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## Introduction: Geography and Democracy

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## **Geography and Democracy**

### **An Introduction**

Clive Barnett and Murray Low

#### **Where is Democracy?**

Amidst debates about globalization, neo-liberalism, and anti-capitalism, it is easy to forget that probably the most significant global trend of the last two decades has been the proliferation of political regimes that claim to be democracies. Democracy refers to the idea that political rule should, in some sense, be in the hands of ordinary people. It is also a set of processes and procedures for translating this idea into practices of institutionalized popular rule. In a remarkably short space of time, commitment to democracy has become universal. The universalization of democracy as an ideal, if not as a set of agreed-upon practices, is historically unprecedented: 'Nothing else in the world which had, as far as we can tell, quite such local, casual, and concrete origins enjoys the same untrammelled authority for ordinary human beings today, and does so virtually across the globe' (Dunn 1992, 239). This assertion pinpoints one key geographical dimension of the contemporary ascendancy of democratic norms. This is the problematic relationship between the particular historical-geography of democracy's 'origins' on the one hand, and democracy's more recent globalization on the other. However, it is striking how little impact processes of democratization, or democracy as a broader theme, have had on research agendas in human geography. While a great deal of critical analysis is implicitly motivated by democratic norms, there is relatively little empirical research or theoretical work that explicitly takes democracy to be central to the human geographic endeavour. This book aims to address this lacuna, by bringing together contributions from across the discipline of geography, addressing various research fields in which democracy is often a veiled backdrop, but not usually a topic of explicit reflection. We hope the book will thereby help to encourage the sort of detailed attention to issues of normative political theory that has recently been called for by others (Agnew 2002, 164-178).

The ghostly presence of democracy in geography can be illustrated with reference to a number of fields. First, debates on the geography of the state, starting in the 1970s with Marxist inspired work on the capitalist state, and developing in the 1980s and 1990s through an engagement with regulation theory, certainly took the concept of legitimacy and the representative dimensions of state institutions into account. However, detailed examination of routine democratic procedures of participation and representation have remained peripheral to the analyses developed in this area, which remain constrained by a conceptualization of political processes as derivative of more fundamental economic interests. More broadly, the neo-Gramscian state theory

most favoured in geography has remained largely untouched by the flowering in the last three decades of post-Enlightenment liberal political philosophy that has reinvigorated debates about democracy, citizenship, and power.

The concern with social justice stands as a second example of the marginalisation of democracy as a theme in human geography. This might sound counter-intuitive, since the value of democracy as a form of rule is often linked to its role in securing social justice (Rawls 1971). Geographers have engaged in debates about social justice since the 1970s. But geographers' interest in these questions has tended to focus on substantive distributive outcomes and spatial patterns, rather than on the issues of political process and procedure that would lead to democracy becoming a central topic for debate. Themes of geography and justice have been revitalized recently by the development of an explicit concern with moral and ethical issues (see Proctor and Smith 1999). Yet the focus of this ethical turn has been on moral rather than political theory, leading to a concentration on questions of individual responsibility detached from wider issues of institutional design and political processes.

A third example of the displacement of democracy in geography is recent research on the geographies of citizenship. This work has concentrated on relationships between migration, citizenship and discourses of belonging and identity, and how these shape differential access to material and symbolic resources from states. Most discussions of these matters in geography have been conducted in light of the question of whether globalization complicates the spatial dimensions of membership and access to material resources of citizenship. The uneven development of rights of *political* citizenship, and the practices of mobilization and engagement these enable, has received relatively little direct treatment by comparison (Low 2000). Electoral geography is the area of human geography research that has consistently addressed the political and participatory dimensions of citizenship rights, and by extension the area that has been most consistently focused on core features of democratic politics. An interest in the dynamics of democratic process and procedure has been unavoidable in this work, as has a focus on questions about political representation. While there are many empirically detailed analyses of electoral 'bias' in particular political systems, the broader normative issues raised by the subject matter of electoral geography have often remained unexplored. Only recently have geographers begun to explore the links between this predominantly quantitative-empirical field of research, and broader normative issues of political theory and democratic justice (Johnston 1999, Hannah 2001).

Finally, one might expect that the proliferation of culturally inflected research in human geography would have been the occasion for a more systematic engagement with political theory. Power has certainly become ubiquitous reference points in the new cultural geography, and in work touched by the cultural turn more widely (Sharp *et al* 1999). However, on closer examination, this concept is a conceptual black box rarely opened up to detailed analysis (cf. Allen 2003). Too often, the recourse to the vocabulary of resistance and hegemony in cultural theory marks the point at which reflection on first

principles is displaced in favour of the imaginary alignment of the academic analyst with popular struggles (see Barnett 2004).

Each of these examples point towards a recurrent preference in human geography for the urgent rhetoric of explanatory rigour, social change, or policy relevance, deferring protracted reflection on normative issues. As a consequence, geography's treatment of politics is characterized by a combination of *theoreticism and prescriptivism*. By theoreticism, we mean a tendency to deduce political interests from deeper interests established outside of political processes, and into which the academic researcher has a certain privileged insight. By prescriptivism, we mean a preoccupation with establishing what should be done, and what things should be like. This preoccupation is often combined with voluntaristic injunctions to the community of researchers, governments, or social movements to work to bring these situations about. In short, the very terms in which geographers have engaged in discussion of politics, justice, citizens, elections, have nourished a persistent avoidance of reflection on the normative presuppositions of political institutions and on the basic criteria of political judgement underpinning democratic processes – criteria concerning what is right, what is just, what is good, and concerning *how* best to bring good, just, rightful outcomes about.

