away or diminution of genuine democratic energy. As a consequence, proper democracy is restricted to those fugitive practices that call into question 'the political'; or unleash the energy of 'the political'; or seek to reorder 'the political'.

The disappointed acknowledgement that contemporary democracy is a "flawed hegemon" is often taken to automatically invalidate any and all concern with the sites and procedures of ordinary democratic politics, such as elections, parties, or parliamentary procedures (Squires 2002). In geography, as elsewhere, this move is evident in the assumption that if democracy is

fundamentally about 'the political', rather than mere 'politics', then in turn the real energy for democratic politics must be found somewhere other than where ordinary politics takes place: at different scales (i.e. not the national level); in social movement mobilisations (i.e. rather than through political parties); and in diffuse practices of identity-formation (i.e. rather than in discrete practices of aggregating preferences, at election time). This is one effect of geography's engagement with a rather narrow strand of post-structuralise radical democratic theory: it has generated a set of empirical programmes which look for democracy in certain places and *not* others; and which leave aside the question of how and whether dispersed practices of identification and mobilisation can, do, and should ever articulate with institutional formations of authoritative decision-making. The other effect of the narrow focus on one particular strand of democratic theory is the authorisation of a dismissive posture towards other lines of democratic theory which, one might reasonably suppose, could be useful in investigating contemporary democratic politics. Most obviously, radical democracy is framed in critical human geography as preferable to Habermasian theories of deliberative democracy, on the grounds that they are less naïve about the operations of power; and on the grounds that they refer to preferable norms of agonistic encounter, rather consensus and agreement.

Yet, oddly, poststructuralist theories of radical democracy and related ontologies of 'the political' turn out to be more prescriptively normative than the broad range of 'deliberative' theory they eagerly dismiss. These theories take for granted particular understandings of how democracy *should be* defined – understandings that sometimes appeal to more or less antiquarian etymologies of the word 'democracy'; or sometimes appeal to more or less convincing ontologies of the essence of 'the political'. The ontological derivation of the true, if forgotten,

meaning of democracy has the effect of elevating democracy into a 'gross concept' (Shapiro 2005), emphasising one aspect (the bit about agonistic contestation) by detaching the concept from the field of relational claims in which such inherently normative concepts take on their significance. These ontological certainties are then deployed as critical devices both to engage with other theoretical traditions, and to evaluate examples of real world politics. This sort of conceptualisation certainly enables one to track the flourishing of radical pluralism in the margins of contemporary or historical formations; and they certainly allow one to bemoan the contemporary ascendancy of 'the post-political' or 'post-democracy'. Either way, abstractly derived *ideals* of what democracy *should be* are appealed to as regulative principles against which real-world political processes are evaluated.

This style of ontologized democratic theory helps critical human geography reiterate the routine habit of the critical mind of exposing the ongoing reproduction of domination, exploitation, or inequality beneath the *appearance* of legitimate processes. What slips from view in this style of critical exposé is the question of what difference it makes to the *content* of social relations when authority or sovereignty are exercised through the *forms* of democratic legitimacy. Getting at this question might require more ordinary approaches to theorizing democracy.

3). Theorising democracy democratically

Addressing what he calls the gap between the demanding 'ought' of democratic theory and empirical analysis, Habermas (2006) has recently observed that different traditions of democratic theory are associated with distinctive empirical research programmes. For example, liberal theories of democracy have an elective affinity with various forms of rational choice

methodology, including social choice approaches to arriving at collective welfare functions, and public choice approaches to understanding processes of rent-seeking. Republican and communitarian theories tend to focus on the sources of solidarity that underpins a democratic ethos, and this in turn cashes-out in empirical measures of trust or social capital. One can place the tradition of radical democratic pluralism that circulates in critical human geography in this same field. It focuses on the forms of ethos through which democratic virtues such as commitment to equality and liberty, or generosity and responsiveness, can be cultivated. Of course, such theoretically sophisticated accounts of 'ethos' are not easily amenable to empirical measures, but they do nonetheless inform subtle ethnographic accounts of democratic subject-formation. But what all of these ethos-led approaches share is a strong presumption in favour of the hypothesis that democracy has certain sorts of cultural conditions, whether these are understood in terms of practices of trust, or reflexive attitudes to the contingency of identities. To paraphrase Jon Elster (1983, 91-100), this might be putting the normative cart before the practical horse (as well as smuggling in some unacknowledged ethnocentrism). What if peaceable democratic politics actually requires certain sorts of institutionalized indifference to others? What if the virtues associated with democratic politics are actually the by-products of democratic institutions, not its conditions?

