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978-0-521-70268-3 - Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition

Aletta J. Norval

Excerpt

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Introduction: towards an aversive account of democracy

We don't start from certain words, but from certain occasions or activities.¹

The democratic elections in South Africa and the subsequent experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, both of which exemplify the so-called Third Wave of democratization, raise vital questions for democratic theory. For example, how do democratic practices become embedded in a society; and what is the relationship between these processes and the assumption of democratic subjectivity? How do we account for the articulation of political demands and its relation to the constitution of political identity and community? While these issues appear rather stark in the context of societies undergoing democratic transitions, they are not irrelevant to the workings of more established democracies. Even in societies with long traditions of democracy, the question of political community, the forging and expression of political demands, and the fostering of democratic forms of citizenship, remain extremely important. In the latter contexts, these issues arise in a slightly different form. They are not principally concerned with the initial establishment of democratic forms of subjectivity and community, but with their maintenance and reactivation. However, it would be mistaken to regard these two sorts of questions as they arise in the different contexts as entirely different in character, for this would assume too large a gap between processes of innovation and the reactivation of tradition. The argument developed in this book arises from this central concern and seeks to elaborate an account of democratic practice that takes account of

¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 3.

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well-established traditions at the same time as it thinks about innovation and renewal. One may expect, in reflecting on these issues, that democratic theory will be able to provide deep insight and critical tools for the analysis of these processes. The matter, however, is more complicated than that. It is characteristic of much political theory, and democratic theory in particular, to distance itself from the ordinary practices, commitments and concerns of democratic life. While most would accept that this is necessary for theorizing and thinking about democratic life, such distancing can take different forms and fulfil different practical and theoretical functions.² At best, it may provide us with the requisite imagination to sustain and deepen democratic life. At worst, it can prevent us from engaging

² There is a wide range of possible positions on the question of abstraction. As O'Neill argues, abstraction is necessary and unobjectionable in that it only abstracts or brackets predicates that are true of a given object. (See O. O'Neill, 'Political liberalism and public reason: A critical notice of John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*', *The Philosophical Review* 106, no. 3 (1997), 419.) However, O'Neill suggests that abstraction has to be contrasted with idealization, which substitutes false predicates for true ones. (O'Neill takes both Rawls's and Habermas' conceptions of rational agency to commit the error of idealization.) While acknowledging that idealizations may be of great help in theory-building, she contends that it is particularly problematic in the case of practical reasoning, 'whose aspiration it is to fit the world (to some degree) to certain conceptions or principles'. (O'Neill, 'Political liberalism and public reason', 419.) Laclau holds a broadly similar position on the necessity of abstraction, though his deconstructive reading clearly takes distance from O'Neill. With regard to the question of 'transcendentalism' Laclau argues (like O'Neill) that 'the transcendental dimension is unavoidable' since there is 'no object without conditions of possibility transcending it'. Yet (contra O'Neill), he argues that 'transcendentalism, in the full sense of the term, is impossible (that is why we can speak of quasi-transcendentals)' because it is not possible to draw a neat frontier with the empirical. (See E. Laclau, 'Identity and hegemony: The role of universality in the constitution of political logics', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left, Phronesis* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 76.) Habermas' account of a 'reconstructive sociology' is relevant in this regard and the issue is captured in the title of *Between Facts and Norms*. He suggests that the idealizations of proceduralism can be linked to empirical investigations through the identification of 'particles and fragments of an "existing reason" already incorporated in political practices'. Yet, for him, this leads into a set of idealizations that would be regarded as illegitimate for both O'Neill and Laclau. (See J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. W. Rehg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 287.)