As other commentators have argued (Sayer and Storper 1997, Corbridge 1998), radical traditions of geographical research have persistently evaded normative political philosophy in favour of either the abstracted-individualism of ethical reflection or the certainties of radical political denunciation. It is in areas of the discipline often thought of as more 'applied' that one can find the most sustained reflection on the normative issues raised by democratization processes. This is the case, for example, in both urban planning and environmental policy studies, in which the meanings and practicalities of deliberative decision-making and participatory democracy have been extensively discussed (e.g. Burgess *et al* 1999, Hajer and Kesserlring 1999, Mason 2001, O'Neill 2001, Owens 2001). Likewise, it is amongst development geographers that one finds sustained critical discussions of the concepts of civil society and social capital, and of the meanings of participation, representation and empowerment, all issues with implications and currency far beyond the global South (e.g. Jeffrey 2000, McIlwaine 1998, Mercer 2002, Williams *et al* 2003). Planning studies, environmental studies and development geography all connect up with broader interdisciplinary arenas where issues of democratic theory have been central in shaping research agendas in ways that is less true of the favoured interlocutors of 'mainstream' critical human geography.

The disconnection of an increasingly theoretically confident tradition of critical human geography from the concerns of political philosophy and democratic theory requires some explanation. Is it because these other fields are not sophisticated enough in their treatment of space, spatiality, or scale to satisfy the agenda of critical human geography? As we will argue below, this explanation does not stand up to scrutiny. In order to explore the question further, we want to identify three points of potential overlap but actual separation between geographical research and democratic theory. Firstly, there is the problematic status of liberalism in human geography. We relate this issue

to geography's treatment of the state. Secondly, there is the question of the degree to which the geographical imaginations of human geography and political theory diverge. Thirdly, there is the thorny problem of how to understand the value of universalism, a concept that is central to debates about democracy, but which geographers find hard to assimilate to their disciplinary matrix of ideas. In flagging these three themes, we want to contextualize the chapters in the book, by providing some sense of the most fruitful cross-disciplinary engagements towards which they might lead.

### **Rehabilitating Liberalism**

The templates for democratic institutions in the West, and indeed in most other contexts today, are usually referred to as being liberal in character. Alternative conceptions of democracy (including communitarian, deliberative, participatory, radical, and discursive approaches) all tend to define their own virtues by reference to the strengths and weaknesses of liberal theory and practice. However, liberalism is a rather broad label for a heterogeneous collection of ideas and practices. One tradition of liberalism, best exemplified by Hayek, explicitly seeks to restrict the scope of democratic decision-making in the name of the higher goods of personal liberty and free markets. One irony of the ubiquitous recourse to the vocabulary of 'neo-liberalism' in contemporary left-critical discourse is, however, the identification of liberalism *tout court* with this particular variety of conservative political thought. In this unlikely convergence, liberalism is reduced to a doctrine that counter-poses the state to the market.

This mirroring of left and right readings of classical liberal doctrine erases the historical variety of liberalisms (Gaus 2003). The market liberalism exemplified by Hayek echoes a broader discourse of elitist disenchantment with mass democracy, which includes Weber, Pareto, Schmitt, Michels, and Schumpeter. What connects these thinkers is an intuition that the mass scale of modern politics, in both spatial and numerical terms, renders democracy implausible and hazardous. However, in contrast to this tradition, there is a diverse tradition of avowedly liberal thought that re-asserts the plausibility and value of extending democratic procedures across larger scales and into a wider range of activities. This tradition would include the work of Robert Dahl, John Dewey, Otto Kirchheimer, Carole Pateman, and John Rawls, as well as that of Norberto Bobbio, Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Pitkin, and Roberto Unger. This is a disparate group, but that is partly our point. It comprises a range of different projects that include a revived Kantian republicanism, political liberalism, civic republicanism, and democratic liberalism. The key feature that these projects share is an effort to overcome ossified dualisms between equity and liberty, by finding practically informed ways of thinking through disputed conceptions of the right, the good, and justice. Taken together, these post-Enlightenment liberalisms can be said to constitute a broad tradition of radical democracy, one that is characterized above all by a shared concern with defining democracy in relation to practices of citizen participation.

We think it important to reassert the significance of this tradition of self-consciously egalitarian, democratic liberalism precisely because liberalism largely remains a denigrated tradition of thought in critical human geography. Radical human geography explicitly emerged by turning its back on liberal approaches in the 1970s. One consequence of this has already been noted. This is the persistent tendency to elevate explanatory accounts of socio-spatial process and substantive (outcome-oriented) accounts of justice over an engagement with the significance of procedural issues of participation, representation, and accountability (see Katznelson 1996). As a result, as Howells (1993, 305) has observed, while geographers have engaged with an ever widening range of theoretical ideas, the dimension of normative reflection on political principles contained in writers such as Habermas, Foucault, or Derrida is too often obscured 'by the use to which they are put [...] as part of a generic *social* theory to which we as geographers appeal almost exclusively for validation'. This predilection for social rather than political theory means that it is rare to find discussions of the geographical dimensions of inequality, or the spatialities of identity and difference, which are able to address fundamental questions concerning the significance of the values of equality, diversity, or difference that such analyses implicitly invoke.

