

INTRODUCTION

Addressing Differences and Inequality within Deliberation

Concern for deliberative democracy is sweeping the social sciences, yet real deliberations tend to be far from ideal. Participants and observers who care about the social inequalities that plague many deliberative situations often advocate bringing in third parties to facilitate. But it matters *which* third parties intervene. I analyze the “best case” of a practice that evolved in several radical democracies and one mainstream local democracy to argue that third parties who both understand and advocate for the disadvantaged can frequently be deployed with significant positive effects.

Consider the following scenario, which I observed at a citizen assembly in a Californian city with a population of approximately three hundred thousand I will call Santa Brigida:¹

“I promise that everyone will be heard tonight,” said the facilitator opening the assembly, which took place at city hall.² Progressive city council members in Santa Brigida had organized this participatory meeting, as well as earlier citizen forums, to include residents’ voices in decision-making on local urban policy. However, just two hours after the facilitator opened the meeting, this promise had already been broken. When it became apparent that city council members, including the facilitator, lacked genuine interest in soliciting citizens’ concerns, participating residents expressed their anger publicly. One, Maria Silva,³ told the facilitator how she saw the problem:

I, Maria, don’t feel listened to by you. I have children at home, and I couldn’t make dinner for them tonight; they are hungry. If you really wanted to listen, you could sit down at a round table and talk to us. I am so angry. You don’t listen to us.

While Maria’s speech (delivered in Spanish) reflected what many residents in the assembly felt, the response of the facilitator, who is bilingual but answered in

¹ All names in this Introduction are changed.

² My fieldnotes, Santa Brigida City Hall meeting, June 7, 2010. ³ All names changed.

English, seemed to disregard her concerns: “Maria, I ask you to calm down. General comments are not allowed until the end of this session. You must make concrete demands, otherwise we cannot include your concerns.” Council members nodded in agreement.

This scene took place in California, but it could easily have occurred in any number of cities throughout the United States or Europe, where policymakers in the past two decades have attempted to promote citizen “empowerment” through public participation and deliberative democracy. In an attempt at reforming mainstream models of representative democracy (where decisions are made by voting), local participatory citizen forums like the one in Santa Brigida are designed to include the proposals of community residents in the decision-making process and are often based on a dialogical or consensus-oriented process of deliberation (Habermas 1984; Mansbridge 1983; Kitschelt 1993; Polletta 2002; Fung 2004; Baiocchi 2005; della Porta 2005; Talpin 2006; Blee 2012; Wood 2012; Lang 2013; Lee 2015; Sintomer et al. 2016). Too often, however, as the case of Maria shows, those for whom these democratic forums are created end up feeling marginalized and misunderstood. *Marginalization*, in this context, occurs within a formally inclusive deliberative process when arguments made by less privileged participants fail to affect outcomes (Young 2003).

Marginalization can result from formal and informal power disparities among participants within ostensibly inclusive and empowering deliberative proceedings. At the Santa Brigida participatory city hall meetings, social-class differences and linguistic barriers divided elected representatives from participating community members – especially poor people; Spanish-speaking immigrants; and women of color, who, like Maria, felt neither heard nor understood by the official facilitator.⁴

When I began this research, I, like many researchers before me, predicted that those who protested about feeling marginalized within the democratic process would choose to leave the meetings where they felt excluded. But this was not the case in Santa Brigida. Following Maria’s speech about her frustration with the facilitator, two women in their early twenties distributed leaflets at the back of the assembly. They were local community organizers volunteering as linguistic interpreters/translators for Maria and other immigrant residents who were not native speakers of English, in order to help them understand and participate in the ongoing policy debates taking place at city hall. One of these translators addressed a group of residents who were about to leave the meeting: “We have witnessed how unfair the deliberative process was tonight.

⁴ I use the broad term *immigrants* to refer to different categories of legal and illegalized (im)migrants in the United States. The broad movement for immigrants’ rights in the United States includes different categories of resident immigrants, undocumented immigrants, refugees, and the families and advocates of these groups, including many (undocumented and documented) second-generation immigrants (Chavez 2008).

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Together with all local community associations and churches, we have organized an alternative people's forum, the Santa Brigida Community Forum. Several city council members have already agreed to participate. Please join us.”⁵

This was not the first intervention by volunteer translators at a Santa Brigida City Hall meeting. While most of the city council members, including the facilitator at the official town hall meeting, were in theory committed to an egalitarian and inclusive process, the community organizers became increasingly aware of how both subtle and more blatant dynamics at those meetings marginalized the voices of many of those for whom they were translating. Working frequently with politicians, those who acted as volunteer translators became aware of their own invisible power positions in these forums. They also discovered the unique power of translators to disrupt the deliberative process without being perceived as out of order, as their official job was to witness and address linguistic miscommunications.

