Democracy can exist as thought and can be thought again, because it happened. Yet each time it occurs, the idea expands. Democracy changes its meaning, means more, as the actions of specific collectives bring it to life in a particular form, different, yet every time recognizable as itself.

—Susan Buck-Morss

In this chapter I want to elaborate further on why thinking about democracy in an ordinary way, as suggested at the end of the previous chapter, should lead us away from supposing that there is a particular form of politics that is properly political, as if grasping this form would allow lesser forms to be characterized as postpolitical. In particular, I want to consider how best to understand the problem of deriving “context-transcending” principles from the specific situations in which the meanings of democratic politics are articulated. I take it for granted that this possibility can no longer be premised on the image of an empirically uneven, historically disjointed, but finally progressive realization of immanent universal norms. Now, this affirmation might immediately plunge us into a series of debates in which the loss of the sure footing once apparently provided by universal principles is set against the specter of relativism. It is often asserted that surely we need some agreed upon principles in order to proceed with the tasks of critical judgment. I argue here that thinking about the mobility of criteria across contexts does not require us to come up with universal principles at all. To think that it does is to misunderstand what criteria do and how they work. The apparent problem of using concepts that lay claim to a certain sort of universal validity but that are instantiated only in particular contexts can easily ensnare us in a particular picture of what thinking with normative concepts involves. We need to get away from the idea that the critical task is one of coming up with general criteria for evaluation that are applicable across contexts and begin to think differently about how criteria actually work in the world.

Critical inquiry into democratic politics does not require an appeal to an ideal
theory that allows evaluations to be supported in advance by agreed upon principles. To think that it does is to mistake what reasoned critique involves. My starting assumption here is that thinking critically requires the capacity to discriminate or, if you prefer, to exercise judgment. Judgment is often thought to be a matter of subsuming particular phenomena within frameworks of evaluation. But it also refers to the activity of separating, sifting, and making distinctions. Prevalent paradigms of radical social theory are not very good at making distinctions, because they tend to subsume very different phenomena under some general category: governmentality, the state of exception, accumulation by dispossession, or neoliberalization. As already suggested, there is a default model of critique in which the primary task is assumed to be exposure and denaturalization, in a kind of politicized version of the high modernist trick of “laying bare the device.” The approach I develop in this chapter starts from the proposition that concepts such as democracy do not have sharp edges and clear boundaries. This does not mean that they are necessarily vague or indeterminate. It does mean that the significance of democracy as an idea is not finally to be found in excavating the history of the idea of democracy. Its significance lies in its use, as already suggested, but more than this, I argue that it depends on its propensity to be used in new situations, to be projected into new contexts in the course of contentious debate about political futures. Thinking ordinarily about the concept of democracy is, according to the view I outline in this chapter, a necessary condition for any geographically sensitive form of democratic inquiry.

In this chapter I argue that the use of criteria depends on an appreciation of the nuances that allow the exemplary qualities of one situation to be applied to a new one. My argument ranges from Hannah Arendt’s political theory, through philosophical debates about exemplarity, essentially contested concepts, and the ordinary, and on to recent attempts to bring an ethnographic sensibility to the task of theorizing about democracy. It recognizes that evaluation is an ordinary dimension of the way in which the world unfolds. In this understanding, the core problem when it comes to theorizing critically about democratic politics is less a matter of whose standards should apply in any particular case and more a question of how to think about the practice of judging.

Thinking in Examples

The temptation to think that the standards of evaluation derived from one time, place, or situation should be applied everywhere is derived from a particular model of judging. It is much the same model that underwrites the worry that not being able to apply universally applicable norms threatens to plunge us into the depths of relativism. In both cases, the model proposes that judging is a matter of applying a preconceived standard to a particular case, thereby subsuming that
Arendt is concerned with developing an account of critical practice that is equal to “the predicament of judging without being able to fall back upon the application of generally accepted rules.” She distinguishes between two sorts of judgment. The first involves “organizing and subsuming the individual and particular under the general and universal.” The second sort of judgment arises when one is confronted with something never encountered before and for which there are therefore no standards. For Arendt, the lack of standards does not render judgment impossible. To presume that it does is to “tacitly assume that human beings can be expected to render judgments only if they possess standards, that the faculty of judgment is thus nothing more than the ability to assign individual cases to their correct and proper places within the general principles which are applicable to them and about which everyone is in agreement.” In Arendt’s view, the assumption that judgment cannot proceed without prior agreed upon standards negates the value of the idea of judgment itself: “The loss of standards, which does indeed define the modern world in its facticity and cannot be reversed by any sort of return to the good old days or by some arbitrary promulgation of new standards and values, is therefore a catastrophe in the moral world only if one assumes that people are incapable of judging things per se, that their faculty of judgment is inadequate for making original judgments, and that the most we can demand of it is the correct application of familiar rules derived from already established standards.” For Arendt, judging arises as a task only when clear standards are absent. One would think of this as an argument that threatens to plunge us toward the abyss of subjectivist relativism only if one clings to the individualistic presuppositions of the model of applying preexisting standards. In Arendt’s account, the capacity for making original judgments is the very source of political life, which she understands as the art of living in common with others.