The suspicion of liberal traditions of political theory has had two further consequences for the ways in which geographers address themes of democracy. Firstly, liberalism as political theory is easily associated with the manifest flaws of 'actually existing democracies'. It is certainly true that elements of liberal discourse (rights, freedom, liberty) can readily take on ideological value in defending undemocratic or illiberal practices. But this is hardly a unique feature of liberalism. In fact, this ideological potential seems a very good reason for critically reconfiguring key terms such as 'rights', or 'liberty' or 'representation', rather than assuming that they cannot be divorced from compromised realities and that we must find less tainted images of authentic political action.

This brings us to our second point, which is that ideal-typical liberal theories of democracy are persistently framed as the benchmark against which truly radical theories of democracy should be judged. As a result, the definition of radical politics is moved further and further away from the sites of mundane politics. Of course, one of the crucial insights provoked by a variety of new social movement mobilizations since the 1960s is the political stake involved in distinguishing what is politics from what is not. It is often argued that this requires that the meaning of 'the political' should be re-framed beyond narrowly defined understandings of government, constitutional rule, voting, or party support. One example is Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) conceptualization of radical democracy. This is perhaps the important example of political theory to attract sustained attention in human geography (see Brown 1997, Jones and Moss 1995, Robinson 1998). The characteristic Marxist response to their distinctive poststructuralist, post-Marxism has been to dismiss it as revised liberal pluralism. However, in their concern to de-stabilize standard conceptions of interests, the people, or representation (and to develop an alternative vocabulary of articulation and antagonism), it is clear that Laclau and Mouffe

are strongly committed to moving decisively beyond liberal formulations of democracy.

Counter-posing mere 'politics', with all its disappointments and limitations, to the question of 'the political' is central to the poststructuralist project of radicalizing democracy. It is associated with the claim that grasping the essence of the political requires a form of analysis utterly different from liberal rationalism, which is supposedly unable to acknowledge irreducible conflict and antagonism. But this leads poststructuralist accounts of radical democracy into the rather thankless task of trying to redeem some democratic value from the resolutely anti-democratic political thought of writers such as Martin Heidegger or Carl Schmitt. With their analytics of forgetting and disclosure, neutralization and depolitization, these writers have become the unlikely foundation for new formulations of radical political action that apparently escape the inauthenticities of ordinary politics. In this strand of work, the ordinariness and banality of ordinary politics is transcended by the promise of a more heroic variety of political transformation rooted in an image of liberating a properly unconstrained creativity unjustly contained by the limits of state, capital, or bureaucracy. So it is that poststructuralist accounts of the political come to resemble a form of idealistic superliberalism (Benhabib 1992, 16). They claim to be more pluralistic, tolerant, and affirmative of difference than conventional liberalism, yet are unwilling to acknowledge the practical dependence of these values on the real achievements of liberal political cultures. This in turn explains the consistent difficulty that poststructuralist theories have in accounting for democracy as a specific sort of institutionalized politics (Dietz 1998; see also Amin and Thrift 2003), beyond modeling political action on specific aesthetic practices such as performing or reading.

The poststructuralist reconstruction of radical democracy therefore illustrates the paradox of the idea of cultural politics more generally. This idea carries a double resonance, broadening the range of activities understood to be in some sense political, but at the same time it carries the risk of jettisoning any concern for the realms in which politics most obviously still goes on. The danger lies in presuming that a whole set of traditional problems in democratic theory – the nature of representation, the meaning of legitimacy, and so on – can be easily resolved. With the near universalization of democracy in both theory and practice, the attention of critical analysis has shifted away from justifying democracy against other forms of political arrangement, towards finding fissures at the margins of actually existing regimes that promise better forms of democracy. As we suggest below, this dynamic of perfectibility might well be a distinctive feature of democracy as a regime of rule. But one unforeseen consequence of this democratically-oriented critique of actually existing democracy is a tendency to always assume that 'democratic discontent emerges from the institutions of representative democracy and can best be ameliorated by the wider democratization of social relations as they are reproduced in civil society' (Squires 2002, 133). This stark opposition between representative forms of democratic politics, presumed to be the source of dissatisfaction, and idealized models of alternative politics, leads to an under-emphasis on the changing dynamics of formal political institutions of the state. This tendency is

exemplified by recurrent calls in political geography to transcend 'state-centric' views of politics (see Low 2003). Suspicion of the state as a central object of geographical concern is justified in terms of facing up to the historical and geographical specificity of state forms, and by calls for thinking about the possibilities of organizing politics differently (Agnew 1998, Taylor 1994).

