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Temporality and the paradoxes of democracy

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Temporality and the paradoxes of democracy

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1). Provocative reading

Lasse Thomassen's generous response to my argument concerning the relationships between deconstruction and radical democracy (Barnett 2004) focuses primarily on a methodological point. This is the issue of whether it is legitimate to treat the more or less disparate writings of authors as a homogenous whole. He suggests that by treating Laclau and Mouffe's writings as a singular body of work, I am guilty of homogenising ideas that are more diverse than I give them credit for. I have to concede that he is correct here, although I should say that I was quite consciously making this gesture. I was interested in trying to discern some broad patterns of conceptualisation that are shared by various writers, and not just these two. My argument was meant as a provocation, and I took Laclau and Mouffe's version(s) of radical democracy as just one example of what I think is a wider *genre* of poststructuralist theory – by which I mean an approach to conceptualisation and evaluation that shares certain features of expository style, argumentative form, and substantive content. On another occasion, I might well agree that it is important to stress the differences between writers, but for my purposes it seemed valid and justifiable to treat this range of work as fairly coherent (just as they do, I suppose, when they talk lightly of 'Liberalism', or 'the Enlightenment', or reiterate some fairly woolly caricatures of 'Habermas' or 'Rawls').

Thomassen suggests that a proper deconstructive reading should start from the heterogeneous elements that divide works from themselves. That's fair enough as far as it goes, and it fits with a standard if somewhat mechanical definition of what deconstructive reading is about. But it's not clear to me why one would suppose that this

is the only sort of reading that one would ever want to undertake. It tends to limit the critical purchase one can bring to bear on any work to aspects that, however inadvertently, are already there in the work itself. Nor do I think this is all that one can say a deconstructive sensibility can be expected to achieve. Deconstruction sensitises you to certain sorts of issues, such as the ways in which difference or otherness are figured, and it was this type of sensibility that I tried to deploy in my reading of radical democracy. "You can only deconstruct what you love" is a motto often repeated by Spivak. On these grounds, I must admit that I would find it hard to commit to the sort of loving reading of Laclau and Mouffe that Thomassen himself recommends. Perhaps I was engaged in something more like a symptomatic reading, as they used to say, which of course bears some close family resemblances to deconstruction.

One final point on this issue. It is certainly the case that to even be able to contemplate a deconstructive reading of the sort Thomassen recommends, one which focuses on the heterogeneous elements that are not contained within the "dominant conceptual framework", then one must first be able to impose a coherence and unity on the work to start with, in order to be able to talk of a "dominant conceptual framework" in the first place. This methodological puzzle is thematized across a range of Derrida's writings, where he talks of deconstruction as a kind of doubling commentary, as well as by other writers such as Paul de Man, Hillis Miller, and Barbara Johnson. Thomassen suggests in a note that the *only* way of negotiating the seeming contradiction between privileging heterogeneity while having to presume a degree of homogeneity for any reading even to get under way is by adopting a "deconstructive style of writing". This not only begs the question of *which* deconstructive writing style – Derrida's style is markedly different from de Man's, for example, and in turn from Miller's – but it also raises the more basic question of why *style* is meant to be the only way of dealing with the apparent problem. This presupposition in favour of style is just one of the unacknowledged modernist

aesthetic conventions that poststructuralism invites you to buy into. Why not just spell the methodological point out, and trust readers to be able to understand it as a straightforward proposition: in order for reading to get underway, one has to suppose that a text has at least a minimal degree of coherent meaning, but one makes this methodological assumption in order to be better able to identify heterogeneity that goes to make up texts and textuality. That isn't too difficult, is it?

2). Making time for difference

Thomassen's response provides a detailed and substantive reading of one aspect of Laclau and Mouffe's developing conceptualisation of antagonism, as way of exemplifying his model of a deconstructive reading. I don't for a moment want to gainsay his account of the different inflections this notion has been given in their work, nor of the ambivalence and ambiguity that can be revealed by this sort of close examination. I would point out, however, that this reading confirms my point above, concerning the restriction of this reading to resources that one finds within the texts under scrutiny. This is where my own engagement started. I was interested in the way in which this variant of radical democracy depends for some considerable part of its authority on a series of external references - to Derrida, for example. I think the appeal to Derrida is flawed, in so far as it assumes that the main point about deconstruction is that meaning is indeterminate.

