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PART 1

Democracy and Critique
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As a tradition, Anglo-American analytical political philosophy, informed by liberalism, is deeply embarrassed by power and tends to ignore it. As a tradition, continental political thought and discourse, to the contrary, sees power as pervading and distorting the networks of human interaction, but offers no clear ways of eliminating the unfortunate by-product of oppressive and invasive human relationships. Both cannot deal with power as a normal, indeed pivotal, political phenomenon and as a potential resource to be harnessed to the attainment of human and social ends.

—Michael Freeden

Democracy seems to have a simple enough meaning. It means “rule by the people.” Or it means “rule by the many,” to distinguish it from monarchy (rule by a single person), aristocracy (rule by the best), or anarchy (the absence of rule). It is common enough to note that the word “democracy” derives from the Greek words “demos” (the people) and “kratos” (power). But, as Philip Pettit observes, “Each of these words is ambiguous in an interesting way.”1 Are the people a unified community or a more pluralistic and divided populace? Should power be understood as equivalent to rule, as control, or as a synonym for domination? Is the sense of power implied by kratos distinct from that implied by the archē referred to in monarchy and anarchy? The latter word refers us to questions about the sources of authority and legitimacy that underlay systems of rule. Is the idea of rule anathema to democracy, or is democracy a distinctive way of sharing in rule? Or perhaps the power of democracy is better understood as the capacity to act?2 If so, democracy seems to speak more to the capacity of a public to act collectively and to bring about change. So perhaps it would be better to define democracy as “the power of the people.”3

The idea of democracy as the power of the people is the source of the deep suspicion this concept has often engendered. As C. B. Macpherson has observed, for much of the history of Western political thought, from Plato and Aristotle through to the early nineteenth century, democracy was not well thought of at all.
The original meaning of democracy was “rule by the common people, the plebeians. It was very much a class affair: it meant the sway of the lowest and largest class. That is why it was feared and rejected by men of learning, men of substance, men who valued civilized ways of life.”

Jacques Rancière has sought to redeem the traditionally negative associations whereby democracy was used as a term of abuse: “Democracy meant the power of the people with nothing, the speech of those who should not be speaking, those who were not really speaking beings.” The reference to the original Greek meaning of the word “demos” allows Rancière to assert, “Properly it designates those who are outside the count, those who can assert no particular title over common affairs.” Rancière revives and reaffirms the rebellious spirit apparently enshrined in the original meaning of “democracy.”

Rancière’s reference to the original meaning of the word “demos” is just one example of the etymological gesture that characterizes a great deal of theorizing about democracy. It reveals a tendency to think of modern democracy as a variant of a political form invented by the ancient Greeks and, more specifically, a form that has its origins in Athens of the fifth century B.C. The appeal to the Athenian origins of democracy can be made to legitimate contemporary regimes or just as often to anchor a critical perspective on the inauthentic, fallen qualities of modern democracy. Discussions of democracy are therefore framed by Hellenocentrism, as Enrique Dussel calls it, referring to the habit of rooting all discussions of apparently universal philosophical concepts back to authoritative readings of Greek philosophy and tragedy and of Roman political thought. Following this habit of mind, the particularities of modern Western experience are taken to constitute universality itself, and in the process are sundered from their constitutive relationships with non-European cultures and contexts.

The prevalence of the etymological gesture in radical political thought is often influenced by a form of analysis derived from the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger. Such analysis tracks the historical variations of the meanings of words and ideas in order to recall to our attention aspects of these meanings that have been covered over or forgotten. The concept of the political is quite central to this tradition of analysis. For Heidegger himself, a recovery of the meaning of the concept of the political allows us to see how the history of translation is a succession of betrayals. “We think the ‘political’ as Romans, i.e., imperially,” he asserts. And this way of thinking has lost touch, so Heidegger argues, with the distinctive experience of Truth upon which a more authentically original Greek meaning depends. As a consequence of our forgetting this experience, we are condemned to mistake the essence of the Greek meaning of the political: “our usual basic ideas, i.e., Roman, Christian, modern ones, miserably fail to grasp the primordial essence of ancient Greece.”

The Heideggerian maneuver of recalling the lost meanings of foundational concepts is caught up in a politically loaded assertion of an essential affinity be-
between the Greek origins of philosophy and a particular claim of German exceptionalism. We would do well to recall that this is not the only way of seeking to historically refine the meaning of concepts. Hannah Arendt’s political theory, developed in conversation with the work of Heidegger, among others, also depends on an account of the Greek and Roman genealogy of modern political concepts such as freedom, justice, power, responsibility, and virtue. Arendt did not think that politics could be reduced to a single model of truth, to a proper grasp of ontology, or to the authority of philosophical reasoning. Her ambition was “to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distil from them anew their original spirit.” On the face of it, this sounds much the same as Heidegger’s attitude. But Arendt uses concepts to attend to the variations in the “underlying phenomenal reality” of political life. Rather than thinking of Greek origins having been betrayed in translation by Romans and others, Arendt sees the movements of translation as bearing the traces of specific forms of political experience. Rather than bemoaning the eclipse of an authentically Greek sense of political life as a realm of unhindered free association between equals, Arendt reminds us that the wider conditions of systematic exploitation, inequality, and slavery on which such a vision depended no longer frame the “elementary experiences” of modern political life: “It is precisely the absence of rule in the public realm that characterizes the specific cruelty of Greek history.”

Heidegger and Arendt can stand for different ways of appreciating the historicity of political concepts. In one approach, translation is always seen as a process of diminution, forgetting, or neglect. This view bestows a certain degree of authority on those able to lay claim to the privileged interpretation of proper meanings. In the other approach, translation is a movement across distinct, particular, but still recognizably political fields of experience. It is the latter approach that informs my own argument in this book.

One reason to be wary of the etymological gesture in political theorizing is that, on closer examination, Athenian democracy turns out to have been not quite so originally Greek as is often supposed. Athenian democracy was a grafting together of traveling practices and translated values rather than an original creation. What is more, the idea that modern democracy is the realization or degradation of something invented by the ancient Greeks is itself a decidedly modern invention. An Athenian lineage for modern forms of liberal democracy is largely a fabrication of nineteenth-century political thought. As the history of this construct shows, the significance of the concept of democracy is always an effect of translations. It might be best to think of democracy as an inherently divided concept with no proper meaning. Which is not quite the same thing as saying that democracy can have any old meaning one might like it to have, as we will see in chapter 2.

The reference to classical traditions also characterizes a great deal of the
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twentieth-century French thought that has done so much to shape theoretical innovations in the humanities and social sciences.\textsuperscript{17} Jean-Pierre Vernant, the most authoritative reference point in this intellectual lineage, rejected the idea that Greek thought should serve as an originating reference point for modern thought. He focused instead on locating Greek thought in the context of the societies from which it arose.\textsuperscript{18} Vernant argues that the meaning of democracy for the Greeks pivoted around the problem of neutralizing arbitrary exercises of force through \textit{kratos}.\textsuperscript{19} For Vernant, there are two elements of \textit{kratos}, referring both to legitimate authority and to violence or confrontation. Neither is more authentic than the other. Rather, according to Vernant, the recurring theme of Greek thought is the problem of how these different aspects of power are related.