The suspicion in geography of state-centred understandings of politics is the main reason for the persistent non-engagement with liberal political theory. Liberalism is marked by a double recognition of the unavoidability of centralized decision-making and a resolute suspicion of its hazards. This implies that democracy needs to be understood in *relational* terms, as a means through which autonomous actors engage with, act for, influence, and remain accountable to other actors, a process carried on through institutional arrangements that embed particular norms of conduct. Two-dimensional political imaginations of resistance or hegemony are rather limited in their understanding of contemporary forms of protest, campaigning, and dissent, in so far as they tend to underplay the commitment to engaging with centralized forms of power, both public and private, that most often distinguishes contemporary social movements. Rather than resistance and hegemony, perhaps the better master-concept for understanding such politics is that classically liberal motif of opposition. Even the most radical forms of contemporary political action are animated by democratic demands (that decisions should be made out in the open and should be based on consent, and that institutions and organizations should be accountable), underwritten by democratic principles (above all, that the legitimacy of rule depends on authorization by ordinary people effected by the consequences of actions), and employ strategies that are the stock in trade of democratic social movement mobilization stretching back two hundred years (the theatrical mobilization of large numbers of supporters in public spaces). At the same time as appealing to the idea of democracy's perfectibility, these mobilizations for greater democracy testify to the impossibility of any established set of democratic procedures ever completely embodying the preferences of all the governed in an unambiguously fair manner (Shapiro 1999, 31). If, then, democratic politics requires opportunities for inclusive participation and accountable representation, then the full value of these is only fully realized in the context of robust and varied practices of opposition (*ibid.*, 31-45, 235-8).

In short, the heritage of classical liberalism is too important to be dismissed by those interested in progressive social change. It remains an essential reference point for connecting the actualities of political action to reflection on the principles and procedures that define democratic justice. It is this space that is closed down by market-based models of democratic choice, as well as by agonistic models of political action as contingent identifications expressed in insurgent acts of resistance. It is, moreover, important to redeem the term radical democracy from a narrow understanding of identity-politics. Rehabilitating the emphasis found in the use of this phrase by both Dewey and Habermas, radical democracy refers to an expansive sense of politics as involving participation in a range of formal and informal practices of identification and opinion-formation combined with a pragmatic orientation

towards getting things done. While keeping open questions about the status and scope of political action, it also suggests a less distanced engagement with what is ordinarily defined as ‘politics’ – with matters of policy, legislation, parties, lobbying, organizing – than is often countenanced in more rarefied accounts of radical counter-hegemonic politics.

The key theme linking the alternative liberalism we sketched at the start of this section is a focus upon the ‘how’ of power. Rather than presuming that political judgement is reducible to a question of who holds power or of which forces are in political ascendancy, an emphasis on procedural forms of power focuses upon the difference that exercising power in relation to procedures of publicity, justification, and accountability makes to the substance and quality of outcomes (Habermas 1996). The emphasis of the broad tradition of participatory radical democracy upon the combination of citizen participation and decisive action opens up issues of political judgment to resolutely geographical forms of interpretation. This is not least the case in so far as the relationship between democratic participation and democratic decision turns on a paradox of scale – on the problem of how to institutionalize effective citizen participation in functionally complex, socially differentiated, and spatially and numerically extensive societies. Ideas of participatory radical democracy, understood as a distinctive variety of post-Enlightenment liberal political theory, therefore require a reconsideration of the distinctive imaginary geographies of modern democratic theory.

### **Imaginary Geographies of Democratic Theory**

Democratic theory has a persistent problem with addressing the significance of its own implicit geographical assumptions. This is particularly the case with respect to the conceptualization of borders and boundaries (see Anderson 2002, Taylor 1994, 1995), a key issue in determining the identity and scope of democratic political rule. Very often, geographical assumptions of bounded territorial entities are not thematized in democratic theory, although there is also a stronger positive argument to the effect that democracy is not possible without sharp geographical boundaries between polities. While acknowledging the problematic elements of political-theoretical assumptions about the geography of democracy, we also want to suggest that the predominant geographical imagination shaping research agendas in human geography might lead to potential points of connection with democratic theory being by-passed. Geographers’ entry point into wider interdisciplinary debates has been their specialization on space, place, and scale as objects of analysis. However, this might also serve as a barrier to certain forms of interaction. There are three dimensions to this claim. Firstly, geographers’ conceptualizations of space, place and scale emphasize complexity and differentiation. Geographers’ spaces are uneven, relational, reticulated, blurry, stratified, striated, folded over, porous, and so on. Secondly, geographers’ strong emphasis upon the constructed, non-natural qualities of territorial entities has led to a wariness of focusing on national scales of political action. There is an in-built impetus to

de-centre and de-naturalize the national scale as the privileged focus of attention. This leads to a further displacement of much of the most routine and ordinary activity of everyday democratic politics already encouraged by poststructuralist understandings of radical democracy. Thirdly, and following from both of these previous points, the preferred scales of analysis for geographical research tend to be both above and below the nation-state, with the local, the urban, the regional, and the transnational. Even if territorial notions of multiple scales are rejected as an-overly formal and constrictive, then the effect is still to emphasize a further complication of flows, connections, networks and fluidities (Amin 2002). Combining these three observations, one might conjecture that a justified conceptual hollowing-out of the nation-state as the taken-for-granted scale of political analysis easily leads to an automatic presumption against national level forms of political practice. This supports an unexamined prejudice against some of the most mundane elements of liberal-representative democracy, which are reduced to the benchmarks against which more radical understandings of democracy will be constructed.