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with democratic theory in a way that addresses practical needs.³ In what follows I hope to reorient democratic theory around the axis of our 'real need', as Wittgenstein puts it, by elucidating what we are doing and committing ourselves to when we participate in democratic life together.⁴ In this context, I will argue, it is particularly important to understand the process of making claims on each other, and of contesting or defending established norms and practices, as well as to investigate how our identities as democratic citizens are sustained in and through democratic practices. The key questions informing my account can thus be formulated in the following terms. How do we become democratic citizens, and what role does the articulation of political claims play in this respect? How are we to understand the constitution and eruption of new claims, and how do we make sense of the terms in which such claims are expressed? Once expressed, how do such claims become generalized and what do such claims and demands tell us about the relations between democratic citizens? Perhaps more broadly, how are we to account for the interplay of tradition and innovation in democratic life, and what light can existing democratic theory shed on these issues arising in democratic politics? While much democratic theory rightly occupies itself with what we ought to do when we engage in democratic practices, I aim in this book to shift away from these concerns to a different set of questions and engagements. Rather than starting out from an

³ O'Neill suggests that this focus addresses the needs of 'spectators who are looking for ways of assessing or appraising what has been done'. O. O'Neill, *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7. Though the activity of assessing is clearly perfectly legitimate, everything depends on how the theorist is situated with respect to it.

⁴ 'The preconceived idea of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination around. (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.)' L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), § 108. Cavell suggests that real need here can be understood in contrast to the invocation of 'false' needs in philosophizing that demands, for instance, that there 'must be something common' in the words we use. These sorts of demands often lead to a deprivation of the human voice. See S. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 199.

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articulation of what in the best of all possible worlds we ought to do, this investigation sets out from what I will argue is an inevitable sense of 'restiveness', which is often expressed in terms of disappointment with the ongoing practices associated with contemporary democratic life, driven as it is by a sense that things could be better.

DEMOCRACY, DISAPPOINTMENT AND PERFECTIONISM

Following a well-established line of contemporary thought, a recent commentator on what is perceived to be a deep-seated malaise in contemporary democracy suggests that the growing discontent with formal politics is best explained by a number of misunderstandings about the nature of democracy.⁵ As Gerry Stoker puts it, 'citizens fail to fully appreciate that politics in the end involves the collective imposition of decisions, demands a complex communication process and generally produces messy compromise'.⁶ In short, according to these perspectives, politics is designed to disappoint. Nevertheless, Stoker insists that it is crucial to take on board the fact that it is always possible in a proper functioning democracy to re-open discussion of any particular issue. Hence, what initially looks like a deflationary thesis is thus used to emphasize the open-endedness of democratic interactions. And this involves 'that hardest of human skills: listening carefully to the opinions of others and their expression of their interests'.⁷ These 'hardest of human skills' can in many respects be taken as the subject matter of this book, as they serve to invoke the question of what Cavell calls 'the conversation of justice', though it is important to stress that conversation in this regard is not just about talk, but an entire 'way of life together', one which is opaque and non-transparent, where the virtues most in

⁵ See, for instance, M. Warren, 'What can democratic participation mean today?', *Political Theory* 30, no. 5 (2002), 677–701, and R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁶ G. Stoker, *Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 10.

⁷ Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*, pp. 10–11.

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demand are those of listening, responsiveness to difference, and an openness to change.⁸

Disappointment is not only empirically relevant for our discussion of democracy. Disappointment, restiveness, even a sense of crisis, is equally important in outlining a theoretical account of democracy. It is unquestionably the case today that democratic theorists, from Habermas, Rawls and Iris Marion Young to Connolly, Mouffe and Laclau start with a sense of disappointment in current arrangements and the accompanying urge to provide something better in its place. For example, Habermas begins *Between Facts and Norms* with an account of the loss of orientation and self-confidence faced by those citizens in contemporary Western societies who are governed by the rule of law, but are faced with the challenges of ecological limits to growth, global inequality and immigration from impoverished regions.⁹ However, it is noticeable that this account is followed almost immediately by a rejection of defeatism and an invocation of the promise held out by radical democracy. Habermas suggests in this respect that the rule of law cannot be enjoyed or maintained without radical democracy: 'private legal subjects cannot come to enjoy equal individual liberties if they do not *themselves*, in the common exercise of their political autonomy, achieve clarity about justified interests and standards. They themselves must agree on the relevant aspects under which equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally.'¹⁰ The specific assertions made here will be treated in some detail in the forthcoming chapters. Of particular importance for us at this point is Habermas' emphasis on both the need to claim liberties as ours, and to do so under conditions in which equality itself is in question and cannot be given or assumed.

These are the issues at stake in this text. In what follows, I develop and defend a perfectionist account of democracy which

⁸ S. Cavell, *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 172–4.

⁹ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. xlii. ¹⁰ Ibid.