The approach to democratic theory that most concerns Habermas, the deliberative approach, puts a premium on the claim that democratic legitimacy is derived from the epistemic function that discourse, negotiation, and mediums of publicity play in identifying relevant problems, informing citizens, and communicating to centres of authoritative decision-making. This approach has generated a range of empirical work, focusing on just how deliberative procedures

actually operate; whether the hypothesized transformations in the horizons of participants actually take place; and whether and how the outcomes of such procedures are given force in decision-making. This sort of research is actually well-established in certain areas of geography, in environmental studies and urban policy studies for example. It is also an important dimension in the ongoing development of normative theories of deliberative and discursive democracy (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006). This empirical aspect of normative theories of deliberative democracy is the expression of a strong commitment to *experimenting* with alternative mechanisms of institutional design (e.g. Anderson 2006, Fung 2006, Unger 2007). This sense of experimentation is worth emphasizing, because it is common to interpret the practical applications given to deliberative theories of democracy as a kind of sell-out, in which normative principles are translated into prescriptive designs. This commitment to experimenting with institutional designs follows from thinking of democracy in terms of the principle of affected interest. This is an implicitly, when not explicitly, geographical principle (Barnett 2008a). The idea that all those affected by a policy should have some say in formulating the decisions around it is a basic aspect of ordinary usages of democracy, as well of democratic theory. It is implicit, for example, in the formulations of 'the political' found in writers such as Arendt, Wolin, and Lefort, where politics is primarily understood in terms of a field of collectively shared matters of concern and action; in the resurgence of participatory theories of democracy since the 1960s; and is the operative sense of democracy in recent work by actor-network theorists such as Latour. In deliberative and discursive theories of democracy, the affected interest principle is translated into a set of broad-based practices of participation in publicly mediated *communicative* practices. With some difficulty admittedly, this approach leads to an acknowledgement that democratic

politics can and *should* include a range of agents and mediums that enact various representative functions (Barnett 2003).

The experimental commitment evident amongst theorists of deliberative and discursive democracy dovetails with a particular style of theorizing. Democracy is not understood to be a static concept, nor one whose sense can be derived through ontological reasoning. If we think of democracy as essentially contested in theory, as well as effectively contested in practice (Freeden 2004), then this implies thinking in terms of a supplementary logic of democratization. New attributes can and do become attached to 'democracy' in the ongoing dynamic of contestation about the relationship between its different values and their practical embodiment (Saward 2003). This supplementary dynamic of democracy, understood as an essentially contested concept, suggests a programme for geographical research on democracy which would have three strands:

> 1). A *charitable* interpretation of the imaginary geographies of democratic theory. This would be sensitive to the fact that political theorists can and do reflect seriously on the spatialities of their objects of analysis. And it would be sensitive to the analytical problems that political theorists might be trying to articulate when they have recourse to what, from geographers' perspective, appear to be rather stylized understandings of globalization, or the transnational, and so on. For example, discussion of geographical boundaries can serve the function of addressing the problem of how to translate broadly diffused processes of opinion-formation into legitimate and effective forms of will-formation; or geographical objects, such as the nation, can serve as the frame through

which to reflect on the qualities of social solidarity associated with democracy. In focusing on the spatial tropology at work in theoretical discussions of, for example, representation or the public sphere, our default position cannot simply be to call these discussions into doubt for being idealizations, or for not having the same theoretical understandings of spatiality that geographers favour (cf. Sparke 2005). We should approach this field charitably, aiming to understand the concerns which are at stake in this style of normative reflection, and being prepared to present arguments for why alternative geographical conceptualizations would contribute to that project of reflection, rather than invalidate it.