The tension between the conceptual emphasis upon re-imagining spatial complexity on the one hand, and the embedded geographies of democratic politics on the other, is not only a problem for geography. It generates recurrent problems for political theorists of democracy themselves. The disconnection between geography and political theory cannot simply be ascribed to the claim that democratic theory is inadequately sensitive to the spatialities of social processes. Modern political theory has, in fact, always been concerned with the difference that geography makes to the qualities of democratic rule. This is the case with theorists as diverse as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Madison, Burke, Paine, Tocqueville, Condorcet and Constant (Manin 1997), through to twentieth-century political science preoccupations with democracy and size (see Dahl and Tufte 1973, Dahl 1989). Furthermore, there has been a veritable 'geographical turn' in recent political philosophy and international relations theory. This would include the deconstruction of the imaginary geographies of international relations theory (Connolly 1991, Walker 1993) that connect with geographers' own critiques of the so-called 'territorial trap' (Agnew 1994, Low 1997). The supposedly taken-for-granted nature of boundaries and national level processes has clearly had its day in political theory (Shapiro and Hacker-Cordon 1999). Geography has also 'broken out' in debates about the scope of political communities and political obligations sparked by ongoing confrontations of liberal and communitarian political imaginaries (see O'Neill 2000). One central context for these debates is the process of trans-national migration, which has provided a real world reference point for questioning the taken-for-granted spatial assumptions grounding modern understandings of popular democratic legitimacy. The idea that citizens are obliged to respect the legitimacy of laws by virtue of having participated in making them has been questioned on the grounds that it unreasonably stakes political community upon shared cultural identities located within clearly delineated territories (Cole 2000).

These developments in turn inform discussions about the value of the national identity as the necessary pre-requisite of citizenship (see Benhabib 2002, Honig

2001), which develop the revival of interest in the Kantian thematics of cosmopolitanism and hospitality in the work of both Derrida (2001) and Habermas (1998). These debates have coincided with critical geographical work that more explicitly addresses the assumptions about geography, space, and place built into abstract formulas of cosmopolitan ethics and politics (Harvey 2000, Entrikin 1999). Other areas in which the geographies of democratic theory have been conceptually twisted and stretched include consideration of the difference that geographical scale makes to the possibilities of instantiating democracy at the level of the European Union (Schmitter 1999), and in ongoing work on the role of social movements in historically consolidating national territorial democracies (Hanagan and Tilly 1999). In this latter area there is an explicit and critical reflection on the centrality of questions of space to the ways in which social movements are organized and develop (Sewell 2001), an interest that connects up with the growing interest in human geography in the spatialities and scales of social movement activism.

This increasing focus amongst political theorists on issues of space, scale, borders, and boundaries suggests that there is considerable scope for a productive engagement with geography over issues of shared concern. But it also indicates that this engagement cannot plausibly take the form of geographers supposing that they have a monopoly on the most innovative ways of thinking about space, scale, territory and so on. Dialogue would be better facilitated by a shift in the balance and rationale of geographers' arguments, with rather less focus on complicating understandings of space, and more on theorizing and investigating the reconfiguration of inherited geographies of democracy within a converging intellectual field where asserting that 'geography matters' is no longer an issue.

However, there might be a more fundamental tension at stake between the two disciplinary fields of human geography and political theory than their different conceptualizations of space and territory. Political theory's traditional investment in taken-for-granted geographical dimensions of democratic political action, or its preoccupation with relatively simple concepts of scale and geographically contained polities, is not simply a conceptual blind-spot. It might stem from a fundamental investment in the value of universalism in defining the value of democracy. Squaring this commitment with the actualities of worldly difference tends to be achieved by holding fast to notions of bounded political entities within which universal rights and obligations are ideally secured. In the wake of theoretical and political criticisms that affirm difference and diversity over false universalism, this investment might be at odds with geography's already deeply ingrained preference for the value of the particular and the specific.

### **Spaces of Difference and Universalism**

We have argued that the conceptual and polemical trajectory of critical human geography has led to a search for politics away from the most obvious site of democratic contention (i.e. the state), and has favoured ways of understanding

political processes which reject the starting points of the tradition of thought in which the meanings of modern democracy have been most systematically subjected to normative-conceptual analysis (i.e. liberalism). In turn, we have suggested that geography's disciplinary concern with the complexity of spatial and scalar relations sits uneasily with the characteristic ways in which space, scale, and territory have been conceptualized in democratic political theory, although there may be signs of a convergence of interest in this respect. It is the combination of these two emphases – the suspicion of state-centred, liberal political theories, and the attraction to ever more complex understandings of space and scale – that explains the strong affinity that geography has expressed with theoretical critiques of universalizing normative democratic theory made in the name of difference, diversity, and otherness. It is a commonplace to observe that liberal political theories have difficulty accommodating difference and pluralism at a theoretical level (see Phillips 1991, Mouffe 1998, Young 1990). And it is a short step from this philosophical critique of concepts of identity and difference to the claim that liberalism fails to address geographical variations in socio-cultural and political arrangements. However, these two arguments – about worldly differences between peoples, places, and polities on the one hand, and about the conceptualization of difference as a philosophical, ethical, and political value on the other – might not be so easily, or wisely, aligned as is sometimes supposed.