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attends to the emergence of claims arising out of the ordinary activities of democratic citizens but which nevertheless runs against the grain of the dominant norms of recognition of legitimate claims and traditional ways of dealing with them.¹¹ There are several features of this account that are worth drawing attention to at this stage. It is important that it starts from and attends to the emergence of claims that arise from the ordinary activities of democratic citizens. The emphasis on the ordinary in this regard not only suggests a concern with the specificity of our democratic practices, language and communication but also tells us something about the grammar of our democratic practices, in short, with our responsiveness to each other. It is, moreover, important that my concern is with the emergence of claims, and the relation between such claims and existing practices and traditions. Perfectionism, which is the province 'not of those who oppose justice and benevolent calculation, but of those who feel left out of their sway, who feel indeed that most people have been left, or leave themselves out, of their sway',¹² provides us with some guidance here. Characterized in this way, perfectionism returns us to the current malaise in democratic theory and practice, which I described as a certain restiveness or dissatisfaction with the present and with the self. Cavell puts it in the following terms. Perfectionism, he argues,

provides a position from which the present state of human existence can be judged and a future state achieved, or else the present to be better than the cost of changing it. The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgment upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world.¹³

¹¹ In this respect, my work clearly follows in the footsteps of James Tully and Stanley Cavell.

¹² Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 25. ¹³ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 2.

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In other words, it suggests a close relation between our disappointments with existing political practices and the desire for something better.

However, as I will argue more fully later, my defence of perfectionism is resolutely non-teleological, denying us the ability to provide a list of features or characteristics that if achieved and instituted would give us the ability to claim that we (and our institutions) are 'above reproach'.¹⁴ It does not furnish us with an end state to be achieved, precisely because these demands (for a set of delineable features and a clearly defined end state) run the risk of complacency, both theoretically and practically. Were we to have such a set of features, the risk is that we concentrate on those elements only or to the exclusion of other, often unforeseen and unforeseeable events, concerns and demands that may arise. To furnish an account of perfectionism that is compatible with the demands of democracy requires a break with the idea that there is one path or one mode of being in the world that could act as a model for all to follow.¹⁵ To put it differently, the perfectionism I wish to defend here acknowledges the excess of being over thought. Hence, it calls for attentiveness, not only to the emergence of demands, but also to the contouring of the space in and against which demands are articulated and the relations it implies between ourselves and others, as well as to ourselves. What Cavell calls 'aversion to conformism' acts as the guiding thread of my argument in this respect, helping to inform my critical engagement with contemporary democratic theory. Conformism, Cavell suggests, makes slaves of us. Aversion to conformism, that is, aversion to the

¹⁴ See Cavell's incisive treatment of Rawls's discussion of the conditions under which we may claim to be 'above reproach', in Cavell, *Cities of Words*, pp. 164–89.

¹⁵ Cavell notes that 'the path from the *Republic's* picture of the soul's journey (perfectible to the pitch of philosophy by only a few, forming an aristocratic class) to the democratic need for perfection, is a path from the idea of there being one (call him Socrates) who represents for each of us the height of the journey, to the idea of each of us being representative for each of us ... Emerson's study is of this (democratic, universal) representativeness ... under the heading of "standing for" ... as a relation we bear at once to others and to ourselves'. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The Carus Lectures, 1988 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 9.

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demand for conformity, politically draws attention to those aspects of a democratic grammar that highlight our democratic responsibilities, to the need to give attention to the exercise of our political voice and to the claims to community that it inevitably invokes and/or contests.

The concerns addressed in this book arise against the backdrop of a fast-changing social and political world. Much attention in recent years has been given to the local and global challenges to traditional arenas of democratic participation, and to their purported effects upon national democratic institutions. However, this renewal of democratic challenges also takes place in surroundings where serious concerns about the lack of interest and apathy displayed by citizens of countries with long-established democratic traditions are expressed. In a similar vein, the international milieu has undergone significant changes, ranging from the 'velvet revolutions' of the late 1980s and 1990s to the 'colour revolutions' of the first decade of the twenty-first century. In all these cases, there has been a complicated interplay between time-honoured democratic traditions and the challenges offered by new forms of transition to democracy. This interplay between innovation and renewal, on the one hand, and tradition on the other, raises important questions for reflecting on the grammar of democracy, understood as delimiting a horizon of what is sayable and doable at any given point in time, as well as what we may expect from others and what others may expect from us in the articulation of claims upon one another. It also allows us to reconsider the processes through which democratic renewal erupts onto the scene and gets instituted. These processes are, moreover, suggestive in thinking about the extension and projection of democratic imaginaries, the reach of democratic horizons, and the claims made in its name. Unfortunately, writing during the first decade of the twenty-first century, these reflections cannot be overwhelmingly optimistic. The project of a forceful imposition of democracy in Iraq, and the shallowness of its uptake elsewhere, cast a shadow over any sense of possibility that accompanied the fall of the Berlin wall and the wave