In a similar spirit, the historian Paul Veyne has argued that there are two schemas in both Greek and Roman political thought, one more idealistic than the other.\textsuperscript{20} One of these turns on the issue of rule and on relations between governors and the governed. The other examines the activist virtues that are required to constitute the polity. Veyne suggests that this latter “militant ideal” did not necessarily have much to do with the real politics of the ancient Greeks, except insofar as critics and reformers invoked it as an “exacting ideal.” The distinction Veyne draws rather exactly captures the pattern of interpretation through which contemporary invocations of the Greek and Roman origins of democratic thought often work: appeal is made to exacting ideals in times of trouble in order to call into question existing configurations of rule and authority. It is here, perhaps, that we should locate the significance of any putatively classical inheritance for democratic theory. The significance lies not so much as a source of original, proper meanings to be recalled but in providing one model among others for the persistent problem of thinking relationally about the powers mobilized by democratic politics.

We can see, then, that different understandings of meaning are at the very heart of arguments about the meaning of democracy. I will return to these issues of meaning more directly in chapter 2. My more immediate concern in this chapter is with how key concepts are used in discussions of a critical theory of democracy. This includes a consideration of how to understand the relationship between democracy and power that I just alluded to: whether power is to be understood as something to be resisted from below, as a medium of agonistic collective self-assertion, or as a medium for the exercise of rule. The question of how to think about the relationship between democracy and power is central to the problem of political evil discussed in the introduction. In this chapter I address this question by considering the ways in which intuitions of human vulnerability are presented in anarchist and liberal political thought. I use this discussion to present a preliminary account of democracy as a mode of exercising power within frameworks of authorization and accountability, rather than as an alternative to rule. The chapter closes by considering the implications of this account of democracy for our picture of the tasks of critical theory.
Before proceeding further, I want to consider in more detail the difference between two distinct understandings of power that we have already seen to be present in disputed appeals to the authority of Western philosophical tradition. Interpretations of the meaning of democracy often divide between those that place an emphasis on accountability, legitimacy, and representation in systems of rule on the one hand and those that emphasize autonomous action and the self-institution of the people on the other. The difference between these two emphases is related to different ways of appealing to the authority of Greek or Roman sources. The appeal to ancient origins to authorize an understanding of democracy as a form of popular government is strongly associated with the Roman translation of Athenian politics. Conflict, in this strand of thought, is a matter of disputes between equals, and the key issue is the consent of free persons to collective rule and government. But it is sometimes claimed that this understanding obscures a more original, more authentic meaning of democracy as “the forceful entry into the realm of politics of those who are deprived of political status.” In this latter understanding, kratos is about the exercise of power against an antagonist, and it informs a view of democracy as always involving claims to power. The idea of democracy as a mode of making insurrectionary claims against domination is revived, for example, in Rancière’s account of democracy as an essentially anarchic form best expressed in the punctual suspension of existing orders.

Democratic theory often revolves around categorical formulations that contrast imperatives of rule and order with those of dissent and struggle. Some thinkers present democracy as the power of a unified community of citizens, while others see democracy as the claim or even conquest of power by lower orders. Some thinkers view democracy as involving the consent of free persons to collective rule, while others see rule as a form of subjugation that negates any meaningful sense of autonomy. And a number of political thinkers seek to reconcile both sides of these contrasts, presenting democracy as a form in which the experience of inhabiting the abysses and aporias, impasses and paradoxes of these competing imperatives is actively embraced and cultivated. Sometimes, just to add another layer of paradox, democracy is further defined in terms of the (im)possible institutionalization of this sort of unsettling experience. What all these different views share is the idea that democracy is more than a set of procedures for selecting rulers, making decisions, or holding government to account. It is also, and perhaps most fundamentally, a particular configuration of cultural dispositions, sometimes modeled on complex theories of subjectivity, sometimes on sophisticated philosophies of aesthetics, sometimes on refined moralities of virtue.

I want to emphasize how appeals to ancient derivations of the meaning of democracy are one way in which different visions of power are elaborated. Debates in political theory often revolve around a contrast between deliberative theories...
and agonistic theories of democracy and on various efforts to reconcile differences between them. In important respects, the two types of theory are associated with two broad ways of thinking about power identified by Martin Saar: "On the one hand, there is a concept of power as domination, whereas, on the other hand, there is a concept of power as constitution. The former is concerned with realisation and subjugation of wills, whereas the latter with the unleashing and channelling of multifarious forces."

These two ways of thinking are variations on the distinctions unearthed by Vernant and Veyne. In one view, power is understood as something wielded by some people over others, following from an idea of power as the capacity to exercise one’s will. It is associated with an action-theoretic line of thinking, going as far back as Thomas Hobbes, on to Max Weber, and then to the Frankfurt School. In the other view, often traced back to Baruch Spinoza, power is understood as a constitutive feature of all social life. In this view, power is understood as a potential, a force that is not held or possessed or wielded at all. It is, rather, an attribute of relations and collectives.

The two views of power that Saar identifies capture a fundamental division in how to imagine the task of critique in social theory. In the first view, power is thought of as repressive and restrictive or as subjugating, and therefore opposed to freedom. The task of critique, in turn, is to expose domination by identifying restrictions of agency and autonomy, seen as illegitimate impositions of the will of some over the will of others. The second view, which sees power as a constitutive dimension of social relations, involves what Saar calls a “flattening of the concept of power,” one that effectively “changes the conceptual criteria available to us for the purposes of social critique.” In a strong Spinozan interpretation, critical assessment affirms the maximization of whatever increases and assists the body’s power of acting and the mind’s power of thinking and the minimization of whatever diminishes or hinders those same powers. Radical interpretations of Spinoza’s thought often suppose that this type of assessment must necessarily eschew first-person registers of agency. They thereby inadvertently elevate the rationalism central to Spinoza’s own philosophy into a depersonalized, third-person register that presents evaluations of good or bad combinations as available only to those able to occupy a position outside of the situations where such evaluations might actually matter to participants.

What is most relevant about Saar’s identification of two ideal-typical approaches to analyzing power and undertaking critique is his own subsequent use of Spinoza’s work to challenge the either/or interpretation of power—as either a medium of domination and subjugation or a mode of empowerment and potential. Saar finds in Spinoza’s work a sense of what he calls the “double potentiality” of power relations. Rather than thinking of the emphasis on domination or on constitution as belonging to two incompatible ways of thinking about power, we might be better served to view them as two emphases combined in different ways by different traditions of thought. In this synthetic view, the critique of domina-
tion from an action-theoretic perspective necessarily presupposes an account of the constitutive power of subjects as free agents. Likewise, critical analysis undertaken from a perspective that privileges an ontology of constitutive relations always relies on some implicit normative sense of the restriction of the positive potential of individual and collective agents or of this potential being channeled in unproductive directions.

Saar helps us see that the political resonance of the constitutive view of power can be interpreted in very different ways. This view of power is often used to posit an image of political life as shaped by tensions between openness and closure, creativity and routine, or change and stasis. The most explicitly political interpretation of the idea of constitutive power is rooted in a tradition of Italian autonomista thought that finds its fullest expression in the writings of Antonio Negri. The pivotal dualism in this stream of work is a contrast between constituent and constituted power, derived from Negri's own interpretation of Spinoza's distinction between potestas and potentia. The distinction is open to various interpretations, but for Negri it names a sharp juxtaposition between power as the force of constitution, on the one hand, and power as the force of centralized, hierarchical command, on the other. Negri condenses the distinction as “human power versus absolute Power.”