The fundamental question facing any critical analysis of democracy is whether or not the claims of universality built into democratic theory are nothing more than culturally specific norms. This is not simply a question of whether particular procedural models of democracy are appropriate as global norms. It is to do with more fundamental doubts over whether the models of universal interest and binding obligation that underwrite modern democratic theory might in fact operate to reproduce systematic, hierarchical exclusions and inequalities. A fundamental critical task is to unravel the logical and normative relations between the *genesis* and *form* of modern democracy. Does the historical geography of actually existing democracy mean that democracy, as a value, is inherently 'Western' in its essence? Some writers argue that the so-called 'third wave of democratization' in the last three decades is indeed the realization of a historical teleology towards liberal representative democracy (e.g. Fukuyama 1993). In this sort of narrative, democracy is assumed to be a distinctive cultural formation with characteristics that are distinctively 'Western' (e.g. Spinoza *et al* 1999). These sorts of assumptions are in turn countered by the charge that the universalism of liberal democracy is a false one, covering over particularistic exclusions (Parekh 1993), and in turn that the spread of democratic governance is as much a reflection of the post-Cold War geopolitics of donor funding, good governance, and brokered democratic transitions.

Neither position is really adequate, since neither one addresses in detail the disjunctive relationship between what might be called democracy's 'context of discovery' and its 'contexts of justification'. Discussions of the meaning of democracy, whether by champions or critics, too often simply assume the identity of democracy as Western, and in turn conflate the significance of

universalistic normative procedures with particular cultural norms of conduct and aspiration (cf. Sen 1999a). But democratization, both historically and in the present period, has had multiple trajectories. In this respect, Schaffer's (1998) analysis of the practice of democracy in modern Senegal is notable for its recourse to the thematic of translation in understanding the cross-cultural variability of democratic norms. Schaffer underscores two points: firstly, that the meanings ascribed to democracy vary across cultures and contexts, but without losing their universal resonance; and secondly, democracy emerges as a modality of rule that emphasizes talking, agreeing, arguing, dissenting, getting things done, and holding to account. This analysis underscores the sense that democracy is the name for variable forms of rule that fold together diverse interests and plural identities in a pattern of decisive action in which the norm of ordinary people participating in the actions effecting them is accorded priority.

The argument that democracy's meaning is historically and geographically variable, without being wholly indeterminate, is the theme of David Slater's (2002) recent critique of Eurocentric discourses of democratization. Slater is keenly aware of the unequal geopolitics of the diffusion of democracy, but is equally keen to stress that this does not de-legitimize democracy as a goal or form of politics. By excavating alternative, non-Western traditions of democratic theory and practice, this sort of self-consciously postcolonial critique of theories of democratization demonstrates that actual processes of political transition are likely to be the outcome of contingent combinations of 'top-down' international pressures for good governance and 'bottom-up' pressures for social change and greater accountability.

Following Slater, we want to suggest that any either/or choice regarding democracy needs to be resisted. Treating liberal democracy as either irredeemably parochial or as undifferentiated in its universal application is premised on an image of cultural space in terms of bounded containers, a spatial imagination from which the opposition between universalism and relativism is in large part derived (see Connolly 2000). As a way out of the oppositional polemics that surround discussions of democracy's origins and application, we think it might be useful to think of the different trajectories of democratization in terms of *family resemblances*. This idea follows from the observation that democratization often involves a combination of distinctively local features, appropriations from elsewhere, and new inventions. For example, the emergence of modern democracy in the eighteenth-century depended on the appropriation of pre-democratic political mechanisms like representation (Manin 1997). In turn, twentieth-century anti-colonial movements borrowed and re-invented nationalist discourses, in the process establishing the value of national, sovereign independence as a basic element of modern understandings of democracy (Held 1997). And this hybridization of democracy is increasingly institutionalized through organizational networks of policy advocacy, social movement mobilisation, and human rights monitoring.

These ideas – that democracy is a necessarily plural form, one that moves through processes of translation, and that different variants are related according to different degrees of family resemblance - allows us to specify the

geographical significance of thinking of democracy as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Connolly 1993, 9-44). To describe democracy in these terms is not to merely suggest that people disagree about the meaning of the term. More fundamentally, it suggests that this disagreement is structured around recurrent contradictions between essential elements of the term – for example, between individual liberty and collective action, between majoritarian principles and minority rights, between participation and delegation. Democracy is essentially contested because it is an inherently appraisive category – people are concerned with deciding the degree to which particular situations are more or less democratic. And crucially, democracy is also essentially contested because the positive appraisal of a context as democratic includes within it an allowance for changing circumstances and modifications (see Gallie 1956, 183-187). This means that the precise form of democratic rule cannot be established in advance, but is open to modification in light of new circumstances. Thinking of the universality of democracy in terms of family resemblance, hybrid appropriations, and inventive translations underscores the extent to which the problem of applying practices and norms developed in one context to new contexts is at the root of the critique of democracy’s presumptive universalism. And this implies that the conceptualization of democracy, and not just its empirical investigation, is an inherently geographical enterprise.