Arendt considers the faculty of judgment to be “the most political of man’s mental abilities.” By this she is referring to “the faculty that judges particulars without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules.” We see in this statement a clear sense that judging is an exemplary form of action, in Arendt’s understanding of that concept. Action, for Arendt, inheres in the capacity for beginning, where this means initiating something that “cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.” And in turn, this capacity “to make room for one’s own action” depends on the faculty of imagination. In making this claim, Arendt suggests that Immanuel Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment
harbors an implicit political philosophy. For Arendt, Kant's account of aesthetic judgment is relevant to political life not because she finds in it an image of political subjectivity modeled on the personal capacity to appreciate the experience of the sublime. In this respect, her interpretation of Kant differs from those provided by writers such as Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Rancière. In Arendt's interpretation, imagination is the faculty through which “enlarged thought” is cultivated, the means by which judging takes place against a horizon of “intercourse” with others.

Arendt contrasts what Kant calls determinative judgment, which involves placing a particular case under a rule, as if from above, with aesthetic judgment (or reflective judgment), which works from the bottom up by seeking the appropriate universal for a singular experience. Imagination is, crucially, exercised in close relationship to particulars. It works not through abstraction but through reflective representation, that is, through “the ability to make present what is absent,” an ability that transforms objects of the senses into objects that arouse pleasure or displeasure. In this type of judgment, according to Arendt, particulars are not thought of as expressions of general rules or essences but rather are taken as examples.

By splicing together her interpretation of imagination, understood as the faculty that “makes room for action,” with the idea of judging through the appreciation of examples, Arendt is not merely seeking to criticize the false universalism inherent in the idea that judging is a matter of detached evaluation. Her concern is to affirm that judgment is intimately tied up with questions of acting together in the world. For Arendt, judging is a crucial activity “in which sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass.” Judgment involves enlarging one's thinking with reference to others “in whose place” one thinks, the task of what she calls “representative thinking.” It is in this sense that Arendt thinks of judgment as a political activity, insofar as it involves “the ability to see things not from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present.” Political thought, for Arendt, depends on representative thinking in this dual sense of imagination as “enlarged mentality” allied to the exercise of judgment. In both respects, the strong emphasis is on forms of action that depend on and reconstitute shared worlds.

Arendt's understanding of judging, imagination, and representative thinking moves the discussion of the application of political concepts beyond the contrast between universally valid criteria and particularistic contexts. It allows us to recast the relevant contrast as one between two ways of thinking about universalizability. One of these involves subsuming particulars under a general law, rule, or principle. This is universality as impartiality. The other way of thinking about universality involves what Arendt calls “exemplary validity.” It does not involve grasping the essence of phenomena in order to wield this knowledge as an evaluative measure. It requires a degree of sensitivity toward what matters in the situation
under consideration and to how aspects of other situations might resonate with it. The logic of exemplarity is therefore central to political judgment for Arendt. And what she calls “thinking in examples” is above all a matter of choosing the company one wants to keep by relating to others through sharing judgments. Rather than proposing a model of universal validity, Arendt therefore presents us with a picture of judgment as a matter of making “claims to validity,” a practice that “can never extend further than the others in whose place the judging person has put himself for his considerations.” It stands, in short, for an understanding of universality as a striving toward inclusion.

Arendt’s philosophy of action allows us to see that the problem of judgment is important in democratic theory not because we are worried about the loss of common standards. This is to get things the wrong way around. It is important because judgment is central to the sustenance of a common world. Arendt’s concern is not with being able to exercise judgment authoritatively or prescriptively. Her concern is with thinking about judgment as a practice of living in the company of others.

