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In the Name of Democracy

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Abstract

What do people mean when they use the word "democracy"? From a survey of usage, we discover that democracy is a highly contestable notion. It is spoken of simultaneously as a moral principle, a state of being, and a system of government. But if democracy is a vigorously contested notion, it is not a hopelessly contested notion. Certain regular distinctions begin to emerge, with the most important being that between "liberal democracy" and "popular democracy." Democracy today exists as a concept at war with itself. The resultant crisis for democrats is that they are forced to defend liberal values against popular reform. My own view is that democracy is best understood as *pharmakon* – as both poison and cure. My overall ambition in this paper, however, is not necessarily to defend one definition against another, but only to ask how we might proceed. In this sense, I want to address Jacques Derrida's question of : "can one and/or must one speak democratically of democracy?"

In the Name of Democracy

Introduction

The ambition of this paper is to write something *of* the name of democracy, and perhaps also, *in* the name of democracy. And I will begin at what is, perhaps, the most endlessly interesting part: determining exactly what people mean when they use the word "democracy." When Alexis de Tocqueville observed, in 1835, that "the democracy which governs the American communities, appears to be rapidly rising into power in Europe" (2003, 1), one cannot assume in advance what he means by "democracy." It can only be determined from a close and sustained reading of the text (and arguably also, by reading it in French). What's more, one cannot rely on an author to use the term consistently throughout even a single text. In general, what Tocqueville means by *démocratie* is something like "equality of conditions," or the absence of class distinctions. But at times he uses the term to mean the freedom to act, sometimes as the liberal institutions that support social orderliness, and sometimes even as a rational state of mind.

Determining what people have meant when they use the word democracy will shed light on its history and competing traditions. As we shall see, democracy has been claimed equally as the bedrock of socialism and of capitalism, as both a means to an end and an end in itself, and even as the end of history. The radical multiplicity of its use invokes a second question: how do we decide which meaning to favour? Which definition is the most legitimate, the most clearly articulated, or simply, the most popular? The second task of this paper is, then, to consider what social and political processes – democratic or otherwise – are revealed in the conflict and resolution of possible meanings. Specifically, I will take up Jacques Derrida's question: "can one and/or must one speak democratically of democracy?" (2005, 71). Is it

possible, in other words, to assert a single, unified meaning of democracy, without, at the same time, compromising the principles for which democracy is said to stand?

If Derrida, like George Orwell before him, is successful in drawing our attention to the rhetorical violence of the powerful in the construction of meaning, then the work of Ferdinand de Saussure helps us to understand the role of ordinary language users in that same process. Saussure alerts us to the possibility that language innovations (whether political or cultural) are difficult to enforce, and that ordinary language users hold much greater power of resistance and ratification than they are generally credited with. Following Saussure, the thesis of this paper is that the public contest over the meaning of "democracy" reveals the ways in which language itself functions as a democracy, and highlights the "democratic" power held by ordinary language users – whom I propose to call "language-citizens" – in the construction of meaning.

The Language of Democracy

Democracy, or a word very like it, has a history extending at least to classical Athens, and according to some commentators, perhaps many centuries earlier.[1] What the Greeks meant by *δημοκρατία* is clearly still of interest to us today. For reasons of brevity, however, and also to circumvent problems of translation which I think deserve their own discussion, I want to start with the earliest uses of the word in the English language. As John Hartley has noted, "in its earliest uses in English, in the 1500s, it was virtually synonymous with 'mob' – very much a 'boo' word" (1982, 23). In 1614, Joseph Hall, Bishop of Exeter, pronounced that: "Nothing ... can bee more disorderlie, then the confusion of your Democracie, or popular state" (*OED*). As late as 1821, Lord Byron asked: "what is, in fact, democracy? – an aristocracy of blackguards" (*OED*). The problem that immediately presents itself in examining the history of this word in

English is determining the point at which democracy shifts from being a "boo" word to a "hooray" word, one that galvanises nations to go to war in its name.

The American Revolution – and in particular, its Declaration of Independence in 1776 – is often claimed as a turning point in the history of the public perception of democracy. But this would suggest a broad support for democracy which simply didn't exist at the time. As late as 1787, in Federalist Paper No. 10, James Madison wrote that a "pure democracy":

> can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. (para 13)

This concern for what J.S. Mill will call "the tyranny of the majority" (1859, 6) is developed in writings by many of the founding fathers. Madison contrasts democracy with a republic, in which the violent passions of the demos are tempered by the wisdom and patriotism of its representatives. Indeed, the American Constitution of 1787 reflects this need to limit absolute democratic power.