Whatever their origins, discourses of democracy, citizenship, and human rights now form an almost ubiquitous formative-context for political action by states, corporations, popular movements, or individual citizens. This observation is not meant to endorse a complacent understanding of democracy as benignly capacious, but rather to emphasize the extent to which the normative horizon of the discourse of democracy shapes real world conflicts. This allows us to understand the positive attraction (as distinct simply from a negative critical force) of the difference-critique of universalism. This critique is most often articulated in a register that appeals, at least implicitly, to norms of universality and equity that it finds to be contravened in practice. The critique of democratic universalism made in the name of the cultural relativity of values re-inscribes rather than rejects universalism: ‘The meaning of the relative does not erase, but rather carries within it, a universal exigency’ (Lefort 2000, 144). Critiques of false universalism are made in the name of the equal recognition of identities, or of equal respect for competing notions of the good life. This observation does not negate the force of the critique, in the manner of a liar’s paradox. Rather, it suggests a different alignment of the universal and the relative, not as polar opposites, but as different registers of judgment.

Our argument is, then, that the difference-critique of liberalism does not have *direct* political relevance as such, but rather functions as a supplementary critique that calls for certain principles and practices to be reconfigured in new ways. Chief amongst these is universalism, the value of which needs to be recast. There are two broad approaches to the post-Enlightenment revision of universalism in the wake of the difference-critique of liberalism. These two approaches – one of which involves a commitment to minimal universalism, the other a rethinking of universalism as an orientation towards openness to otherness – share in what Stephen White (2000) refers to as a commitment to

‘weak ontology’. That is, they are approaches that affirm certain fundamental values while at the same time acknowledging the contingency and contestability of those fundamentals.

The first of these approaches to rethinking the value of universalism follows from the observed similarities in the meanings ascribed to democracy in variable historical, geographical, and cultural contexts. This is used as a basis for affirming a base level, minimal universalism in defining human needs, capabilities, and standards of justice (see Corbridge 1993, 1998). This is an argument most coherently developed in the work of Amartya Sen (1999b) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), both of who argue for a universalism of basic human capabilities. Their position gives considerable importance to the idea that a key human good is the practice of asking questions and offering justifications through which human needs are defined. Drawing on a similarly Kantian heritage, Onora O’Neill (2000) deduces a universalism premised on practical actions which are stretched out over space and time, and which implicitly assign competency, agency, and equal moral respect to others irrespective of their ascribed identities.

The second approach to recasting universalism is distinct from the post-foundational philosophical anthropologies implied by the adherence to a minimal universalism of reasonably defined needs. In this second approach, the critique of static, essentialist universalisms of justice, democracy, or rationality leads to a reinterpretation of universalism in terms of an orientation to openness to otherness. The deconstruction of exclusionary universalism leads to a redefinition of universality not as a singular, converged set of values (being-the-same), but in terms of being-together (see Nancy 1991, 1999). From this perspective, the value of universalizing discourse lies less in its descriptive content than it does in the implied commitment to listen to and respond to claims for justice from others that is implied by invoking a universalist register. This argument is developed, for example, in Iris Young’s (1993) conceptualization of communicative democracy, in which democratic justice does not presume the transcendence of particularity in favour of a shared universal perspective. It depends instead on a shift from a self-centred understanding of needs to the recognition of other perspectives and a commitment to negotiation. ‘Appeals to justice and claims of injustice [...] do not reflect an agreement [on universal principles]; they are rather the starting point of a certain kind of *debate*. To invoke the language of justice and injustice is to make a *claim*, a claim that we together have obligations of certain sorts to one another’ (Young 1998, 40). In this formula, universality is rethought not in terms of sameness, but in terms of openness. Openness is a value that presupposes plurality not sameness. This recasts rather than rejects the value of the universal, understood as an aspiration or impulse towards which claims for justice are oriented without presuming that this requires complete transcendence of partial positions

This second approach to the universalism of democracy points towards the distinctive temporality that is characteristic of democratic rule. If democracy is understood to have no essence (which is not the same as saying it is a purely empty category), this is because democratic rule is oriented to towards the

future. It is a form of rule that anticipates revision. In an abstract register, this is the sense of Derrida's (1992) account of 'democracy to come', which turns upon two notions of the future: the future as programmed and planned; and radical openness of the future as the wholly unexpected, what cannot be anticipated. Derrida suggests that the promise of democracy inheres in the relationship between these two temporal registers: 'For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even where there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept' (Derrida 1997, 306). This philosophical understanding of the temporality of democracy's promise of perfectibility connects to a more pragmatic observation concerning the basic mechanisms of democratic modes of rule. Regular elections, rights to free assembly, and so on, all embody a commitment to deal with irreconcilable difference and unstable identifications in a peaceable fashion by *temporizing* conflicts. This depends upon institutionalizing a distinctive temporal rhythm that combines open-ended deliberation, temporary identifications, the punctuality of decisive action, and retrospective accountability (Dunn 1999). Democracy, in short, is a political form that enables action that is characterized by being decisive without being certain, and is therefore open to contestation and revision. And this implies that it is important not to think of democracy in terms of *identity*, whether this refers to the presumption of deep cultural unity of a citizenry, to the idea that representatives and represented are bound together in a tight circle of delegation, or accordance with a single model of democratic rule. Rather, the value of democracy inheres in the quality of *relations* between different imperatives, interests, and identities – that is, it lies in the degree of openness to contestation of definitions of the proper balance between imperatives of collective action and individual freedom, between conflicting interests, and between multiple and fluid identities.