As witnesses and in reaction to the failure of the city hall meetings, community organizers who had worked there as voluntary translators mobilized outraged citizens, other residents, and church groups to establish a community forum that would be chaired and facilitated by the residents. At city hall, city council members had dominated discussion periods with lengthy statements, making it hard for residents to influence decision-making. At the newly created community forum, one of the translators politely interrupted a politician to prevent such dynamics from being repeated: “Excuse me, but you have not answered several questions asked by people here tonight,” she stated in English.⁶ Another translator then provided a Spanish translation and requested that politicians make concrete concessions to community members. The translators' collective intervention echoed the voices of residents holding protest banners. At this alternative community forum, politicians changed their previously agreed-upon policy proposals following the residents' and translators' collective interventions.

My analysis explains how and why Santa Brigida community translators acted as they did, and how linguistic diversity prompted both their insights and the changes they made in the deliberative process. I analyze *political translation*, distinct from linguistic translation, as a disruptive and communicative practice developed by activists and grassroots community organizers to address the inequities that hinder democratic deliberation, and to entreat powerful groups to work more inclusively with disempowered ones. The insights I derive from the conscious efforts and effects of those who took on the explicit role of political translators in these local forums apply to other situations in which inequalities in communication threaten to undo a democracy.

⁵ My fieldnotes. ⁶ My fieldnotes.

THE NEGLECTED POWER OF THE THIRD:
 POLITICAL TRANSLATORS

Theorists have conceptualized deliberative or communicative democracy as based on direct, egalitarian dialogue that seeks to avoid asymmetrical power. In doing so, they have neglected the powerful informal third position of supposedly neutral facilitators – an omission that has kept us from imagining alternative democratic models. The notion of political translation provides a model for democracy that breaks with the reigning theory of neutral facilitation by adding a specific advocacy role, which I call a *disruptive third position* within political deliberation, in order to foster a more equal and inclusive decision-making process.

At the core of political translation is the translator's unique position as a disruptive third actor between facilitators and conflicting parties. As seen in Maria's case, translators do not seek to act as impartial facilitators; nor are their interventions neutral. Through their witnessing of differences and disagreements between local residents and political elites, including facilitators, the translators in the Santa Brigida case gained a fairly limited yet significant influence over the outcome of the proceedings. They also had the capacity to influence through persuasion, because they understood both the values of the privileged groups and the needs of marginalized ones. Translators used their unique position as a *disruptive third* to influence through persuasion, by directing attention to power imbalances and drawing on the egalitarian commitments of those who otherwise would be unlikely to recognize their own structural privilege.

For residents and community organizers in Santa Brigida, translation has become a model for grassroots democracy and political activism that changes the way in which local deliberation is organized and facilitated. Based on community organizers' and activists' practices as presented in the following chapters, I posit political translation as a twofold model of radical democracy that transcends our conventional understanding of linguistic interpretation in the context of deliberative and participatory citizen forums. First, *political* translators, such as the community organizers in Santa Brigida, come together as a group to resist domination in the context of officially inclusive deliberative or participatory democracy. Rather than boycotting meetings, they openly intervene to challenge cultural and linguistic power asymmetries, within both official community meetings like the one in Santa Brigida and radical democratic meetings created by protesters and social movement groups. Second, political translators also directly intervene within discourse or negotiation to challenge the marginalization that dominant politicians often impose upon disadvantaged community members.

My analysis counters the conventional notion of a "neutral" facilitator role in three ways: first, it shows that in the context of all of the cases I studied, deliberative groups with only "neutral" facilitators tended to fail. Second, it shows that the political translators succeeded by acquiring both an oppositional

consciousness and effective political power through their positions as witnessing, disruptive third parties and their ability to act at least somewhat independently of dominant interests. Third, it documents three conditions that make political translation effective: a context of cultural and linguistic differences; a commitment to equality among some privileged group members; and, most importantly, the translators' development of a disruptive third position.