As such, we will need to set a date later than 1776 as the moment when democracy completes its journey from "boo" word to "hooray" word. It is more likely that only with Abraham Lincoln's Address at the Dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, on 19 November 1863, that democracy became firmly established as a universal good:

> Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. [. . .] we here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under

God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people,

and for the people, shall not perish from the earth. (lines 1-3, 22-26)

Lincoln concisely and eloquently recalls the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, in which certain truths are held to be "self-evident": "that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (lines 3-4). In order to secure these rights, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed" (lines 4-5). The logic of Lincoln's speech implies that from the principle of the equality of man springs forth a clear implication for government: a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But it is the *poetry* of Lincoln's speech, and not the argument it carries, that has become most significant for the meaning of democracy. Lincoln's rhetoric effortlessly weaves together the notions of liberty, equality, and democracy into a single cloth. In doing so, Lincoln makes democracy a "hooray" word at the very moment when it becomes inseparable from the concepts of liberty and equality.

Liberty, Equality, Democracy

Since the Gettysburg Address, the concepts of liberty, equality, and democracy have become inextricably entwined in American political consciousness. The difficulty of separating these three concepts – one a state of being, one a moral principle, and one a system of government – can still be heard in the words of George W. Bush during his presidency. Speaking at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, he remarked:

We've witnessed, in little over a generation, the swiftest advance of freedom in the 2,500

year story of democracy.

Already we can hear the absolute indivisibility of "freedom" and "democracy." The President continued:

It is no accident that the rise of so many democracies took place in a time when the world's most influential nation was itself a democracy. The United States made military and moral commitments in Europe and Asia, which protected free nations from aggression, and created the conditions in which new democracies could flourish. As we provided security for whole nations, we also provided inspiration for oppressed peoples. In prison camps, in banned union meetings, in clandestine churches, men and women knew that the whole world was not sharing their own nightmare. They knew of at least one place – a bright and hopeful land – where freedom was valued and secure. And they prayed that America would not forget them, or forget the mission to promote liberty around the world. (2003, paras 8-9)

Bush goes on to describe democracy and liberty as "the design of nature," and explicitly names God as "the author of freedom." As noble as the intentions of the Declaration of Independence were, the tone of President Bush's address demonstrates the dangers of founding a nation in self-evident truths, under God. There is a distinct lack of *doubt* in the President's vision of democracy: in its design by God, as the design of nature; as the direction of history; in its relationship to liberty and equality; and of the role of the United States in its advance. All the questions of Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes, and the deliberations of Madison, Hamilton, and Jefferson, are either forgotten or deliberately buried under the weight of homilies. It is, once again, the poetic imprecision around the word democracy which best advances its claim as a universal good.

Contrary to President Bush's sentiments, democracy has had anything but a settled and self-evident meaning, history, or place in human affairs, even since the Gettysburg Address. It is a term which has been used to support both big government and free markets, centralised control and liberalisation, rebellion and counter-rebellion. In the same decade of the early twentieth century, Lenin could claim that: "democracy is not identical with majority rule. Democracy is a *State* which recognizes the subjection of the minority to the majority" (1992,

97), while Woodrow Wilson described democracy as: "the limitation of governmental power, not the increase of it" (1956, 130). In 1989, Francis Fukuyama claimed that:

> What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (1989, 107)

As if to deliberately counter all three statements, Jawaharlal Nehru argued that: "Democracy and socialism are means to an end, not the end itself" (1992, 491). But if democracy is a *vigorously* contested notion, it is not a *hopelessly* contested notion. What particularly begins to emerge is the tension between what we could call the "popular" aspects of democracy – in a government representing the will of the people through free and fair elections – and the values and institutions of what we could call the "liberal" aspects of democracy – in the rule of law, and in the freedoms of speech, association, and religion.