### **Spaces of Democracy**

We have suggested that the universalization of democracy as a taken-for-granted good does not imply that the meaning of democracy is cut and dried. Quite the contrary, it has coincided with a flowering of critical accounts of democratic theory and practice. If, at a minimum, this universalisation indicates that there is no alternative to the legitimization of rule by reference to the will of the people, then it also indicates the point at which the elusive qualities of 'the people' become all the more evident (Offe 1996). The questions of just *who* should participate, *how* this participation is going to be arranged, and *what* scope of actions are to be subjected to democratic oversight, have become more problematic, not less, with the historical 'triumph' of democratic norms. It is these three dimensions – the who, how, and what of democracy – that the chapters in this book address. They all share a strong commitment that the geographies of democracy are deeply implicated in working out practical

solutions to these questions of democracy's meaning. Each chapter sets out to connect the practicalities of democracy with questions of democratic theory, without idealizing democracy or collapsing normative reflection into *a priori* models of desirable end-states. Taken together, they underscore the need to explore democracy as a specific sort of politics that constantly invites the evaluation and appraisal of first principles.

### *Summary of Chapters*

The opening chapter addresses the basic context for the whole collection, namely the geographies of democracy's diffusion. John O'Loughlin provides a critical evaluation of the empirical and conceptual assumptions that inform the measurement and evaluation of democratization processes amongst academics, policy makers, think-tanks, and politicians. The next two chapters, by Ron Johnston and Charles Pattie on the uneasy relationship between electoral geography and political science, and by Richard Morrill on the politics of electoral re-districting in the United States, both develop critical insights into perhaps the basic mechanisms of modern democracy – elections. Taken together, these two chapters illustrate the complexity of representative and representational practices involved in the design, implementation, and interpretation of democratic electoral politics.

The next three chapters each explore the implications for theories of democracy and citizenship of thinking seriously about the complex spatialities and the constructed scales of democratic polities. Sallie Marston and Katharyne Mitchell develop a critical account of the changing geographies of citizenship. They illustrate the variability of citizenship identities and practices in relation to scales of local state, domestic space, the nation, and increasingly, trans-national networks of migration. Their key contribution is the notion of citizenship-formation, calling attention to the institutions, social relations, and embodied practices through which the meaning of citizenship is made-up and transformed in different contexts. David Smith addresses a fundamental tension within liberal theories of democratic legitimacy, namely whether there are any legitimate grounds to exclude outsiders from full citizenship status. At stake in his discussion is the fundamental question of the scope of the basic unit of democratic theory itself, the political community. There has been a great deal of discussion recently over whether globalization spells the death-knell of national democracy, suggesting that democracy's real level is lower-down, at the scale of the region, the locality, or the city. Murray Low explores the limitations of these arguments by examining the relationships of dependence and inter-dependence between democracy at sub-national scales and national level decision-making.

The following three chapters address another central conundrum of democratic theory, namely the identity and location of the collective subject of democratic politics, the public. Lynn Staeheli and Don Mitchell explore the changing meanings of the public/private distinction. They suggest that public action can take place in putatively private spaces, but also that what are

nominally public spaces are increasingly subjected to processes of exclusionary privatization. Gareth Jones develops similar themes, exploring the practices and performances through which new forms of public space have been developed and sustained in the context of democratization in Latin America. The strong emphasis of his analysis is upon public space as a realm of communication between different social subjects. This theme is further developed in Clive Barnett's chapter. He argues against overly concrete conceptions of public space and overly substantive conceptions of the public, suggesting instead that stretched-out, mediated forms of communication be thought of as the space of democratic politics.

These three chapters all touch on the cultural infrastructure that underpins democratic politics, and that sustains practices of tolerance, respect, and acknowledgement. This theme is further developed by Sophie Watson, who argues that Robert Putnam's influential account of the relationship between social capital and the quality of democratic governance clings to a narrow understanding of the forms of cultural and social interaction that sustain a democratic ethos. She suggests that this approach, with its in-built tendency to see only decline in the trajectory of contemporary social trends, is looking in the wrong places for signs of vibrant democratic cultures, and in turn, looking at the wrong people – ignoring the emergent democratic subjectivities of organized women's groups, youth cultures, and the elderly, amongst others. Finally, and developing the emphasis in previous chapters on the importance of citizen action and cultural practices in democratization processes, Byron Miller picks up one of the most pressing questions of contemporary democratic politics - the role and future of social movement mobilisation as a force for establishing, sustaining and deepening democracy. Miller's discussion focuses in particular on the challenge of globalization for both the conceptualization and the practice of social movement mobilisation, and critically assesses the possibilities and limitations of emergent forms of trans-national movement mobilizations.

In line with the preceding discussion in this Introduction, the combination of chapters in this book therefore aims to do two things. On the one hand, they address a broad range of arenas and actors through which the scope and meaning of democracy has been extended and deepened - including the media, social movements, community mobilisation, and patterns of associational culture. At the same time, they open up new questions about some well-established fields of state-centred democratic politics, reconsidering the nature of elections and electoral systems, central-local state relations, and political membership. We hope that, in bringing leading-edge theorizations of space, place, and scale to bear on existing conceptualizations of democracy, the collection will put normative questions of democracy, justice, and legitimacy at the centre of critical geographic analysis of contemporary socio-economic transformations.

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