Negri’s interpretation of these two forms of power is related in turn to his elaboration of Spinoza’s concept of multitudo—the multitude—the name given to the constructive power of the collective in Spinoza’s unfinished account of democratic life. For Negri, the free expression of the multitude, the power of multiplicity, is continually subordinated by absolute power. Negri’s view of the oppressive exercise of absolute power against the freedom of the multitude underwrites a definition of Spinozan politics defined as “against Power.” Negri’s use of Spinoza’s thought to construct a political ontology of constituent power has become central to a highly influential theory of activist politics centered on the concept of the multitude. Thinking of constituent power as the activity of unmediated creativity leads to a view of democracy not as popular sovereignty or representation but as the performance of oppositional antagonism.

The conceptual bifurcation of the concept of power by Negri presumes that a picture of political strategy can and should be deduced directly from a philosophical elaboration of the ontological features of the world itself. From this perspective, the way out of the conceptual and political impasses of Marxist class analysis is to transpose the animating questions of that tradition to an ontological level, so that the dynamics of capitalism and the resistance to capitalism emerge immanently from the same type of action. Thus, Negri’s political ontology discerns in the dynamics of abstract labor the already present possibilities of fundamental transformation. He posits an already existing universality, in the form of the common modes of interdependence that capitalism depends on and parasitically draws on. In this understanding of the pure immanence of radical political action, “the will
to be against” is almost naturally occurring and certainly requires no articulation, representation, or further elaboration.33

Negri’s division of power into two parts is one example of a broader model of ontological splitting of the political that I will consider in more detail in later chapters. It is a conceptual maneuver that installs at the center of radical democratic thought an image of political time as a kind of punctuated equilibrium, in which “events” interrupt and disrupt, and perhaps even reconstitute, functionally integrated social formations that then settle down again into durable and ordered routines. The contrast between the routines of instituted organizational orders and rare events of constitution and disruption informs a temporal imagination whereby genuine political action is necessarily insurgent and insurrectional. Democracy is the name reserved for this type of extraordinary act of rupture.

The idea that political change is best modeled on an image of decisive rupture and structural crisis has a strong hold over the imagination of radical political thinkers.34 Although no longer couched in terms of reform versus revolution, the temporal imagination of ongoing serial reproduction versus sudden transformative ruptures continues to provide the terms of analysis and criticism for many adherents of radical democracy.

Here I want to suggest that the conceptual splitting of power into two aspects undertaken by Negri can also be used to support a less melodramatic, all-or-nothing frame of analysis and evaluation. The interpretation of the distinction between constituent and constituted power developed by Enrique Dussel illustrates this suggestion. Dussel also makes use of Spinoza’s ideas in outlining his understanding of the relationship between the source and the institutionalized exercise of power. He distinguishes between potentia, understood as “power-as-potential,” and potestas, the delegated exercise of power, its “necessary institutionalization.” Dussel posits what he calls an “originary ontological scission” between these two dimensions. But he insists that potestas is the giving of institutional form to potentia that in itself cannot be actualized. The split between the two “is necessary, and it marks the pristine appearance of politics while representing at the same time the supreme danger to politics and the origin of all injustice and domination.” Positioning himself between the anarchist who dreams of “the lost paradise of potentia” and the conservative who “adores the fixed and controlled power of potestas,” Dussel argues that the analysis of politics needs to be approached as “the long history of the proper or corrupted use of potestas.”35

In contrast to Negri, Dussel provides an account of two dimensions of power that does not depend on a stark categorical opposition. For him, “any exercise of power is institutional, because the power of the community as potentia in itself is not an initial empirical moment in time but rather a foundational moment that always remains in force beneath institutions and action (that is, beneath potestas).”36 For Dussel, potestas names a necessary process of mediation of power that is also inherently ambiguous. His emphasis in elaborating the relationship
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between potentia and potestas is not on the closure of the latter through the exclusion or elision of the former but rather on a process of backgrounding, supplementation, and risk. The source of power, as potentia, is always present in the political community, but it is also necessarily delegated to political institutions. These institutions exercise what he calls “obediential power.” For Dussel, the “original corruption” of the political arises when power is fetishized, when delegated political actors presume that they are the source of power. The key distinction in Dussel’s work is therefore between a positive, delegated exercise of power, in the form of obediential power, and its negative form, when power has become fetishized. The possibility of corruption associated with potestas is not an alien imposition. Nor is it a necessary outcome. Democracy, for Dussel, is a practice that explicitly questions the relationship between the proper and corrupted exercise of potestas.

To clarify the contrast I am making between different styles of theorizing, I would emphasize that Dussel does not present potentia as equivalent to democracy. Dussel’s political philosophy certainly prioritizes those who cannot live fully within prevailing institutionalizations as the privileged agents of political transformation. He accords primacy to the oppressed, repressed, and excluded, all those he calls “political victims.” The principal motivating force of critical theory, Dussel insists, must be based on the perspective of the victims.

Dussel uses the figure of “the victim” to challenge the persistence of the binary opposition between revolution and reform in the temporal imagination of left politics. In place of this opposition, he presents the concept of “transformation.” Transformation is “a change in the form of the innovation of an institution or the radical transmutation of the political system in response to new interventions by the oppressed or excluded.” It is the action of political victims, but Dussel does not presume that it only takes the form of momentary events or dramatic ruptures. It is carried out “with reference to the horizon of a new way of exercising delegated power.” Dussel’s account of the temporality of political action, in short, envisages a new way of exercising potestas, rather than its temporary negation in the expression of pure potentia. Rather than counterposing reform and revolution, incremental change and fundamental refoundation, Dussel’s notion of transformation names a form of action that seeks “to change the course of an intention, the content of a norm; to modify a possible action or institution.”

I have dwelt upon Negri and Dussel’s contrasting accounts of the relation between potentia and potestas in order to illustrate how the splitting of political concepts can be undertaken in very different ways. Negri’s interpretation of the distinction stands for a wider tradition in which political resistance arises from any attempt to secure order or institutionalize power. In this sort of interpretation, the constitutive view of power derived from Spinoza is given ontological priority as the source of genuine radical political energy, which emerges in crisis events of dramatic rupture. Dussel uses the same distinction to provide a nuanced account.
in which dissent arises from situated experiences of power exercised to reproduce specific wrongs of exploitation, oppression, or violence.

Dussel’s work is one example of the sort of synthesis that Saar recommends between the constitutive view and the action-centered view of power. In Dussel’s case, the idea of power as a collectively generated medium of action is used to raise the question of how this capacity can be wielded to expand social justice. A key feature of Dussel’s account is the idea that the exercise of power is inherently risky. He places those most susceptible to the corruptions of collectively generated power at the center of his own political philosophy. For him, the core concern of critical analysis should be to respond to the negation of the corporeality of all those dominated as workers, indigenous peoples, slaves, the exploited, and women.41 In making the corporeality of victims of injustice the crux of his version of critical theory, Dussel helps us to see that debates about democracy and power have at their heart not just assertive virtues associated with concepts of agency, collective action, and mobilization but also a concern with the exposure to particular sorts of harm associated with what he calls “corrupted power.” We should not, then, think of disputes between different views of power as merely conceptual, open to resolution depending on one’s own theoretical inclinations. We might instead think of these disputes as turning on different interpretations of the place of vulnerability in our understandings of democratic politics.