Popular Democracy and Liberal Democracy

This tension between popular democracy and liberal democracy is, indeed, evident in its dictionary definitions. Most contemporary English dictionaries give democracy the dual characteristics of: (1) a system of government in which power resides in the people governed; and (2) a set of social institutions which safeguard equal rights. The *Oxford English Dictionary* of 1989, for example, defines democracy as:

> Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them (as in the small republics of antiquity) or by officers elected by them. In mod. use often more vaguely denoting a social state in which all have equal rights, without hereditary or arbitrary differences of rank or privilege. (*OED*)

It is notable however, that both the *first* English dictionary – Johnson's of 1755 – and the most *recently* published major English dictionary – the *Encarta World English Dictionary* of 1999 – expurgate the moral and ethical aspects of democracy, defining it only functionally as a government of the people with free and fair elections.[2]

It is clearly demonstrable that states exist which attempt to rule in the interests of all citizens equally without popular elections, as well as voting states in which equality of rights or opportunities is not observed, nor even attempted. And both types of state have claimed the name of "democracy." In order to manage this tension in the meaning of democracy, Francis Fukuyama separates "formal democracy" from "substantive democracy," which he also calls "liberalism":

> While liberalism and democracy usually go together, they can be separated in theory. It is possible for a country to be liberal without being particularly democratic, as was eighteenth-century Britain. [. . .] It is also possible for a country to be democratic without being liberal, that is, without protecting the rights of individuals and minorities. A good example is the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran (43-44)

In much the same way, but from the opposite end of the political spectrum, Chantal Mouffe has argued that such a division in the meaning of democracy betrays the *independent* – or even *opposed* – notions of popular sovereignty and liberal values, and she calls this opposition the "democratic paradox":

> On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only contingent historical articulation. (2000, 2-3)

For both Fukuyama and Mouffe, popular democracy and liberal democracy are wholly distinct and independent phenomena which have too often been treated as a single entity.

This fracture in the unity of democracy as a shared value, and as a practical concept and institution, is far from trivial or merely semantic. Rather, the increasing divergence of the popular and liberal aspects of democracy is the central crisis in political theory today; so much so that a special issue of the *Journal of Democracy* was published to consider the crisis of "the growing tensions between democracy and liberalism" (Krastev 2007, 57). In Central-East Europe, Rupnik notes, "the recent populist backlash is a direct challenge to the liberal paradigm that had prevailed in the region for a decade and a half" (2007, 19). It is possible, then, that the meaning of democracy – isolated from its associations with liberty and equality – is gradually returning to its pre-modern definition as "mob-rule." Such a view of democracy was only overturned by its attachment to the Enlightenment concepts of liberty and equality. With the cultural shift to postmodernity comes a decline in the autonomy of the nation-state, the loss of shared moral and ethical beliefs, and the loss of an independent media's role in creating an informed public. Despite the optimism of President Bush, and the legacy of the Declaration of Independence, it is no longer self-evident that popular government and liberal institutions are inherently or naturally co-dependent. When the poetry of their association recedes, what remains are two ideas with quite distinct foundations and consequences.

The argument, therefore, is that emotional or nationalistic appeals to the public often put at threat liberal institutions and values such as the rule of law, freedom of speech, or the protection of civil rights. The resultant crisis for democrats is that they are forced to defend – in the name of democracy – liberal values against popular reform. This schism in the democratic vision has caused structural changes in the way politics is conducted. As Krastev phrases it: "the main structural conflict is not between left and right or between reformers and conservatives. The real clash is between elites that are becoming ever more suspicious of democracy and angry publics that are becoming ever more hostile to liberalism" (2007, 63). In

this way, democracy is a notion at war with itself: the greatest threat to liberal democracy comes from the unrestrained enactment of popular democracy.

Speaking Democratically of Democracy

The question, as it stands, concerns the definition of democracy, and its competing histories and values. The limit of such an inquiry is reached when one realises the difficulty of supporting one view of democracy at the expense of another. If one claims to have a better, higher, more moral definition of democracy, then on what grounds, what authority, on whose behalf, does one speak? As Ralf Dafsendorf has put it: "one man's populism is another's democracy, and vice versa" (qtd. in Krastev 2007, 59). Hence, there's a kind of stalemate, or inescapable circularity, in this inquiry. In order to move beyond this *aporia* we will need to simultaneously consider *how* we determine the meaning of democracy, and *who* determines the meaning of democracy. Specifically, we need to consider the role of language-users in defining democracy, and more generally, the role of language-users as *citizens* in the construction of meaning.

Democracy was perhaps the dominant theme of Jacques Derrida's last decade of writing. Most recently and pointedly, in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Derrida asks: "can one and/or must one speak democratically of democracy?" (2005, 71). Is it possible, in other words, to claim a particular and unified meaning of democracy without, at the same time, having to renounce democracy, at least temporarily? When George W. Bush claims that liberty is the design of nature, isn't he simultaneously curtailing the liberty to think otherwise? In this way, Derrida draws attention to the "circular and contradictory" (2005, 72) nature of the question.