My aim in this chapter is to make the problem of applying concepts developed in one context to new or different situations central to the task of theorizing democracy geographically. Arendt’s account of judgment and thinking in examples provides a first step toward doing so. To further clarify the significance of her understanding of judgment, it is helpful to consider Linda Zerilli’s feminist theory of democratic judgment, which is developed in close conversation with Arendt’s work. Whereas Arendt was concerned with the problem of the historical loss of standards in the wake of the calamities of mid-twentieth-century genocide, warfare, and totalitarianism, Zerilli picks up the theme of “natality” in Arendt’s theory of action, understood as a beginning or initiation. In so doing, she more explicitly shifts the discussion of the problem of judgment toward the issue of engaging with new, novel, and unpredictable situations.

Zerilli observes that discussions of judgment are often wrapped up in accounts of how to understand the values of different cultures or different identities. There is, in fact, a close association between the model in which judgment is seen as a matter of subsuming particulars under universal concepts that are already agreed upon and the idea that one cannot comprehend or should not even presume to judge what is foreign or unfamiliar to one’s own experience. The standard worry about relativism is associated, Zerilli suggests, with a worry that arises from mistaking the challenges of making judgments in first-order contexts of practical action for the ability to provide philosophically foolproof principles for such judgments in any context: “The real problem of judgment in the context of widespread value pluralism is not relativism, the inability to judge cultures and practices not our own, but the failure to take genuine account of the strangeness of what we are judging.” As with Arendt, Zerilli suggests that the idea that we are trapped within our own cultures bleeds too easily into a disavowal of the capacity of judging altogether.
Arendt’s account of judgment and Zerilli’s elaboration of this understanding in relation to issues of cultural pluralism help us to see that the recurrent problems associated with identifying “context-transcendent” principles of critique arise from a particular picture of judging. It is a picture in which the idea of judgment as the rule-governed application of agreed upon standards leads either to interminable worries about relativism or to the disavowal of judging in the face of various scruples about giving offense. This picture assumes that belonging to a particular culture or being located in a particular context is to find oneself enclosed within a tightly bounded conceptual schema of some sort.20

Moving beyond the contrast between purely idiosyncratic prejudice and a cognitive model of grasping and applying general criteria requires us to change our picture of the “logical geography” of critical reasoning. Echoing Arendt, Zerilli argues that judgment should be thought of as inherently political, not in the sense that it is necessarily about explicitly political topics or in the sense that it involves expressing one’s own opinions, but in the sense that it involves addressing oneself to others. Rather than thinking of judgment as a practice in which a subject forecloses on engagement with others by presuming to know with certainty, judgment is better thought of as a moment in community making that revolves around making claims that invite contradiction, counterarguments, and disagreement. Zerilli proposes that thinking of judgment in this way, as a mode of agonistic sociability, requires us to think of the use of criteria as “fundamentally anticipatory rather than antecedent (justificatory) in structure.”21 In switching temporal registers in this way, Zerilli also refashions the image of the space across which the application of criteria is projected. Judgments are now thought of as claims addressed to others in anticipation of some sort of response, without either knowing in advance the form of such a response or being able to compel assent. Judgment is thereby reconfigured as a performative act of opening and sustaining social interaction, of affirming a shared world, rather than as a means of securing oneself against skepticism toward both the world and one’s relations with those who share it.22 We need now to consider further how this account of judgment can help us to better appreciate that democracy is a distinctive type of concept.

Democracy without Precedent

Arendt’s account of action as the capacity to initiate something new has certain resemblances with themes in the thought of Jacques Derrida. For him, too, the possibility of acts such as forgiveness, responsibility, and hospitality depends on a kind of structural dehiscence that allows departures from what is given. The political significance of the similarities between themes in Arendt and Derrida is usually found in their shared interest in the paradoxes of foundation, acts of constitution, and ideas of popular sovereignty.23 But Arendt’s idea of reflective
judgment as a matter of “thinking in examples” is also resonant with the structure of exemplarity in philosophical reasoning that Derrida diagnoses across his writings.24 The theme of exemplarity recurs across Derrida’s engagement with various topics, including the legacies of Eurocentric models of universalism; the exceptionalism of claims of truth and democracy in the Greek and Roman tradition; concepts of justice and revolution in communism and Marxist thought; claims about the end of history and the telos of liberal democracy; philosophical accounts of violence and sovereignty, fraternity, and nationalism; post-9/11 terrorism; the meaning of democracy in Islam; and the politics of immigration in France. Exemplarity is, in short, a theme directly related to the political inflection of Derrida’s work from the mid-1980s, extending arguments evident in earlier phases of the career of deconstruction. It a theme that works over a more “classical” deconstructive motif of the necessity for contextualization and the final inadequacy of any context in determining the meaning of an action, a concept, or a text.25