POLITICAL TRANSLATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Translators' political role has been described by theorists of comparative literature, culture, feminism, language, and Marxist philosophy (Venuti 1992; Sakai 1997; Tymocko 1999; Gentzler and Tymocko 2002; Gentzler 2008; Apter 2006; Boéri 2010; Baker 2016; Butler 1999; Conway 2011; Nanz 2006; Santos 2005; Mezzadra 2007). Translators' critical interventions in public discourse vary depending on the specific context of interaction (Gentzler 2007). In historical revolutionary moments and postcolonial contexts, literary translators have taken on an important role by translating and spreading new terms and subversive political meanings to popular audiences (Tymoczko 1999, 2007; Baker 2016). With the rise of popular influence on power holders through digital and social media, activists in the Egyptian revolution have used linguistic translation and subtitling as a way to broadcast independent news and alternative meanings to transnational audiences of supporters (Baker 2016).

Belying an abstract, normative conception of a neutral, impartial translation, empirical research reveals a degree of agency as well as situated moral judgments on the part of interpreters operating in power-dominated arenas for public dialogue. For example, in asylum interviews or in court hearings involving detained undocumented immigrants, translators may find themselves in the ethically challenging position of being the only individuals to fully grasp the failures of mutual dialogue that arise from prejudices involving categories such as gender, race, or class, among others (Inghilleri 2012; Mokre 2015). While professional interpreters' training prepares them to act as impartial mediators to ensure that speakers and hearers understand each other, impartiality and neutrality may in reality limit translators' capacity to transmit the truth across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Inghilleri 2012).

An increasing number of professional linguistic translators and volunteer interpreters currently use their language skills to engage in social protest, engendering a need for research on how translators can influence political processes of discourse, deliberation, and democratic decision-making. This is a rich and generative field, within which I have pursued one rather particular line of inquiry. Following translation theorist Moira Inghilleri, I use the notions of translating and interpreting interchangeably in this book to emphasize the cultural component of the work of both interpreters and translators (Inghilleri 2012). Rather than focus on the political ramifications of linguistic translation

or interpreting per se, I look at *political translation* as a broad set of practices designed to address marginalization based on gender, class, race, and other differences – even within groups whose members speak the same language. For example, I will show that US global justice activists used the concept of translation to describe their radical democratic contributions to building a broader US American Left coalition connecting climate justice activists and NGOs close to the Democratic Party with undocumented immigrants, excluded workers, LGBT leaders of color, and minority organizers.

Political translation presents a new way to theorize the political role of activists who engage in deliberative politics. Activists bring to deliberative forums a critical awareness that counterbalances the subtle and overt influences that economic and political interests exert on public decision makers (Polletta 2015). From an activist perspective, though, deliberative forums actually risk co-opting and delegitimizing protest: for example, if a facilitator marginalizes the perspective of already disenfranchised groups (Young 2003). Moreover, the presence of political activists within citizen forums is contested (Polletta 2015). As Francesca Polletta shows, some deliberative democrats argue that protest is necessary if deliberation fails to be inclusive, if it is biased or unfair, and if it does little but reproduce elite discourse (Smith 2004; Habermas 1981). Others, however, fear that protesters could impede the deliberative process if they only advocate for their own political ideas – failing to engage in serious dialogue with other groups (Talisie 2001; see, for a discussion, Polletta 2015).

Addressing some of these open questions, political translation provides a perspective for activists to engage within deliberative politics without being perceived as threatening to the norms of deliberation and yet in a way that challenges inequity within public discourse. Activists who intervene as political translators do more than protesters speaking for social justice. By translating on behalf of other groups or individuals, activists transcend their own group's particular position. They acquire a new role within deliberative forums through their position as a third party challenging cultural and social hierarchies in deliberative and participatory democratic settings.

Political translation draws on two different conceptions of power in communication: the liberal assumption that deliberation will inevitably lead to fair and equitable decisions through mutual persuasion, and the radical perspective that posits a need to disrupt existing power structures in order to make such outcomes possible. Behind these contrasting conceptions of power lie two different notions of equality: unlike the liberal point of view, the radical position assumes that playing fields require leveling before all factions can participate equally. Political translators act from a liberal perspective when they echo and support arguments made by marginalized group members; they take a more radical approach when they collectively disrupt and interrupt deliberations in which dominant groups marginalize disadvantaged group members.

As political translators, activists challenge the ideals of neutrality and impartiality in situations that many participants in a meeting perceive as unfair, in which a dominant group systematically ignores demands for equality and justice made by another, less privileged group. I call such situations *positional misunderstandings*. At their core lie material differences of interest entangled with inequality.