The Vulnerabilities of Democracy

One feature of the Spinozan view of power discussed in the previous section, in which power is accorded an ontological status as a constituent dimension of social relations, is the idea that democracy itself is the underlying immanent principle of social life. This idea finds expression in a range of contemporary discussions around the theme of the commons, discussions animated in part by a concern with redeeming communism from its infelicitous historical associations.42 The idea of the commons is also a central theme in the resurgence of interest in anarchism as a theory and practice of activist politics. In both cases, strong claims are made about the proper meaning of democracy. From an anarchist perspective, democracy is one name for the peaceable negotiation of different viewpoints toward an agreed upon path of action. This is understood as a benign process of “spontaneous ordering” that can properly flourish when external assertions of authority, whether in the form of terror or bureaucracy, are absent.43 A consideration of anarchist political thought is of significance here, then, because it provides a simple image of the sources of harm to which democratic politics responds, an image that itself rests on a very specific spatial imagination.

Building on the view that anarchism refers to the absence of rule and the promise of a politics without “the power of command,” the anthropologist David Grae-
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Graeber suggests that democracy has to be defined in terms of “the process of collective deliberation on the principle of full and equal participation.” Graeber’s account of democracy revolves around three related conceptual propositions. The first is a straightforwardly sovereign conception of power, in which any and all forms of organized authority are presented as embodiments of violence. To live under a state, he suggests, is to live “in a society where rules are enforced by the threat of prisons and police.”

Graeber’s second proposition is that democratic deliberation is a consensual procedure. Drawing on the practices of contemporary activist movements, Graeber presents “consensus process” as the pivotal practice in his democratic theory. Characterized by a complex set of procedures of “blocking” and “standing aside,” consensus process is a form of deliberation that aims to develop proposals acceptable to all members of a community. It is a model for reaching agreement over a course of action without having recourse to measures that compel people to go along with something that they have not freely agreed to do: “The essence of consensus process is just that everyone should be able to weigh in equally on a decision, and no one should be bound by a decision they detest.” It should be noted that the second clause here does not necessarily follow from the first principle. One might reasonably hold that given the chance to contribute equally on a particular decision, people do have some obligation to respect a decision that does not quite go the way they would have preferred. Graeber excludes this line of reasoning, not least on the grounds that given the right conditions of face-to-face interaction, people will move toward consensual agreement anyway. His understanding of democracy is underwritten by a spatial imaginary of proximate face-to-face communication as the source of genuine political comity. Graeber argues that spatial proximity is the condition for consensual political practice, because in face-to-face communities it is apparently much easier “to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not to go along with it.”

Even more fundamentally than this empirical proposition, Graeber’s account of democracy rests on a rejection of the idea that people should ever be compelled to act in ways that they do not approve.

Consensus process is, then, a model of direct democracy that puts a premium not just on participation but above all on nondivisive agreement. It stands opposed, therefore, to voting procedures, which by definition encourage division. The vision of democracy as a consensus process has a rather specific purview, it should be said. It is primarily a model for how to think about the tasks of organization in which the primary unit of political community is a group of more or less like-minded activists. The most prominent reference point against which it is developed is a model of the democratic-centralist vanguard party. This rather restricted frame of reference is justified by reference to the idea of “prefiguration.” Consensus process is not just about a set of procedures of deliberation. It is meant to anticipate the future form of “a culture of democracy.”
The idea that power is always underwritten by violence is vital to the anarchist vision of consensus process as a means of reaching nondivisive agreements. This vision in turn depends on the third proposition in Graeber’s reconstruction of democracy as an anarchist practice, which is a claim about the immanent presence of communism in social life. He provides an updated version of Peter Kropotkin’s account of the immanence of fully developed “communistic anarchy” in existing modes of social life. For Graeber, all sorts of activity, from voluntarily helping one’s neighbors to ordinary market transactions, embody “everyday communism.” We are, says Graeber, all communists when we are with the people we know and love and work with, indeed, when we are involved in any and all sorts of cooperative activity with others. It is a view that leads him to declare, “All societies are communistic at base, and capitalism is best viewed as a bad way of organizing communism.”

Graeber provides the clearest expression of the political imagination of contemporary anarchist thought and of its claims to embody the true meaning of democracy. It is a perspective defined by the conceptual reduction of power to violence, by a constricted spatial imagination of consensus process and strong temporal claims for prefiguration, and by an immanentist understanding of communism as the pervasive if unrecognized condition of all human cooperation. It is a style that resonates with certain strands of post-Marxist thought that likewise look upon the state as a monstrous usurper of popular energies and that find traces of a future communism in alienating processes of modern bureaucracies and market capitalism.

The significance of the anarchist tradition for my discussion here is that it dramatizes a specific way of thinking about the vulnerabilities associated with the exercise of democratic power. It is a tradition that attends closely to the harms that can accompany the exercise of authority and rule. But the sources of these harms are presented as being external impositions on the authentically convivial disposition of “gregarious animals” toward cooperation. The starkly dichotomous view of power characteristic of anarchist thought is illustrated by the work of James Scott. For Scott, the art of “seeing like an anarchist” involves developing the sensitivity to be able to discern forms of voluntary cooperation that escape the hierarchies that define rule by states. Such forms of cooperation are routinely present in ordinary and everyday activities, he argues, and in certain cases enable whole societies to define themselves against the presence of the state.

As with other anarchist thinkers, Scott’s work turns on a straightforward opposition between good and bad forms of power. On the one hand, there is top-down rationalism, characteristic of bureaucratic ways of “seeing like a state.” On the other hand, there are various means of evading, withdrawing, and withholding from engagement with states that Scott once characterized as “weapons of the weak.” As in Graeber’s work, in Scott’s account of “seeing like a state” and “the
arts of resistance,” the political imagination at work depends on a distinctive spatialization. In Scott’s case, the state is presented as both external to society and vertically superordinate above it. Both writers illustrate the degree to which Mikhail Bakunin’s rhetoric of horizontality and verticality remains central to the imagination of anarchist political thought. Bakunin contrasts bottom-up virtue and top-down imposition, a contrast through which he elaborates collectivist anarchism in opposition to the apparently authoritarian political strategies promoted by Karl Marx. The image of power being exercised from the top down through a series of forcible commands or impositions and of resistance arising from the noncoercive vitality of a self-organizing collective is remarkably resilient across various strands of radical political thought and cultural analysis.

The operative understanding of power in Scott’s work follows from the definition provided by another founding figure of anarchist political thought, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, which Scott cites approvingly: “To be ruled is to be kept an eye on, inspected, spied on, regulated, indoctrinated, sermonized, listed and checked off, estimated, appraised, censured. . . . To be ruled is at every operation, transaction, movement, to be noted, registered, counted, priced, admonished, prevented, reformed, redressed, corrected.” The horror expressed in this formulation at the thought of one’s own actions shaped by the will of others is a recurring theme of anarchist thought. It is a reaction that presumes in advance that all relationships of heteronomy are reducible to relationships of domination, oppression, or violence.

It is here, in the interpretation of relations of autonomy and heteronomy, that we can see how evaluating the claim of anarchist thought to embody the true essence of democracy turns on a small but highly significant distinction: the difference between the idea of consent to being ruled or governed, on the one hand, and on the other hand the idea of self-government as a form of consensus. Thinking of democracy with reference to the first idea implies accepting the need for collective action that is binding in some sense. It involves thinking of democracy as a system of authority, among other things. Anarchist political thought privileges freely arrived at agreements and assumes that having to consent to authority is a negation of a more authentic orientation toward consensus.