As with other themes in Derrida’s work, exemplarity has a double logic. Examples are sometimes thought of as mere repetition, as one case in a series, or as just an instance of something more general. But examples also serve as exemplars—as norms or teleological models or as expressions of the universal. Derrida argues that any assertion or demonstration of the value of universality is linked to this double logic of exemplarity, whereby examples threaten to undermine the very value they are invoked to sustain. On the face of it, an example plays a merely illustrative function in the presentation of universal concepts, but this supplementary function turns out to be necessary and irreducible to the force of universal concepts. Concrete, specific examples, articulated in a particular idiom or place, make the thought of the universal possible, but as such they make the full purity of universality strictly impossible. Examples bring to mind the universal but stand in its place, deferring and displacing universality at its core.

The political relevance of this characteristic deconstructive trope is most evident in Derrida’s account of “Democracy-to-Come.” This idea names the inadequacy of any instance of democracy to its pure form. What Derrida refers to as the “essential historicity of democracy” implies an interminable analysis and self-criticism.26 Derrida links the idea of democracy to the structure of “an infinite promise” on the one hand and on the other to “the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise.”27 In this sort of formulation, it can easily seem as if Derrida is proposing a criticism of the actuality of democracy by comparison with an ideal model. Democracy, he argues, is “the only word for a political regime that, because it carries conceptually the dimension of inadequation and the to-come, declares both its historicity and its perfectibility.”28 But this also makes it sound a little too much like we already know what democracy’s perfect form might look like. It is here that the importance of the “to-come” in Derrida’s formula lies. It refers us to a stronger sense of openness of the future, to what will come as a surprise in the form of an event that
Democracy and Critique

has no model. The idea of democracy-to-come does not, then, refer to a horizon of anticipation or to the idea of “a future democracy in the future present,” nor to “a regulative idea” or a “utopia.” It refers to forms of democracy that have no exact precedent.

As with Arendt, what is at stake in Derrida’s account of democracy-to-come is not so much a model of critical evaluation. Rather, he is concerned with the very conditions of judgment. The sense of the “to-come” of what cannot be anticipated might suggest that democracy-to-come has entirely to do with deferral. Derrida, however, insists that it really implies an engaged response to urgent issues in which the absence or suspension of democracy is at stake: “This to-come prescribes pressing tasks and urgent negotiations, here and now.” In an iteration of a theme found elsewhere in Derrida’s work, democracy-to-come is not the name for a regulative ideal or a messianic hope. It is, rather, one attempt to exemplify the aporetic structure that ties what is given together with what can be initiated. In short, Derrida’s account of democracy-to-come can be read as one variant of the type of understanding of action also found in Arendt’s work.

Although elaborated in different registers by Arendt and Derrida, the practice of “thinking in examples” that both theorists recommend rests on a shared way of judging the relations between existing arrangements and new situations. And in both cases, judging as exemplary thinking emerges as the medium of political community. It should be said that for both Arendt and Derrida the form of action exemplified by exercising judgment remains a rather refined activity. I propose that this way of understanding the application of concepts in new contexts should be thought of in a much more ordinary way. To develop this proposition, I argue that the idea of “essentially contested concepts” can play a vital part in further developing the ordinary approach to thinking about the meaning of democracy introduced at the end of chapter 1. Although often thought of as a rather staid and consensual tradition of thought, the strand of ordinary language philosophy from which this idea emerges allows us to develop an account of the exemplary structure of applying criteria that is actually more resolutely agonistic than those presented by Arendt and Derrida.

First coined by Walter Gallie, the term “essentially contested concepts” has become central to a series of debates in political theory and the social sciences. The best known variation of the claim that political ideas are essentially contested is Steven Lukes’s argument that the concept of power is “ineradicably evaluative and ‘essentially contested.’” Lukes shows that various theories of power are available to us and that scholars disagree about which one is best. The disputes he focuses on are therefore over different concepts of power. But it is not clear that these types of disputes really amount to different interpretations of how a more or less agreed upon idea should be applied. This issue is at the heart of the original sense of essentially contested concepts.