The *positional* misunderstanding between Maria and the facilitator at Santa Brigida's local democratic forum reflects a larger debate about inequality and democratic participation that divides institutional leaders and engaged citizens. In radical democratic theory, Jacques Rancière has used the notion of "disagreement" to describe the failure of consensus-based and deliberative democratic models to effectively include demands for greater equality and social justice made by the less privileged (Rancière 1995). While deliberative democracy has become the mainstream model for policy-makers and progressive institutions aiming to enhance citizen dialogue, the democratic outcomes of deliberative reforms have been contested (Fraser 2007; Lee et al. 2015). Those who have studied the diffusion of deliberative models from small local citizen forums to broader national political arenas are concerned about the instrumentalization and increasing commercialization of such practices (Lee et al. 2015). Today, deliberation is a key model for negotiation used by mainstream political institutions, such as the European Union, as well as by development companies, multinational corporations, and international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, which adopt deliberative models as a way of enhancing transparency and accountability (see, critically, Fraser 2007; Eliasoph 2011, 2015; Deitelhoff 2012; Deitelhoff and Thiel 2014; Lang 2013; Lee 2015). Critical research suggests that the mainstreaming of deliberative democracy may not facilitate "empowerment"; rather, it may serve as a tool for power holders to legitimate themselves (Nanz and Steffek 2004; Deitelhoff 2012; Lang 2013, 2015; Lee et al. 2015; McQuarrie 2015).

My critique in this book is different. I do not address the intentional manipulation of deliberative democratic forms of participation by dominant interests. Rather, I look at places where deliberation goes wrong even when people genuinely attempt to make it work. To understand the puzzle that positional misunderstandings create, I analyze mainstream deliberative settings created by policy-makers as well as alternative forums for radical democracy and consensus-based decision-making created by protesters, community organizers, or local residents, such as Maria. In many of these groups, facilitators were supposedly motivated to include everyone in the process and were clearly sympathetic to the concerns of those included in the democratic deliberation process. Nevertheless, these facilitators marginalized, often preconsciously, the people they sought to include.

In Santa Brigida the problem was even greater than the facilitator's failure to help participants. In fact, the misunderstanding between the facilitator and residents in Santa Brigida involved linguistic and cultural barriers that prevented

the emergence of an inclusive democratic debate between residents and city council members. Democratic theories have assumed that a shared language is a necessary background condition for democratic discourse. Yet in Santa Brigida, only the official facilitator and city council members spoke English, while the majority of residents present had to rely on volunteer translators.

Santa Brigida's efforts at democratic deliberation point to a broader concern about political communication. How can people work together across cultural differences in increasingly multilingual, multicultural societies? Regarding the case of Europe and of multilingual nation-states, cosmopolitan and deliberative theorists have advanced English as a shared language, a "lingua franca" for transnational democratic communication (Habermas 1996; Archibugi 2005; Dryzek 2009; Van Parijs 2011). However, from a multicultural and communitarian perspective, civic deliberation, in order to be truly democratic and inclusive, needs to take place in people's authentic language, their local vernacular (Kymlicka 2001); otherwise public discourse reifies cultural misrecognition and linguistic colonialism (Taylor 1995).

I suggest, as an intervention in this ongoing debate, that whether a single global language or multiple local languages are involved in deliberations, the need to uncover inequality and bridge difference remains. People have unquestioned, familiar ways of understanding or misunderstanding each other that can determine how culture enables and restricts cooperation in heterogeneous groups (Polletta 2002, 2008). With political translation, I present a practice that produced dramatic results in improving the inclusivity and effectiveness of decision-making practices in diverse movement groups and local democratic settings. Political translation can turn real differences among deliberating groups into a resource for deepening democracy.

THE POTENTIAL OF MULTILINGUAL, CULTURALLY DIVERSE DEMOCRACY IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

I began my analysis of political translation by trying to understand how those groups that objected to marginalization within official deliberative forums would work within their own culturally diverse groups and grassroots democratic assemblies (della Porta 2005a, 2009, 2012; della Porta and Rucht 2009; Polletta 2002; Blee 2012; Smith 2007; Wood 2012). Activists engaged in the global justice movement in Europe and the United States have used political translation to address positional misunderstandings in the context of radical democratic, consensus-oriented, deliberative democracy, set in multilingual meetings and transnational assemblies that involve people with a multiplicity of identities and linguistic backgrounds (della Porta 2005b; Doerr 2008, 2012; Klein 2008). One particularly important model of egalitarian, grassroots-based democracy and deliberation is the World Social Forum (WSF). Created in 2001 by activists working on global justice, the WSF is the largest transnational face-to-face

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experiment in radical democracy at the time of this study (della Porta 2012; Juris 2008a, 2008b; Pleyers 2010; Smith et al. 2007, 2012; Smith 2007; Smith and Wiest 2012; Teivainen 2002; Whitaker 2004). For eight years I studied decision-making and deliberation in the WSF's regional Social Forums in Europe and the United States, which involved thousands of citizens, immigrants, and multilingual speakers discussing social justice and global politics.