More to the point, I argued that radical democracy tends to make it very difficult to think about temporality in any way other than by reference to a set of presentist figures of contingency and arbitrariness. Thomassen's reading of Laclau and Mouffe's variable formulations of difference, equivalence, and antagonism doesn't disrupt this temporal imagination at all. He affirms the basic understanding of radical democracy that political identities and communities are constituted at the level of meaning, and therefore they

necessarily foreclose relations of difference by asserting chains of equivalence. On this model, this disruption of the free play of an ontologized understanding of difference can never be complete, since it always projects a remainder, which is the source of antagonism. For Thomassen, then, there is then a tension or ambivalence between the imperatives of difference and those of equivalence; this is roughly analogous to Mouffe's (2000b) argument that the abiding 'paradox of democracy' is the irreconcilable conflict between individual liberty on the one side and political community, or equality, on the other. Simply saying all of these relations are ambivalent and ambiguous doesn't really get us very far. This way of theorizing remains stuck in a frame of mind in which democratic theory must find some sort of reconciliation between various "oppositional givens" – liberty and community, difference and equivalence, and so on (see Dietz 2002, 75). Radical democracy's innovation is to affirm contingency and ambivalence in a kind of reconciliatory gesture of non-reconciliation, but this still keeps us stuck oscillating between various pairs of oppositional concepts.

It is this oppositional framing of the dilemmas of democratic theory that also makes it difficult for radical democracy to explicate the two senses of otherness that I outlined, one based on a process of exclusionary projection, the other on a constitutive movement of surprise or hospitality. Now, the key question is just how one is meant to understand the relationship between these two senses of otherness. It is easy enough to present them as the ontic manifestation as difference-as-exclusion of an ontological pluralistic movement of difference. This is how radical democracy frames the relationship between difference and equivalence. This implies that we are condemned to think of otherness-as-hospitality as a kind of regulative ideal, or as an 'ethical' relationship off-set against the more 'political' form of otherness premised on confrontation, conflict, and antagonism. But maybe it is a mistake to think that these are two different *kinds* of otherness at all. Otherness-as-surprise, or otherness-as-hospitality, only becomes visible after a fairly

rigorous methodological *epoché* by writers like Levinas (1981) and Derrida (2000), and part of the effort behind this exposure is to actually call into question the viability of positing ontological relations in this first place (Barnett 2005). It would therefore be a mis-reading to suppose that this set of relations refers to either a distinct set of real-world practices or some deep, fundamental level of ontological relations. The point of this phenomenological idealization is, rather, to suggest that we do not need to think of 'difference' solely in terms of the interminable play of negative relations of signification. To do so is to remain in thrall to a particular temporal imagination of pure contingency, which derives identity, antagonism, and meaning from the truncation of the synchronic movement of differential relations. We might, instead, think of temporal relations by reference to a vocabulary of surprise, events, patience, anticipation, hope, and so on.

In his closing remark, Thomassen claims that "since political space – including the identities of political communities – is hegemonically constructed, it is radically historical and temporal and subject to political struggles" [**ms. p. 13**]. The assertive force of this comment confirms the sense that radical democracy's privileging of relations of meaning, bolstered by an analysis of indeterminacy, leads one to think of temporality in terms of a succession of moments which are either contingently tied into relations of equivalence, or just as contingently disrupted into new patterns of identification. This rendition of the historicity of identities and hegemony assumes that the discovery that identities or meaning are not fixed or natural implies they are 'merely' contingent or 'merely' arbitrary. This is, of course, the prevalent political interpretation of poststructuralism. It assumes that exposing the contingency of foundations is a disobliging gesture that directs attention to the ways in which arbitrary relations and identities are fixed and naturalised by power, yet thereby are also always open to being re-made. In this interpretation, what is *given* is aligned against what is *possible*, so that the given is understood as what needs to be negated or transcended by unleashing and realising the suppressed potential of what is

possible (see Zerilli 1998). Derrida, amongst others, recommends that a little more patience is required before deciding that all inherited modes of life should be wholly re-made (see Derrida and Roudinesco 2004). The recurrent theme of his work is that of *reckoning* with the given, not simply in order to conserve, but in order to explicate a practice of responsibility that works through the questions of what one should affirm, what should be subjected to criticism, and what should be abandoned. What is interesting is that this theme in Derrida's work, turning as it does around a problematisation of decisionistic understandings of the moral self and political action, approaches Habermas' concerns with questions of inheritance, responsibility, and post-traditional identity (see Habermas 1990, 249-267).

This relation of inheritance and responsibility is important for thinking both the individual and collective dimensions of democratic subjectivity. So, for example, it is central to what Post (1993) identifies as the paradox of democratic autonomy. On the one hand, the value of autonomy is meant to follow from it being a capacity *attained* by a free subject through its own conscious effort; on the other, autonomy is *ascribed* to subjects by administrative and institutional actors. To understand the ways in which autonomy is ascribed *as if* it were an attainment, and how in turn this capacity is taken on by ordinary people as a regulative practice, we require some account of how actors inherit and work through given identities as their own. Thinking about this in terms of the temporalities of inheritance and responsibility might help us escape the eternal return of circular models of subjectivity that, whether under the name of interpellation, enrolment, or discipline, constantly privilege a scene of recognition.