In order to draw out the distinctive understanding of the sources of human vulnerability that differentiates consent from consensus, I turn to the account of power captured in Judith Shklar’s notion of the “liberalism of fear.” The liberalism of fear has some passing similarities to the anarchist imagination, not least in a shared concern about the dangers posed by centralized state authority. But whereas anarchism interprets these dangers primarily as undermining a more fundamental inclination toward voluntary cooperation, Shklar invokes a much scarier image of the physical and mental harms that people face not just from exposure to hierarchies of authority but also from exposure to one another. Shklar’s
“dystopic liberalism” builds from an appreciation of the pluralism not of interests, opinions, or even comprehensive doctrines but of human virtues and vices.\(^6\)

In Shklar’s view, liberalism is most concerned with securing the conditions necessary for the exercise of personal freedom: “Every adult should be able to make as many effective decisions without fear or favour about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult. That belief is the original and only defensible meaning of liberalism. It is a political notion, because the fear and favour that always inhibited freedom are overwhelmingly generated by governments, both formal and informal.”\(^6\) This view of liberalism shares with anarchism a deep suspicion of the harms that can be done by the concerted exercise of power. The difference between an anarchist and a liberal perspective might appear to lie in the emphasis, evident in Shklar’s definition, on individual freedoms as opposed to the collective action envisaged by an anarchist search for consensus. But the relevant issue is not the balance between individualism and collectivity. It is the question of how to treat the fact of pluralism. The defining emphasis in Shklar’s liberalism is on the potential for conflict arising from different people’s exercise of freedom. It is an emphasis that marks both a practical and a normative acknowledgment of the irreducibly pluralistic character of human life—and an acknowledgment that people are as prone to vice as they are to virtue. It is an acknowledgment that anarchist thought struggles to concede.

In Shklar’s hands, liberalism appears as a much more distrustful and gloomy style of thought than anarchism, which tends to match a paranoid cynicism toward the state with a romantic optimism toward the capacity of people to get along peaceably under the right conditions. Shklar’s liberalism eschews the search for rationalistic consensus. It is shaped by a concern for giving weight to “ordinary vices,” those misanthropic dispositions to hypocrisy, betrayal, and snobbery that are a basic quality of human sociability.\(^6\) Above all, Shklar places the evil of cruelty at the center of her vision, because for her the always-present possibility of cruelty generates fear—and systematic fear makes the exercise of freedom impossible.\(^6\) Shklar therefore makes questions of tyranny and domination central to her vision of liberalism. Hers is an avowedly affective image of liberal politics: “For this liberal the basic units of political life are not discursive and reflecting persons, nor friends and enemies, nor patriotic soldier-citizens, nor energetic litigants, but the weak and the powerful.” Given this understanding of the difference between the weak and powerful, for Shklar the freedom that liberalism must seek to secure “is freedom from the abuse of power and intimidation of the defenceless that this difference invites.”\(^6\) In short, the animating concern of Shklar’s liberalism lies not with being compelled to act against one’s better inclinations. It is a rather more substantive worry about being physically or mentally harmed.

Shklar’s emphasis on the relations between the weak and the powerful expresses a specific commitment associated with the idea of the liberalism of fear. This approach does not presume that the task of political thought is to urge a
particular course of action on someone in a position of power. It is, rather, a view that places at the center of analysis what Bernard Williams once referred to as an “awareness of politics.” By this he means an appreciation of the fact that questions about the limits of state power matter most to those who are not empowered at all. But we should be clear about just what this sort of awareness requires of critical theory. Whereas anarchism holds out the possibility of a unifying form of sociability that overcomes division by ascribing unlikely virtues to all participants in joint ventures, for Shklar the value of liberalism lies precisely in the affirmation of a division between public and private spheres. Freedom, she holds, depends on the drawing and redrawing of this line, irrespective of where exactly it is drawn. The affirmation of division is the defining feature of this kind of fearful liberalism, one that presumes that the state can be both dangerous and protective. In its emphasis on cruelty and other ordinary vices, Shklar’s vision makes a concern for victimhood quite central to political theory while also warning against either the identification with or the idealization of victims of injustice.

I have invoked Shklar’s distinctive version of liberal thought in order to draw out a contrast between different ways of thinking about the vulnerabilities to power associated with democratic politics. The contrast allows us to see that one of the chronic problems with anarchism is what one might call its misplaced optimism. It is not that anarchism is too optimistic or that liberalism necessarily embodies a pessimistic view of human togetherness. It is, rather, that the distribution of optimism and pessimism is poorly drawn in anarchist thought. Graeber’s anarchism shows no sign of acknowledging the positive qualities of institutionalized legitimate authority (Scott’s does so, if somewhat grudgingly) nor much appreciation of the irreducible pluralism that might limit the application of consensus processes. Shklar’s account of the liberalism of fear, by contrast, brings into view a more complex sense of democratic politics as a response to certain forms of harm associated with the exercise of power, a response which harbors certain potentials for harm of its own.

The contrast I am interested in here is best captured by John Dunn, who applies the vocabulary of horizontality and verticality that comes so easily to political thought to differentiate two attitudes about the potential sources of harm to which people are exposed. He suggests that democracy is associated with a feeling that the harms that potentially follow from people acting without any mediation by legitimate authority might be “far more dangerous than vertical subjection to such authority.” It is here, he suggests, that the fundamental difference between anarchism and democracy arises: “Anarchists, for whatever reason, prioritize vertical over horizontal hazards. Democrats, however nervously, prioritize horizontal over vertical hazards.” Dunn’s contrast might be a little too starkly drawn. But it does capture something important about the difference between the idea of anarchism and the idea of democracy, and it makes clear the reason for not collapsing the latter into the former.
Dunn’s contrast between democracy and anarchism in terms of their respective understandings of the sources of harm to which people are most exposed is associated with his strong affirmation that politics is “inherently concerned with rule.” In a reference to classical thought of his own, he invokes the authority of Aristotle, for whom rule is “compelling large numbers of human beings more or less systematically to act as they would not otherwise be inclined, whether or not to their own net advantage.” For Dunn, democracy “is one (very broadly defined) form of being ruled: in the modern world, one broadly defined form of state. It is not, and cannot be, an alternative to being ruled.” The emphasis here not just on rule but also on being ruled might well jar a little, upsetting any libertarian sensibilities we might all harbor. But rule is not in and of itself an affront to democratic sensibilities. The fascination, from Aristotle to Robert Dahl, with the idea that the type of equality required by democratic ideals is best achieved by allocating offices by lottery is one indication that the more relevant issue is determining how rule is to be shared. The emotional appeal of the consensual vision presented by Graeber, or any discomfort provoked by Dunn’s account of being ruled, is generated by very different understandings of the conditions of human civility. It is a difference that Shklar’s discussion of ordinary vices and of the effects of fear on the exercise of democratic freedom brings into focus for us. Which of these views most appeals might well depend on one’s willingness to accept that demands for democratization arise from feelings of powerlessness that can have multiple sources.