Derrida's task, which I will take up here, is to consider whether it is possible to speak *democratically* of democracy, or *in the name of* democracy. Of course, Derrida's democratic project is irreducibly complex and open, and any criticism of it in a short essay must be

preliminary. But I feel that I can only partially agree with Derrida's formulation, for reasons which I hope to make clear. He begins his answer in this way:

> To speak democratically of democracy, it would be necessary, through some circular performativity and through the political violence of some enforcing rhetoric, some force of law, to impose a meaning on the word democratic and thus produce a consensus that one pretends, by fiction, to be established and accepted – or at the very least possible and necessary: on the horizon. (2005, 73)

Derrida's answer reiterates the insight of La Fontaine's parable of *The Wolf and the Lamb*[3] that "the strong are always best at proving they're right" (qtd. in Derrida 2005, x). Derrida introduces this theme, which appears throughout *Rogues*, in relation to "the question of the United States," which is "the question of their 'right of the strongest,' their 'law of the jungle'" (2005, xiii). And it is easy to think of President Bush's speech to the National Endowment for Democracy as a kind of rhetorical violence in the name of democracy. Indeed, it would seem that the National Endowment for Democracy's mission is to overturn the idea that competing conceptualisations of democracy exist, or at least, are legitimate. In a recent speech on the theme of "contested conceptions of democracy" the Endowment's President, Carl Gershman, stated that:

> Let me now turn to where I had originally planned to begin, by making a brief disclaimer about the rather ambivalent, excessively diffident and self-doubting way the theme of this panel has been stated. [. . .] The conception of democracy that is implicitly contained in the Universal Declaration – government by consent and respect for basic rights -- does not need to be defined by an adjective. Adjectives are needed only by regimes that seek to justify their violation of fundamental rights by cloaking it the language of democracy. Examples of this Orwellian use of language include what China calls socialist democracy, what Iran calls Islamic democracy what Russia calls managed democracy, and what Venezuela calls Bolivarian democracy. (2013, para 8)

Gershman's use of the term Orwellian is ironic in a number of ways, not least of all because Orwell himself acknowledged that democracy has: "several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another" (1968, 132).

It would seem that at the very moment when democracy is acknowledged to be divided, or even in crisis, the defenders of its hegemonic mode redouble their efforts to present democracy as a *panacea* – as a cure-all[4]. But today, in the west at least, democracy presents as more like the *pharmakon* – the cure that is also a poison. The cure for totalitarianism carries with it the poison of populism. The point for both supporters and critics of democracy to grasp is that we shouldn't think of this duality as a failing of democracy, but instead, as democracy's natural functioning. Populism is not avoidable nor even a *side effect* of democracy; it is part of the very *substance* of democracy. As such, when we advocate for democracy, it should not be as a boo-word or hooray-word, but both at the same time.

Democracy and the Language Community

Despite this evidence that speaking democratically of democracy requires "the political violence of some enforcing rhetoric," I feel that Derrida's position overplays the hand of the speaker, and underplays the hand of the language community, and their powers of *ratification* or of *legitimation* of meaning. "Democracy" is, in fact, a very good example, and very important example, of how linguistic meaning is produced and continuously modified through social and political contests that involve all members of the language community. The point I hope to make is that if speaking democratically of democracy involves a kind of rhetorical violence, then it is the kind of violence that all speakers of the language commit every day.

La Fontaine's parable of *The Wolf and the Lamb*, and Derrida's own discussion of "rogue states," are, as Derrida acknowledges, part of "a formidable tradition" which includes "Bodin, Hobbes, Grotius, Pascal, Rousseau, and so many others" (2005, xi). It is a tradition which must

also include George Orwell. In his powerful essay of 1946, "Politics and the English Language," Orwell identifies political language as that which "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (1968, 139):

> Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. (1968, 136)

Sixty years on, we could update Orwell's list and add that the military killing of tens of thousands of civilians is called "collateral damage," and the secret transfer of prisoners of war from one state to another in order to be tortured is called "extraordinary rendition." But these are more complex examples than they first suggest; more complex, say, than the parable of *The Wolf and the Lamb*. "Collateral damage" may have originally been coined as a way for the American military to deflect responsibility for civilian casualties in Vietnam, but there has been such a strong negative reaction to the phrase, and popular resistance to the phrase, that it is now more often held up as an example of military "Newspeak," to borrow from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As a linguistic strategy, it failed to accomplish what its speakers wanted it to, and indeed achieved the opposite, in bringing popular attention to the issue of civilian casualties in war. "Extraordinary rendition" has a similar history of reception, and the *Wikipedia* pages for both entries bears this out. It must be relevant, too, that both *Collateral Damage* and *Rendition* are now the titles of Hollywood movies. If the strong are always best at proving they're right, then strength, in this case, is found in numbers.