I assumed that deliberation in monolingual, national social and citizen forums in Europe and the United States would be more inclusive and more democratically successful than in groups facing linguistic disparities. Most studies of deliberative democracy would make such a prediction, assuming that a multiplicity of languages would obstruct the deliberative process. Drawing on eight years of ethnographic fieldwork (2003–2010) involving case studies of forty Social Forum meetings and local citizen forums in the United States, Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, however, I discovered that – as this book will show – linguistically and culturally diverse groups were actually *more* inclusive in their democratic processes and decision-making outcomes than homogeneous groups, and they also survived longer. The explanation for this counterintuitive finding lies in the process of political translation.

Even though linguistic difference is often seen as a hindrance to democratic deliberation, in the cases I studied, this difference was designated by all participating parties as an issue that needed to be addressed, and thus prompted efforts to discuss the potential problems it might cause. In attempting to address linguistic problems, the participants opened up an avenue for better understanding the *positional* misunderstandings that so often distort deliberation between members of privileged and disadvantaged groups. In all of the monolingual groups that I studied, positional misunderstandings led to internal crises and to the groups' decisions to break into different factions. As a result of the explicit attention that both multilingual and highly diverse deliberative settings drew to cultural differences among participants, these settings also inspired political translation, the collective practice of openly challenging and tackling positional misunderstandings within deliberative politics.

The political translation practices that this study uncovers have not been previously addressed by democratic theorists, and they bring to the foreground people's grassroots engagement with positional misunderstandings and structural inequality in the context of cultural and linguistic diversity. Political translation builds on previous experiences and radical democratic practices of social movements that for both ethical and strategic purposes saw the process of deliberation as being at least as important as the outcome (della Porta 2005a). In different generations of protest, students in the civil rights movement, feminists, anarchists, and global justice activists have addressed the issue of power within consensus practices requiring norms for facilitators to pay attention to the way that structural inequalities play out within a meeting (Phillips 1993; Whittier 1995; Polletta 2002; Young 1996, 2000, 2003). Radical democrats and anarchists who formed part of the global justice movement and who founded

the North American Direct Action Network worked with *third facilitators* to ensure their network included and prioritized the voices of marginalized participants (Polletta 2002). Deliberative theorists and social movement scholars have only started to explore immigrants' and activists' grassroots attempts to address the reality of multilingual policy-making in the context of local urban democracy and transnational political participation (Nanz 2006, 2009; Alcalde 2015). Sociologists draw attention to the key role of social movement activists as translators who spread ideas from one national political context to another (Chabot 2012; Levitt and Merry 2007). My study will not specifically focus on translation as the diffusion or adaptation of ideas across different contexts (Chabot 2012). I also use "translation" differently than does Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who conceives of it as a counterhegemonic normative ideal (Santos 2006; see, for a discussion, Conway 2011). Rather, I will restrict my focus to the political practice of translation as used by community organizers in Santa Brigida and activists in social movements for their radical democratic practices. In comparing deliberation in meetings with or without political translation, I will begin to identify conditions under which heterogeneous groups may work together more democratically.

POLITICAL TRANSLATION VERSUS NEUTRAL FACILITATION

I will make several arguments regarding both positional misunderstandings and political translation within deliberation, based on one case of local mainstream democracy in California and on several radical democracies set in the WSF process and its American and European chapters. First, I will show that egalitarian democracy and deliberation often fail to fulfill their tasks because they do not address the problem of marginalization within the model of consensus-based democracy. Second, focusing on practices of political translation, I will show how social justice activists and community organizers in both the United States and Europe have worked to institutionalize a *disruptive third voice* within deliberation that helps members of marginalized groups influence and alter processes of facilitation and decision-making perceived as being "unfair." Third, I will show how the grassroots practice of political translation provides a better model for equal deliberation than is found in any model of neutral facilitation in the cases I discuss. I will argue that political translation helps to solve positional misunderstandings regarding race, gender, class, and language differences or other cultural differences. These misunderstandings remain unseen within models of neutral facilitation and, in turn, impede democratic deliberation.

POLITICAL TRANSLATION: WHAT THIS BOOK WILL COVER

To examine how positional misunderstandings occur, I analyze case studies in which activists and community organizers employed political translation to