The Powers of Democracy

I have dwelt on the contrasts between anarchist political thought and strands of fearful liberalism in order to specify the understanding of democratic politics that is central to this book. We have seen that a consideration of the meaning of democracy, of its value as both an ideal and a practice, requires a reckoning with questions of power. Recalling Dussel’s account of political power, the fundamental question facing any analysis of the meaning of democracy is how power is exercised, not whether it should be or not. But in saying this, of course, I am invoking a particular understanding of power. It is one that follows from Hannah Arendt’s rejection of the view that power is simply a “form of mitigated violence.” Likewise, for Michel Foucault, power relations are conceptually quite distinct from relations of violence. For both thinkers, insisting on the specificity of the concept of power follows from thinking of power as a concept of action, or, if you like, a medium for the cultivation of freedom. Both thinkers stand in a longer line of thought that conceptualizes power democratically, by reference to a norm of developmental freedom rather than the individualized maximization of utilities. Power and freedom should not be thought of as mutually exclusive at
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all. Power is understood as the ability to use and realize one’s capacities. Power, in this understanding, is not thought of as simply a synonym for domination. Rather, domination is thought of as standing at one end of a continuum of power relations and is defined as the most extreme restriction of freedom—which is understood as “the capacity to participate in shaping the limits that define what is socially possible.” Power is in turn viewed as a type of relation “that is connected to the abilities of agents to bring about significant affects, either by furthering their own interests or affecting the interests of others, positively or negatively.” This view of power certainly leaves open questions about the exact distribution of those abilities and about the interests served or affected by the exercise of power in different situations. It reorients critical attention to the asymmetrical interdependencies on which capacities to act freely rely. And this is precisely why it recommends itself as a frame for inquiring into democracy as a modality of power.

In order to further specify why it is important to think about democracy as a mode of exercising power in the sense defined above, I propose that we should take quite seriously Iris Marion Young’s suggestion that democracy is not just a form of rule but a mode of coercion. Young’s argument is a variation on the idea that democracy requires that people affected by a decision should have some say in how the issue at stake is formulated and acted on: “Democracies ideally are polities in which coercion is legitimated in some demonstrable way by processes in which those obliged to follow the coercive rules have had the opportunity to influence their formation.” The insistence on coercion here is an affirmation of an aspect of democracy that Graeber expels from his definition—the aspect of consenting to be bound by decisions with which one does not agree. If one thinks of power as just a synonym for violence, then Young’s definition will appear almost perverse. But that is precisely the point of raising it here. It is common enough to affirm that power must now be understood as a positive as well as a negative mode of action. And, as already indicated, we would certainly do well to think of power as a plural concept referring to various relationships that range from domination to persuasion. But it is less common to acknowledge that different forms of power function through the enactment of different normative values. This latter idea is central to Young’s own account of democracy, an account that rests on her insistence that there is a difference between “the use of force by a powerful actor” and “the legitimate exercise of force.” As she continues, “Many doubt that there is such a distinction, but they cannot be democrats.” Acknowledging the distinction that Young makes helps to differentiate social theories that take democracy seriously as a problem from those that are happy to present it as merely an ideal.

Perhaps, then, the fundamental issue separating the two ways of conceptualizing power identified by Saar—an action-theoretic approach and a constitutive approach—turns on whether one thinks that the appeal to the idea of legitimacy made by Young can be maintained without lapsing into bad faith. The idea that relations of coercion could ever be rendered legitimate through some procedure
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of consent is often thought to have been shown to be hopelessly naïve by adherents to an ontological view of constitutive power. The work of Foucault is often invoked to justify the rejection of any concern with thinking about power in relation to issues of consent or legitimacy, on the grounds that he demonstrated how power relations always already construct any putative freedom of subjects. But this dis-obliging interpretation of the genealogy of modern freedom is not necessarily quite so inimical to questions of democratic legitimacy as is often supposed.

The idea that free subjects are formed in and through relations of power has a specific inflection in Foucault’s work. By presenting relationships of power in terms of “a set of actions upon other actions,” Foucault opens up a broad understanding of the process of governing as the effort to structure “the possible field of actions of others.” In terms of Saar’s distinction discussed above, Foucault’s distinctively governmental sense of power combines elements of an action-theoretic emphasis on the mobilization of competing wills as well as an emphasis on the constitutive relations from which the capacities to act are derived: “Power is relations. Power is not a thing. It is a relationship between two individuals, and a relationship that allows one individual to conduct the conduct of another or to determine the conduct of another—to determine their conduct voluntarily according to a number of objectives that are his own. In other words, when one examines what power is, one sees that it is the exercise of something one could call government, in the broadest sense of the term.” In this definition, Foucault provides a view of power as something that can be exercised only insofar as subjects are free, free in the sense of acting within a field of possible ways of behaving or performing. Such a view suggests in turn that democracy might be best thought of as possible only in situations where such governmental power relations exist in the first place: “Broadly speaking, democracy, if we view it as a political form, can only exist to the extent that there are, at the level of individuals, families, and everyday life, if you will, governmental relations—a certain type of relations of power that are produced. That is why democracy cannot take place just anywhere.”

Foucault here describes power and democracy as dependent on one another rather than as mutually exclusive. Power relations are presented as the very condition for the emergence of democratic problems.

Rather than thinking of Foucault as an example of a theorist of constitutive power who demonstrates the naïveté of appeals to legitimacy, the emphasis on both constitutive relations and strategic action in his view of power allows us to better specify how legitimacy matters to democratic politics. Foucault helps us navigate a path between a hopelessly grim view of the world that can easily follow from the idea that power relations are constitutive of any and all claims to legitimacy and an overly rosy view that follows from the idea that power relations can be legitimated through contractual agreement. Whether or not they are well founded in philosophical terms, claims to legitimacy play a dynamic causal role in democratic politics, insofar as it is as a form of politics that depends on strategic
moves that seek to mobilize and shape power relations, that is, to influence the actions of free subjects.

I have drawn on Foucault’s ideas to emphasize that the view of power as a constitutive element of human affairs does not necessarily render the concern with questions of domination, emancipation, and legitimacy redundant. Democratic politics, after Foucault, can be seen as one distinctive way of configuring a field of situated practices that seek to shape actions and outcomes. But we also need to remember that the crucial emphasis of Saar’s elaboration of the two views of power is on the ways in which different understandings of power inform distinctive models of the vocation of critique. The issue in this chapter, after all, is not deciding on the correct concept of power but rather discerning a way of pursuing democratic inquiry in light of the “awareness of politics.” We therefore need to consider the status of critique a little further in order to better appreciate why the interpretation of the relationship between these two views of power has come to settle on understandings of democracy as a means of enhancing non-domination in human affairs.

The Justificatory Dilemmas of Critical Theory

Different ways of understanding the concept of power, we should recall, matter because they inform different understandings of the very meaning of critique. With this in mind, I will close this chapter by arguing that the fundamental schism that divides different approaches to radical democracy does not necessarily concern competing interpretations of key analytical concepts such as power. It concerns, rather, different understandings of the vocation and ethos of critical analysis.

To elaborate on this argument, I draw on Maeve Cooke’s account of different strategies for justifying visions of social transformation. She identifies four broad approaches, two of which she describes as “authoritarian” insofar as they presume that their own claims are immune from further justification or criticism. One of these is a purely conventionalist position, which argues that the possibility of change is regulated by the norms that define any given community. Another involves an appeal to transcendent authority of some sort, perhaps to religion or to a teleology of historical realization. Both of these perspectives arrive at foundational principles that discount the transformative potential of the reasoning practices of human agents.