If the idea of essentially contested concepts is not just about debates and dis-
agreements over concepts, then what it is about? Well, we might say that it is about the inherently fuzzy or blurred quality of concept use. For example, William Connolly's argument that the terms of political thought should be understood with reference to the idea of essentially contested concepts takes the form of a claim that any clear-cut distinction between concepts that are descriptive and concepts that are normative does not hold up. For Connolly, concepts like democracy, power, or freedom are inherently evaluative in the way they are used in everyday life, and this quality is the source of conflicts about their meaning and use. Connolly suggests that political theorists should cleave more closely to this dimension of ordinary usage rather than assume that their task is to tidy it away and establish precise but neutral terms.

Both Lukes and Connolly are attracted by the idea of essentially contested concepts because it throws light on the worldliness of political concepts, on the ways in which disputes about these concepts matter to people. This aspect of the idea of essentially contested concepts is important to hold on to, certainly. But we need to return to Gallie's elaboration of the idea to better appreciate why it can help us think about democracy in an ordinary way.

It is important to note that Gallie does not make an argument about concepts in general but is interested in a particular class of concepts whose precise use cannot be decided on by appeal to theoretical criteria on their own. Gallie suggests that for certain concepts in aesthetics, political philosophy, and theology "there is no one clearly definable general use of any of them which can be set up as the correct or standard use." Essentially contested concepts are not subject to final clarification precisely because their varied usage does not derive from ambiguity, confusion, or even disagreement. These are not just concepts over which people disagree, as in Lukes's account of theories of power, but ones where the disagreement reveals something essential about a certain class of concepts. Gallie's examples of such concepts are art, democracy, social justice, and religion. He identifies a series of characteristics that all these concepts share. Among other things, an essentially contested concept must be "appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement" and it "must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole." In turn, explanation of the worth of such a concept must include a "reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features."

We can see why democracy might be a good example of the type of concept Gallie was trying to pin down. It is an internally complex, multifaceted concept whose meaning and value are subject to intense dispute; it can be described with reference to different ideas, such as the power of the majority, equal citizenship, or active participation, and these constituent elements can be ordered and related in different ways. Furthermore, and this is crucial, democracy is a concept whose use is never merely descriptive. To describe a situation as democratic is to ascribe to it certain characteristics that are worthy of praise or are rationally
Democracy and Critique

justified. As Gallie observes, democracy is “the appraise political concept par excellence.”

Gallie’s discussion of essentially contested concepts is therefore concerned with situations in which deciding about the appropriate use of a concept is necessarily a matter of judgment in the same sense already discussed in this chapter. It is not an argument about the ambivalent meaning of concepts such as democracy. Although the idea of democracy has been denigrated for much of its history, it has for some time been a concept that is positively valued. It is now what we might call a “Hurrah” concept, as distinct from a “Boo-Hurrah” concept. Compromise, which carries both positive and negative connotations, is an example of the latter. The ability to compromise is sometimes thought of as a sign of commendable strength of character. At other times it is seen as a betrayal worthy of criticism and even shame. By contrast, having once been a bad thing, democracy is now generally thought of as a good idea. Herein lies a key aspect of its exemplary status as an essentially contested concept.

Internal complexity and appraisiveness, for Gallie, do not exhaust the characteristics that contribute to democracy’s exemplary status as an essentially contested concept. The internal complexity of the concept of democracy is related to a further aspect of essentially contested concepts: “The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance.” Democracy, it follows, can take on new meanings in changed circumstances. This aspect of an essentially contested concept is quite central to the re-ordering of our understanding of criteria of democratic inquiry.

Gallie’s argument also contains elements that restrict the usefulness of the idea of essentially contested concepts, not least the idea that contestation revolves around “the derivation of any such concept from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept.” The implication here is that the emergence of new meanings in changed circumstances necessarily has a teleological dynamic, whereby the original idea (e.g., of democracy or art) is ever more closely realized and more perfectly refined. But it is not necessary to follow Gallie in either the argument that essentially contested concepts refer to an original model or that the accretion of new meanings follows a teleological path of full realization. Democracy is the exemplary essentially contested concept because it is an inherently appraisive concept, one whose value depends on application to new contexts that existing meanings do not adequately cover.