At the collective level, this problem of inheritance is classically posed in terms of the relationship between constitutionalism and democracy – how the procedural frameworks and rights contracted-to at one point in time retain their binding legitimacy on subsequent generations. In answer to this problem, Thomas Jefferson thought it was a

good idea if Constitutions were re-written every 20 years or so. Karl Popper (1966) thought this was the defining paradox of democracy, and felt that the fundamental liberties guaranteed by a democratic constitution should be made immune to any subsequent democratic revision. But this tension between liberty and equality, constitutionalism and democracy, is not simply a more or less ambivalent paradox. It is a relationship between different temporal events and practices. Derrida takes up this issue of the relationships between the event of democratic foundation and retrospective authorisation in his reflections on the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Habermas (2001) addresses them more recently in his consideration of how the democratic legitimacy of constitutions depends not on the legitimacy of foundations, but is instead oriented towards a horizon of future redemption. My point is not that Derrida and Habermas have identical things to say on these questions. Habermas' account of the future-orientation of democratic legitimacy might actually work to recuperate the open-ended quality of the future, understood as a horizon rather than a ground (Honig 2001). In this respect Derrida's ruminations on two senses of the future – one anticipated and programmed, one structured around the event of surprise – is an important supplement to normative conceptualisations of the temporality of democratic representation and legitimacy. But this overlapping of concerns between Habermas and Derrida suggests that, rather than simply affirming ambivalence and ambiguity, we might need to shift conceptual registers. Radical democracy's restricted temporal imagination means it is of little help in thinking about the ways in which democratic politics involves the articulation of multiple temporalities – of speed, urgency, decision; of patience, deliberation, and reflection; of anticipation and prospective imagination; of retrospective judgement and revision; of foundations, origins, inheritance, and hopes. These sorts of issues have been recently raised by Sheldon Wolin (1997), William Connolly (2002, Ch. 6 and Ch. 7), and William Scheuerman (2004) at a meta-theoretical level. More generally,

they suggest we might think of the histories and geographies of democratic politics in strongly pragmatist terms, by reference to the sequencing of various devices for setting-agendas, forming and re-forming identities, debating and discussing, allowing dissent, deciding, implementation, revising and regretting (see Saward 2003).

By strongly affirming the value of agonistic dissensus as the very essence of the political, and thereby denigrating any consideration of the conditions for legitimate, binding consensus as a rationalistic fantasy, radical democracy helps to freeze in place an understanding of the political ontologizes *polemos* as the primary generative force in human affairs. But radical democracy's firm conviction that hostility and antagonism are the generative dynamics of human affairs seems to me to be a rather arbitrary anthropological assumption. Derived variously from the work of René Girard (1977), Pierre Saint-Amand (1996), and Carl Schmitt (1996), the idea that demonstrable relations of empathy, reciprocal understanding, and mutuality are mere chimera underlain by a more authentic layer of mutual antagonism or mimetic violence provides radical democracy with a certain critical frisson, certainly. On this view, writers like Habermas and Rawls are the real dangers to democracy because of their apparent insistence on rationalising 'difference', and therefore they are found guilty of not doing justice to the negativity inherent in human sociability (Mouffe 2000b). But embracing radical democracy's deceptively realist ontology of perpetual antagonism makes it very difficult to even comprehend the types of pragmatic cosmopolitics that is emergent today. This paradigm invites us to see the boundaries of the political realm as necessarily established by asserting one collective identity over another. This implies we are faced simply with a moral choice between parochial communitarian loyalties or utopian global identifications. From this perspective, any example of the domestic democratization of hostility or violence is only won at the cost of externalizing antagonisms onto various demonized 'others'. Radical democracy doesn't help much if one is trying to understand phenomena

such as transnational activist networks (Tarrow 1998), the politics of global charitable assistance (Chatterjee 2004), or the type of 'civility' politics that has problematized ethnic cleansing, sexual violence, rape, and other forms of violence (Keane 2004). The ontological style of conceptualization favoured by radical democracy literally cannot comprehend the conditions of possibility for these types of cosmopolitan concern. These conditions lie in an orientation towards empathy and understanding – to 'getting-on' – which are derivative neither of a fundamental mimetic desire for emulation, imitation, or recognition, nor of an abstract exercise in moral reasoning.

It is here that Derrida's work over the last 15 years or so is interesting. If there is a 'political' or 'ethical' turn in his work after the late 1980s controversies over Paul de Man and Martin Heidegger, then this is focussed on a family of related topics, including hospitality, forgiveness, confession, tolerance, testifying, bearing witness, gift relations, mourning, justice, responsibility, friendship, haunting and ghosts, and violence against animals. Radical democracy's agonistic interpretation of 'deconstruction and the political' misses what is most distinctive about all of these themes, by recuperating them into paradigm in which politics is always referred to scenes of recognition, antagonism, agonism, or hostility. In contrast, these topics all refer to a set of attentive, generous, responsive modes of relating. What is at stake here is neither a Habermasian ethos of reciprocity and dialogue; nor the poststructuralist affirmation of agonism and dissensus. It is, rather, something like an outline of a *politics of acknowledgement* (see Barnett 2005).

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