2). A *diagnostic* investigation of the types of influence to which particular fields of power are susceptible. Assuming a broad understanding of radical democracy, in which the energy of democratization is dispersed across a range of actors operating in the 'public sphere', a key issue in any democratic theory that is attuned to empirical analysis is whether the forms of *influence* that can be generated in the public sphere (or, if you prefer, in cultivating an agonistic democratic ethos) can or should be articulated with the institutionalized *exercise* of power (Scheuerman 2006, Cohen and Fung 2004, 28-31). Poststructuralist theorists, who address the communicative conditions of pluralistic democracy through figures of democratic ethos, are wary of drawing too close to sites of decision-making. For them, the force of democratic politics is reserved for the disruptive energies of contestatory practices. This leaves a whole series of issues off the table. An analysis of the 'steering media' through which different fields of practice are coordinated can provide resources for an analysis of the forms of influence that different practices

might be susceptible too, the forms of contention and grievance they generate, and the type of democratic politics that might be expected to emerge around them (e.g. Dryzek 2007; Dryzek et al 2003, Young 2001). In contrast to the undifferentiated emphasis on democratization as contingent on the internal styles of movement organization that the poststructuralist approach to radical democracy generates, the deliberative-cum-discursive elaboration of classical critical theory is better geared to recognizing the *material* differences between fields of practice that accounts for the styles of political action that are gathered around them. And it is here that geographers' sensitivity to the differential spatio-temporal constitution of fields of power (Allen 2003), supplemented perhaps by an appreciation of the differential validity claims enacted by these formations, might contribute to broader projects of theorizing democratic futures.

3). A *parasitical* analysis of the ordinary deployment of normative concepts of democracy in political processes. One reference for this sense of parasitical analysis is Derrida's concern with "democracy-to-come", which draws attention to the relationship between the promise of political ideals and their institutionalization. Or, in Foucauldian terms, democracy might be understood to be the name for a system of rule which is geared to establishing new norms in changed circumstances. More practically, a parasitical analysis would focus on the ways in which democratic norms are invoked in new contexts in the course of ongoing political contestation. By focusing on the contestation of democratic norms in historical-geographical contexts of *application*, such an analysis would help to disclose what values are invoked, and what harms or concerns are motivating different actors, when recourse is made to the discourses and devices of

democracy. This style of analysis would be context sensitive but attuned to processes of translation through which democratic practices travel; it would be attuned to different understandings of what democracy is good for; it would be sensitive to the articulation of democratic practices with non-democratic practices of bureaucracy, violence, patriarchy and so on; and it would be sensitive to the ways in which new meanings accrete to 'democracy' in this process of translation and contested application.

This sort of three-pronged programme for geographical research on democracy, committed to theorisizing democracy ordinarily, that is, to appreciating the ways in which democracy's meanings emerge in the course of political processes, does not abandon the normative dimension of democratic theory. Acknowledging that democracy collects together a series of values, including liberty and equality, participation and publicity, accountability and accommodation, contingency, contestation, and consensus, responsibility and representation – suggests that critical attention should focus on the ways in which particular claims to instantiate democracy advance certain values over others. Judgement over the validity of any such combination will, no doubt, remain open to further contestation, which is why this sort of analysis should also enact a commitment to giving reasons for preferring certain values over others (Barnett 2008b).

4). Profane democratization

Politics is about who gets what, where, and how. Democracy is a form of politics, not a substitute for it. Democratic politics is a form of politics in which questions of who gets what, where and how are folded into questions of *whether they should*[1] (see Staeheli 2008). Any geographical research programme on democracy needs to be able to address the normative force

of democratic values in practical contexts. Some democratic theories are better equipped to do this than others, and so are some social theories. In order to cash-out the potential of critical theories of democracy it might be necessary to disrupt the received conventions of theory-formation in critical human geography: in which normative theories are only ever allowed to serve as ideals; in which finding signs of 'power' is always understood to negate any putative 'communicative' normative steering of social practices; and in which explicit reflection on normative values is always trumped by ontological assertion. Democracy is not an empty signifier; it is full of meaning, and these meanings include the irreducible dimension of *rule*. A responsible theoretical approach to democracy cannot remain removed from questions of institutionalization, in the name of a perpetually deferred 'to-come'. The value of democracy does not rest on an eschatological hope in a wholly different future, but in "the profane expectation that our praxis in the world, despite everything, may help to bring about a shift towards a better state of things" (Habermas 2002, 113).

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NOTES

[1] Thanks to John Keane for this formulation.