There's little doubt that the intention behind terms like "rectification of frontiers" and "extraordinary rendition" is the deliberate manipulation of language with the aim of legitimising an otherwise unacceptable political program. One definition of Orwell's

"Newspeak" I think is particularly relevant: "the deliberate alteration of meanings of words to achieve political or social ends" (Huff 1999, 1). And yet the very same definition could describe Derrida's deconstructive strategy of intervening in meanings, of inverting and displacing the complacent use of linguistic conventions. In other words, the limit of such a position is reached when one realises the rhetorical force required to defend a "political critique" of the language against the "abuses" of others. The point I am making is not intended to be either ironic or critical of Derrida's deconstructive project as a whole. It concerns only (what we could call) the *congenital* nature of rhetorical force in language.

The "Language-Citizen"

The work of Saussure, in particular, draws our attention to rhetorical force in language. Unlike Orwell, or La Fontaine, or even Derrida, Saussure emphasises the power of the *entire* language community in establishing meaning. Saussure famously characterises language as both "mutable" and "immutable" (*Course* 71ff). This is not as paradoxical as it sounds. At any point in time, any individual is free to coin a phrase or use a word in a new way, but it is only the linguistic community as a whole which can ratify the new expression, give it social currency and legitimacy. As Saussure says, this is because:

> At any time a language belongs to all its users. It is a facility unrestrictedly available
> throughout a whole community. It is something all make use of every day. In this respect
> it is quite unlike other social institutions. (73-74)

Saussure defines a language as:

> something in which everyone participates all the time, and that it is why it is constantly
> open to the influence of all. This key fact is by itself sufficient to explain why a linguistic
> revolution is impossible. Of all social institutions, a language affords the least scope for
> such enterprise. It is part and parcel of the life of the whole community, and the
> community's natural inertia exercises a conservative influence upon it. (74)

In a language, rhetorical force is constantly being applied by speakers of a language: by politicians, journalists, screenwriters and academics. At the same time, *resistance* to linguistic innovation, and *ratification* of linguistic innovation, is being applied by the language community as a whole: in conversation, on *Wikipedia* and on talkback radio. As a result, the language is always changing, reflecting subtle shifts in a community's imagining of itself. Large or sudden changes are unlikely, for each of us, consciously or otherwise, participates in the continual ratification of definitions and of rhetorical devices. Expressions such as "collateral damage," "rogue state," "illegals," or "queue-jumper," can only be given currency, force, or legitimacy, by the community of speakers of a language as a whole. It's little wonder, then, that the Saussurean scholar Roy Harris says that the role of the individual in making a language is remarkably similar to the role of the individual in a democracy. He writes:

> We are dealing with a model which assigns to the individual, *vis a vis* [the language system], a role which matches exactly the socio-political role assigned to the individual *vis a vis* the institutions of the modern nation state. As a member, an individual can do no more than what the community, through its institutions, makes it possible for an individual to do. (216)

Harris's analogy naturally suggests the concept of the "language-citizen." A language-citizen would be a speaker of a language who makes choices in their language use, who has either the *right* or the *ability* to innovate or to ratify and re-use linguistic expressions, and hence, who participates in the construction of meaning. Following Saussure, this definition includes *all* speakers in a language.

As early as 1884, the linguistic William Dwight Whitney (who was so influential for Saussure) was calling language a "democracy":

> High political station does not confer the right to make and unmake language; a sovereign's grammatical blunders do not become the law of speech to his subjects, any more than do those of the private man. Each individual is, in a way, constantly trying experiments of

modification upon his mother-tongue [. . .]. But his individual influence is too weak to make head against the consenting usage of the community. (Whitney 1884: 36)

And:

The speakers of language thus constitute a republic, or rather, a democracy, in which authority is conferred only by general suffrage and for due cause, and is exercised under constant supervision and control. (Whitney 1884: 38)

For example, Whitney says that a speaker of a language "may confer on an old word a new value, not too far differing from that already belonging to it – and the licence shall be ratified by general acceptance" (1884: 40). The words "suffrage" and "ratified" making the process sound very much like a referendum. And in thinking about nation states, it's also interesting to reflect that if Benedict Anderson's (1983) theory of "imagined communities" is correct, then our citizenship of national languages predates, and also directly creates, our citizenship of nation-states.