The key lesson I take from Gallie’s original discussion of essentially contested concepts is that the meaning of democracy arises as a problem when the concept is applied to new circumstances. The abiding significance of Gallie’s account therefore lies in the connection he identifies between the variability and appraisiveness of concepts such as democracy or art and their status as concepts of application. Here I am following Thomas Wartenberg’s interpretation of Gallie’s
account as amounting to “a claim about how meanings of concepts evolve.” The idea of essentially contested concepts alerts us to a set of issues relating to “non-paradigmatic application,” that is, the difficult problem of extending the use of concepts in order to classify borderline cases. These issues are central to the task of thinking critically about democracy because they suggest that past uses of appraisive concepts cannot straightforwardly settle questions of whether and how to extend such concepts to new contexts. New contexts are likely to lack some of those features that have been previously taken to be defining for a given concept.

What is contested about essentially contested concepts, it is worth emphasizing, is not how to evaluate the concept itself. Concepts like democracy and art are generally thought of as positive things. What is contested is the range of application of such concepts and the composition and arrangement of their component parts. And we should think of contestability as a feature of worldly application. The reason to think of democracy as an essentially contested concept, then, is because doing so draws into view the degree to which its value is intimately related to the problem of evaluating whether and how the concept can be extended to non-paradigmatic cases. And this means that democracy cannot finally be reduced to a single, determinative theoretical meaning.

As I have argued, both Arendt and Derrida can help us understand the type of reasoning involved in addressing the iterability of democratic principles and practices across new contexts. They do so by replacing an image of judging as the application of universal standards with an image of exemplary reasoning, in which the initiation of action without certain foundations is presented as a means of convening with others. The same structure of reasoning is central to the treatment of democracy as an essentially contested concept, where the contestability at issue is not a function of a general account of the undecidability of meaning but rather a specific feature of inherently appraisive concepts. The idea of essentially contested concepts also provides a more ordinary understanding of the sorts of formulations of action and judgment found in the work of Arendt and Derrida. I will now elaborate further on the precise sense of the “ordinary” involved in this claim about the ordinary qualities of using democratic criteria in the absence of foundations.

Affirmations of Ordinary Life

Gallie’s account of essentially contested concepts is an elaboration of a strand of thought first developed by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein proposes that grasping the meaning of concepts does not involve being able to exhaustively define the full range of necessary and sufficient conditions of application or being able to identify essential features. Concepts do not have fixed and clear boundaries that are waiting to be properly mapped out. Wittgenstein suggests instead that meaning is better understood through analogy to recognizing “family resemblances”—it is a
matter of apprehending similarities and relationships across cases. Wittgenstein also compares the extension of a concept across a range of examples to the process of “spinning a thread by twisting fibre on fibre.” He suggests that “the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.” Wittgenstein therefore also invites us to think of applying a concept as a practice of judgment: it is both a practice, something done in relation to the continuing projects of life, and a matter of judgment, an action that is more than the automatic application of existing rules: “Our rules leave loop-holes open.”

Wittgenstein’s case for thinking of concepts in terms of family resemblance is linked to the commitment to bring reflection on meaning closer to the ordinary situations in which questions of meaning arise. As Veena Das puts it, “For Wittgenstein, concepts acquire life in the give-and-take of ordinary life.” This simple-sounding invocation of the ordinary helps guard against the idea that questions of meaning are best thought of as matters of mere convention. To suppose that they are would be to miss the ways in which meanings matter to participants in a situation: meanings matter in a way that is not experienced as arbitrary or conventional at all. In this section I connect the preceding account of judging as a form of exemplary reasoning to an account of what it means to approach democracy as an ordinary concept.

We might think of the idea of democracy as ordinary in two related senses. The first, and perhaps more straightforward, sense is indicated by John Dunn’s claim that “in its essence, democracy is the political acceptance of the ordinary.” Here the idea of ordinariness takes on its meaning in contrast to privilege or superiority. It is the same sense, for example, in which Raymond Williams once affirmed that “culture is ordinary.” We might accordingly locate the modern idea of democracy within a much broader movement dubbed by Charles Taylor as “the affirmation of ordinary life,” in which understandings of the good life are relocated away from ideals of higher pursuits accessible to a select few and located instead in the realm of life itself, in activities of labor, love, friendship, and community. In this move, questions of the good life are made accessible to the concerns, calculations, and competencies of everyone irrespective of their station in life.