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of democratizations following in its wake. The disclosing of new arenas of struggle, in which nothing is guaranteed, should alert us to just how much is at stake in the current theoretical and practical debates about democracy. Having witnessed the transition to democracy in South Africa, these questions have personal resonance and hold particular theoretical interest for me.¹⁶

DEMOCRATIC THEORY REORIENTED

The arguments I develop in this book have emerged in part from a long-standing interest, but also certain unhappiness, with the political insights that can be gleaned from a post-structuralist approach to political theory. And the turn to deliberative democratic theory in an attempt to resolve what I perceive to be perplexing and deep-seated problems in both mainstream normative theory and post-structuralism has been an enriching experience. I thus critically engage in this text with both these traditions in order to cast light on what I find problematic in our contemporary accounts of democracy. In addition, I draw much inspiration from the writings of the late Wittgenstein, and have sought to work through and extend his theoretical and ethical insights in order to analyse contemporary politics in general, and democratic theory in particular. Both his method and the substance of his philosophical insights have proved constant companions in this process. His picture of leading words home to their ordinary use, together with the peculiarly uncanny sense of the ordinary, has alerted me to some of the excesses of abstractionism and the consequent demand for rules and standards of democracy drawn from realms other than our ordinary engagements and commitments. I have found similar inspiration in the work of Derrida, particularly his careful attention to textual detail and nuance, but also his continual breaches with

¹⁶ As Grassi puts it, 'Every problem that concerns us may not and cannot be conceived in an abstract and purely formal way. If the question that presents itself to us has a basis, then it must bear upon us in a way that oversteps subjective limits.' E. Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy*, trans. J. M. Krois and A. Azodi (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), p. 1.

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context that provide a sometimes dizzying perspective on the issues under discussion. My reading of both thinkers works from the postulate that their works cannot be treated as a mere propaedeutic to political analysis, which can therefore be separated from normative insights. Like other commentators, I suggest that Wittgenstein's and Derrida's engagement with the philosophical tradition is deeply infused with an ethic that has significant consequences for the usages we may make of their works in political analysis.¹⁷ In the case of Derrida, this approach is vindicated in the latter's own writings and forays into the domain of political theory. In the case of Wittgenstein, the recent resurgence of interest among political theorists in his work has smoothed the road for me, and I follow the exemplary investigations of Wittgenstein's reflections for political theory advanced by Cavell, Tully and Zerilli whose engagements with the ordinary has been pivotal for enabling me to articulate what I mean by aversive democracy.

The challenges to traditional forms of democratic participation in established democracies, as well as the more recent transitions to democracy, raise issues not addressed adequately in contemporary democratic theory. Two key areas are singled out in this respect. The first concerns the character of democratic argumentation. My attention to different aspects of argumentation allows me to better understand the mechanisms involved in the formation and articulation of new demands; the respective roles of reason and rhetoric in this

¹⁷ I deal in some detail with readings of Wittgenstein, and his relation to ethics and politics in Chapter 4. There has been extensive debate on the relation between deconstruction, and politics and ethics. See, for instance, D. Wood, 'The experience of the ethical', in R. Kearney and M. Dooley (eds.), *Questioning Ethics. Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 105–19; S. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); J. Dronsfeld and N. Midgley (eds.), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction* (PLI, *Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6, University of Warwick, Summer 1997); E. Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', in S. Critchley, J. Derrida, E. Laclau and R. Rorty, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. C. Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 47–68, and A. Norval, 'Hegemony after deconstruction: The consequences of undecidability', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 2 (2004), 139–57.