There's an interesting question of agency that runs through both language and democracy. The question is whether citizens of a nation-state, or citizens of a language, actually exercise free will in making choices, or whether those choices are determined by social-political forces out of our control. In which case, the sense we all have of making choices is something along the lines of "false consciousness." Sometimes the activity of linguistic ratification is very actively conscious, as in the American-Christian right, or the politically-correct left. In each case, there are groups of people constantly on vigil against other language users. At other times, though, the process of individual and group adoption of expressions would be more subtle and even unconscious. The point is, however, that in *either* case, this question of agency cancels itself out: to whatever degree it is true of language, then it must also be true of democracy. If we are not citizens of our languages, then we are not citizens of our nations.

Conclusion

I began by investigating the origins and evolution of the word "democracy" in English, and found that its journey from "boo" word to "hooray" word is marked by its linguistic entanglement with the notions of liberty and equality. By making democracy indistinguishable from liberalism, from the freedoms of association and speech, and, most ironically, the protection of minority interests, democracy has enjoyed a long boom of popular and critical support. However, as modernity wanes, and with it the authority of nation-states and shared enlightenment ideals, democracy remains as problematic an idea as ever, subject to the passions and prejudices of angry and ill-informed publics. Democracy is exposed as a notion at war with itself, where liberal ideals become increasingly incompatible with popular rule. And at the very moment when democracy reaches crisis, its hegemonic keepers are forced into denial that this is so. In contrast, Chantal Mouffe argues that it is "only by coming to terms with the democratic paradox can one envisage how to deal with it" (2000, 4). In other words, it is only by *remembering* the tension – or even opposition – between democracy and liberalism that would have been obvious to Locke or Mill or Madison, can we hope to forge a rational political state in the postmodern era.

Jacques Derrida alerts us to the circularity or inherent hypocrisy of democracy, and wonders if it's possible to speak democratically of democracy at all. If Derrida's intention is to draw our attention to rhetorical violence in language, then my own investigations suggest that language is like a democracy in quite a different sense. As the Saussurean linguist John Joseph suggests, "Every propaganda can be understood as an invitation to conceive of things in a particular way, which people have a more robust capacity for refusing than they're generally given credit for" (143). What is more interesting than any particular definition of democracy offered by liberals and conservatives, are the mechanisms of ratification or rejection of those definitions by the language community as a whole. Of course, not all language communities

are equal or similar. As we have seen, some are ruled by parliamentary democracy and some by dictatorships. Some states are liberal but not democratic, and others are democratic but not liberal. But it is not necessarily true that *either* voting states *or* those with liberal institutions such as the rule of law or freedom of speech will inspire in its people the greater facility to manipulate language and meaning. Resistance to dominant discourses – whether military, populist, or corporate – is not dependent upon a parliamentary system nor upon whether the equality of man is enshrined in a nation's constitution. The notion of the language-citizen offers a way of measuring the depth and breadth of community participation in the construction of meaning, beyond any recourse to a particular definition of democracy, and beyond the opposition of populism and liberalism. To speak democratically of democracy would only be – by parliament or by law, by rights or by nature, by rhetorical violence or by political critique – to participate in the construction of meaning.

Notes

1. See, for example, John Keane's *The Life and Death of Democracy* (Simon and Schuster, 2009).

2. Johnson's definition is: "One of the three forms of government; that in which the sovereign power is neither lodged in one man, nor in the nobles, but in the collective body of the people." The Encarta World English Dictionary offers: "The right to a form of government in which power is invested in the people as a whole, usually exercised on their behalf by elected representatives."

3. In which the Lamb's legitimate protest that it could not have been muddying the Wolf's drinking water – because it was downstream – is annulled by the Wolf's exercise of physical power: "The Wolf dragged and ate his midday snack / So trial and judgment stood."

4. See also the photos and videos from the US State Department's "Democracy Video Challenge": http://www.videochallenge.america.gov

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