In Cooke’s view, what distinguishes critical social theory from both conventionalist and transcendent views of critique is a commitment to “nonauthoritarian justification” and “affectively imbued, rational motivation.” She suggests that there are, however, two distinct traditions informed by these twin commitments: a “radically contextualist” (more or less poststructuralist) tradition and a “context-transcending” (more or less deliberative) tradition. Different types of appeals to
normative ideals characterize the two traditions. Radical contextualists appeal to “normative ideas implicit but not fully realized within a given sociocultural context.” Context-transcending theories appeal to “normative ideas that are at once immanent to the sociocultural context in question and transcend it.” It should also be said that these two traditions of critical thought depend on different spatial imaginaries. In the first, contexts are understood to be temporarily enclosed fields, which are subject to iterative disruptions by mobilizing excluded or marginalized elements. In the second, contexts are thought of as particular instantiations of potentially universalizable possibilities.

The differing justificatory styles identified by Cooke indicate a fundamental fault line separating different ways of theorizing transformative political agency. This fault line underlies debates between agonistic and deliberative approaches to democratic theory, and it helps to determine the different ways of conceptualizing power already discussed. The common feature in both the radically contextualist and the context-transcending approaches is the search for what Nancy Fraser calls a “foothold” in the world that can warrant the critical elaboration of the possibility of transformation. The two approaches are differentiated by their respective understandings of the type of foothold that is required. Finding common cause with subaltern struggles of the moment will do for some approaches, whereas other approaches require a stronger, more justifiable account of why some struggles might be considered more or less emancipatory than others. Both approaches are certainly concerned with providing some general account of the sources out of which subversive and transformative energies emerge. What a reconstruction of the normative commitments of communicative action is asked to do in Habermas’s work (and in more or less diluted form for other deliberative theorists), ontologies of lack, absence, the vitalism of life, antagonism, or heterogeneous assemblage (and sometimes even set theory) are asked to do for different versions of poststructuralist agonism and post-Marxist political thought. These ontological narratives are invoked in order to serve as reasons for believing that current wrongs can and might be challenged, transformed, and overcome.

The significance of the justificatory differences between action-theoretic styles of critical theory and ontological styles of theory that Cooke identifies can be better appreciated by considering a distinction drawn by Axel Honneth. Honneth locates different strands of critical social theory within a historical narrative of the exhaustion of the productionist paradigm of revolutionary change inherited from classical Marxism. Within the terms of this tradition, as long as it could be assumed that the proletariat was the bearer of universal historical transformation, no further effort was required to define experiences and practices that would guarantee this transformation. In the wake of the passing of this paradigm, and of the philosophy of consciousness on which it depended, Honneth argues that two different paths have been taken in the search for new grounds for asserting the possibility of transformative political agency.
In the first route, in what Honneth calls “normatively charged” accounts of the human psyche, drives, or the vitalism of bodies, transformative agency is relocated to deeper ontological levels of one sort or another. In this ontological trajectory, the idea of agency itself is theoretically transformed. It is now understood as an immanent presence in the world, which requires no further elaboration by agents. This trajectory cleaves most closely to the constitutive conception of power identified by Saar and follows the radically contextualist route of justification discussed by Cooke. It is often associated with a narrative that still seeks to honor Marx’s predictive insights by assuming that capitalism actually has succeeded in fully realizing the real subsumption of the whole of life to capital through the generalization of the commodity form. So it is that capitalism is presented as a desiring machine or as a system for the production of subjects.89

In a second trajectory beyond the confines of the productionist paradigm, emancipatory and transformative potentials are located away from an exclusive focus on a single form of action, that of labor, in order to encompass a wider variety of forms of action. The main reference point here is Habermas’s reconstruction of critical theory around an action-theoretic model of communicatively mediated interaction. But this trajectory is also followed by a broader strand of contemporary social thought concerned with understanding the plural rationalities of action.90

The distinction that Honneth draws between the trajectories taken by ontological and action-theoretic styles of social thought helps to clarify the issue separating agonistic theories of the political from more deliberative styles of political theory. The issue at stake is not really a contrast between theories that privilege conflict and contestation and those that privilege consensus and agreement. I would suggest that the more fundamental issue is how the different strands of thought approach the problem of normativity. There are two aspects to this issue.

First, there is a fundamental difference between these approaches over the question of whether the critical dimensions of social thought do indeed require some sort of normative justification. Thinkers working in a vein of critical theory derived from the Frankfurt School tend to think that they do, although they differ on what form and what strength this normative justification can and should take. Poststructuralist theories and ontological accounts of the political tend to presume either that this sort of normative justification is not necessary or that it is not a task to which theoretical reason is equal.

Second, the two approaches to critique differ over how they understand the force of norms to actually operate in practice. In one strand of thought, the social is understood to exist on a single plane of immanence, so that the normative dimensions of social life appear to be of little concern, or they are reduced to the self-realizing force of normalization. Either way, no room can be found for the ordinary give-and-take of reasons in helping to move social life along. The animating force of transformative politics is found in dynamic ontologies of im-
manence. Such a view finds its apotheosis in the analysis of “bodies in space” and the dynamic potential of “collective affects.”

By contrast, in the action-theoretic strand of thought the determinative role of normative practices of justification in coordinating social life is given much more credence, whether in relatively weak explanatory ways or in more strongly foundational ways. “Normative” is often thought of as a dirty word, wrapped with intimations of prescription and treated as a synonym for power, a name for all those subtle impositions on us that deserve to be criticized and resisted. But living beings are not indifferent to the conditions of their lives, and in that simple sense life is a normative activity. Life is unavoidably “fraught with ought.” The dimension of “oughtness” that characterizes any number of actions, practices, and processes is certainly not exhausted by considerations of rationality, justification, and validity. It extends to all sorts of ordinary aspects of fitness, appropriateness, value, and health, as well as the antonyms of each of these and other normative terms. So we might simply think of normativity as referring to “the whole range of phenomena for which it is appropriate to apply normative concepts, such as correct or incorrect, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, and the like.” Understanding norms as “implicit properties of practice,” rather than as rules standing above practices or behind action, suggests that ethical and moral concepts neither exhaust the normative realm, nor do they necessarily best represent what is at stake in normativity. Thinking of norms of action as ordinary features of life and practice shifts the meaning of normativity away from the strongly “antinormative” interpretation that has become almost second nature in some strands of contemporary cultural theory.

If we approach traditions of critique in terms of their different attitudes toward issues of normative justification, then it becomes clear that a fundamental problem for any critical practice of theorizing about democracy is the challenge of theorizing democratically. It is a grand-sounding challenge, I realize, but all I mean by raising it is to foreground the need to squarely address the “justificatory dilemma” that various traditions of self-consciously critical social theory all share. The dilemma derives from the fact that any claim of criticality depends for its force on demonstrating the possibility of transforming people’s practices, norms, and commitments, not just as a factual possibility but also as a normatively preferable possibility. As Cooke observes, the challenge for critical theorists, then, is to justify both the plausibility and the validity of their alternative visions in a nonauthoritarian register: “On the one hand, they must endeavour to proceed in a nonauthoritarian manner by taking account of the historicity of knowledge and validity claims, recognizing the subjectivity and partiality of ethical judgements, and acknowledging the possibility that claims to context-transcending validity are perhaps yet one more means of exercising repressive social power. On the other hand, they must seek to uphold ideas of the good society that raise claims to validity that are not reducible to the contingent preferences of the inhabitants.
of historically specific, sociocultural contexts.” The first of Cooke’s points here is a warning aimed at post-Habermasian styles of critical theory. The second, more pertinent, point is a warning about the imaginative limitations of radically contextualist, poststructuralist, and ontological styles of critical thought.

Of course, at least one side in the disputes under consideration here might not accept the pertinence of Cooke’s presentation of the “justificatory dilemma” facing critical theory in the first place. It is, after all, a problem that arises most explicitly from within the self-understanding of the action-theoretic tradition associated with Habermas and others. It reflects, in turn, a commitment to an ethos of reason-giving in preference to the ethos of defamiliarization that shapes strongly ontological styles of thought. Nevertheless, the recurring concern with democracy that defines post-Marxist strands of theory associated with figures as diverse as Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière, Etienne Balibar and Judith Butler, and Alain Badiou and Chantal Mouffe does suggest that the challenge of theorizing democratically about political change resonates more widely. I will pursue this suggestion further in part 2.

**Intimations of the Ordinary**

I started this chapter by considering how the meaning of democracy is inevitably related to disputes about how best to understand the meaning of words and concepts. Different approaches to this issue proceed from different models of the authority of interpretation. We saw that different accounts of the meaning of democracy are intimately related to specific concepts of power, and these differences in turn inform different attitudes toward the status of rule in democratic politics. By focusing on the vulnerabilities to which people are potentially exposed by the concerted exercise of power, I suggested that democracy could be understood as a response to certain forms of harm associated with horizontal relationships between people and the potential forms of harm associated with the vertical exercise of power. From this perspective, practices of rule appear not simply as examples of more or less forcible compulsion. Rule is also revealed to depend on certain forms of active cooperation and to enact the pursuit of positive conditions of public life.

One conclusion that emerges from my discussion of disputed understandings of democracy and different notions of power is that the meaning of political concepts in part depends on a prior determination of “the meaning of meaning.” And we might suppose that some theories of meaning are more democratic than others. There is an elective affinity between the search for deep ontological sources of political energy and the etymological gesture discussed at the start of this chapter. Both reflect a strong commitment to the view that critical understanding requires us to keep our distance from ordinary senses of democracy, politics, or power. This commitment to critical distancing, however, only compounds the already
difficult task of navigating the justificatory difficulty of both finding a foothold for critique and convincingly showing why others might trust enough to take a first step onto it. The challenge of demonstrating both the plausibility and the validity of radical democracy requires us, I think, to give more, not less, credence to ordinary understandings of the dynamics of life.

One place to start the task of developing an approach to democratic inquiry that is attentive to the ordinary is with Roland Barthes. Barthes found in Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of the sign an implicit vision of democracy, one that crystalizes the difference between theorizing democracy by reference to originary meanings and theorizing democracy ordinarily.99 The core concept of Saussure’s Copernican revolution in linguistics—the idea of the arbitrariness of the meaning of signs—endures and resonates across innumerable fields of critical social analysis.100 Saussure’s idea expresses a distinctive form of democratic imagination. His view of meaning turns on an opposition between conservatism and transformation. It affirms, on the one hand, that meaning has no natural, motivated basis but is instead an effect of social conventions. This is an argument against the authority of tradition. On the other hand, the conventions that Saussure exposes as arbitrary do reflect an odd kind of agreement, since they rely on the coercive force of community norms. Precisely because meaning is a social fact, no individual is empowered to change the meaning of this or that sound or word on a whim.

Saussure’s view would lead us to an emphatic rejection of the search for the original meanings of words or concepts. He is deeply hostile to the idea that etymology throws proper light on how meaning ordinarily works. Etymology is essentially conservative, harking back to and remembering old meanings. Analogy, which Saussure holds to be quite central to “the normal functioning of language,” is by contrast characterized by the forgetting of older forms, a forgetting necessary for the emergence of new meanings.101 Saussure’s preference for analogy over etymology, for synchronic imitation over diachronic derivation, is an expression of the political unconscious of his account of meaning. After Saussure, according to Barthes, “the space of the word is no longer that of an ancestry or a descent, it is that of a collaterality: the elements of language—its individuals—are no longer sons, but fellow citizens: language, in its very becoming, is no longer a lordship but a democracy: the rights and duties of words (which actually form their meaning) are limited by coexistence, the cohabitation of equal individuals.”102 If Saussure teaches us that tracking the derivation of words is not necessarily the best approach to apprehending the ordinary significance of concepts, then Barthes’s reading of Saussure as a theorist of democracy helps us see why this quest is doubly flawed as a way of grasping the meaning of political ideas.103 At its heart the quest for original meanings represents a turning away from the fields of conflict in which disputes over the meaning of concepts such as democracy actually take on their full significance.
The sense of attending to the situations in which issues of meaning actually arise is also, of course, the animating concern behind Ludwig Wittgenstein’s assertion that for “a large class of cases—though not for all—the meaning of a word is its use in language.”104 The idea that meaning is use can be thought of as a democratic idea, too, at least in the sense that it would appear to grant at least some provisional validity to popular understandings of the meanings of words. Wittgenstein’s most fundamental legacy is the idea “that we cannot purify our concepts of their embeddedness in human life and of their expression in natural languages without being left with only a shadow play of the grammar of serious judgment.”105 It follows that attempts to grasp the meaning of a concept like democracy need to attend to the forms of life in which the question of whether a situation is democratic really matters. This understanding of meaning would seem to lead us toward more than an analysis of the variable senses of the word “democracy” over time and space.106 More precisely than that, it should lead to an analysis that attends closely to the practices associated with such usage in different contexts.107

If we follow the train of thought that connects Barthes to Wittgenstein, we can see the prevalence of the etymological gesture in theoretical accounts of democracy in a new light. It now appears as just one example of how the concept of democracy is used in practice. The claim that democracy has a proper meaning is closely related to the recurring tendency to condemn existing manifestations of democracy as illusory.108 The argument that democratic arrangements are sham manifestations of a more authentic form is a long-standing feature of modern political thought on both the Left and the Right. Yet it is also a feature of routine political contention. Disappointment and discontent are ordinary features of political life, and in contexts where the registers and practices of democracy are at stake, they tend to be expressed with reference to the benchmark of the authentic will of the people. This reference to real democracy is the horizon of justification against which claims about the degree to which democracy is being eroded, honored, or circumvented appear as an ordinary aspect of democratic politics.109

There is, then, a certain sort of perfectionism built into the concept of democracy. It is in theory and in practice an unavoidably normative concept, a concept that combines values including autonomy, equality, freedom, justice, liberty, solidarity, all of which have close associations with the ideas of authenticity, legitimacy, and validity. Ideas like authenticity, legitimacy, and validity are, of course, looked on with considerable suspicion by some traditions of contemporary social thought. But those skeptical traditions are faced with the conundrum of trying to square the observable importance of such values to actual democratic political contestation with their own theoretical commitments that disallow any affirmation of those ideas. However, we should not misconstrue the dilemmas of “truthfulness” associated with democratic political life for epistemological problems of
Contests around the authenticity, legitimacy, or validity of practices that claim to enact autonomy, equality, or justice are not matters of epistemological truth at all, whether to be affirmed or deconstructed. They are best thought of as indices of recurring predicaments associated with different modes of power, that is, of different modes of living in concert with others. Understood in this way, contested understandings of the meaning of democracy require us to explore a little further the sort of reasoning that should orient critical inquiry into democratic politics.