A second sense of the ordinariness of democracy builds on the more sociological version but deepens its significance for how we think about the vocation of critical theory of a democracy. It involves thinking of democracy along the lines suggested by Stanley Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein, specifically Cavell’s account of how the meaning of concepts is extended to non-paradigmatic cases.

Cavell certainly has important things to say about democracy and political life. But I am more interested here with drawing out the significance of aspects of his general account of criteria for the type of reasoning required to inquire into the emergence of democratic politics in new situations. Cavell provides important resources for thinking about the normativity of concepts, not least by suggesting
that we should think of normativity not in terms of prescriptive rules but rather as a capacity to adjust to changed circumstances. Negotiating between a currently fashionable view of the nonconceptual attunement to practical environments while also avoiding the traps of highly intellectualist notions of conceptual intentionality, Cavell opens up for us an ordinary understanding of possessing concepts in terms of knowing how to "go on" in new situations. Cavell reconfigures our idea of what criteria are and how they work.

Two aspects of Cavell’s views on meaning are relevant to thinking of democracy as an ordinary concept. First, knowing the meaning of words is about knowing how to “go on” with them in new contexts. Second, and related to this, knowing how to “go on” does not depend on knowing criteria in an explicit way. Criteria are usually thought of as things that help us guard against the abyss of skeptical doubt, whether about the real world or other minds, or both. Cavell’s description of criteria revolves around a consideration of one of the central figures in philosophical debates about meaning addressed by Wittgenstein, the theme of learning the meaning of a new word by learning how and when to use it appropriately. Laying claim to the spirit of Wittgenstein’s thought, Cavell argues that “to know the meaning of a word, to have the concept titled by the word, is to be able to ‘go on’ with it in new contexts—ones we accept as correct for it: and you can do this without knowing, so to speak, the formula which determines the fresh occurrence, i.e., without being able to articulate the criteria in terms of which it is applied.”

Embellishing on Cavell, Veena Das suggests that knowing how to “go on” with a concept does not involve knowing what it means so much as appreciating the significance of those “dispersed forms of action” that account for what it means and why it matters to those who are using it.

The sort of claim that Cavell makes about the ability to “go on” without explicit criteria is often associated with a rather reassuring image in which people unconsciously know the meanings of a word because they belong to a shared community of values. But affirming the conventional qualities of meanings and actions does not necessarily require a consensual interpretation of implicitly agreed upon norms. It might just as well lead to a sense that meaning is inherently disputatious. However, even this view can easily lead to the idea that the task of critical theory is to expose the constructed qualities and the power relations that account for any shared frame of debate and disagreement over meanings. This view of meaning gets the idea of convention all wrong, setting up debates about how agreed upon meanings are secured through intuitive access to some sort of occluded background agreement and whether this is a mark of happy community or dark manipulation. The earlier discussion of essentially contested concepts and the “to-come” suggest that what we really need is an account that is focused on how meanings change by being applied to new cases. Cavell outlines just such an account in his vision of the ordinary experiences of being able to “go on” in new situations:
We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing ensures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism that Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.”

The claim here is that using words involves the projection of established meanings to new contexts, or what I previously called the application to new cases. As already noted, one might well read Cavell’s account as suggesting that this capacity for projection is secured not by hard and fast rules but by the conventions of shared culture. This is what Cavell’s reference to “forms of life” perhaps brings to mind. But the image of forms of life is not something to fall back on in order to explain the ways in which learning of concepts works. Cavell’s point is that nothing guarantees that projecting meanings into new contexts will come off successfully, neither grasping universal principles or an appeal to conventional meaning. It is the very possibility of community that Cavell is seeking to account for, in much the same way that Arendt is in her account of judgment as a form of consorting with others. Cavell’s reference to the presence of a like-minded community is therefore not meant to substitute a foundation of shared community norms for a foundation in rational rule following. There is nothing so reassuring about Cavell’s image. This vision of what makes it possible “on the whole” to carry on with shared projects is, according to Cavell, “as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (because it is) terrifying.”

Cavell’s account of the application of criteria is certainly open to a recuperative “political” interpretation. In this interpretation, the alternative to thinking of questions of meaning as applying fixed criteria or faithfully following rules would be to adopt the mirror image of this idea, according to which meaning is finally dependent on the decisionistic imposition of closure, Humpty Dumpty style. But this interpretation places the emphasis on the idea that there are no criteria to establish meanings, in the sense that questions of usage and application are wholly arbitrary, and thus that they are matters of pure will. Against this interpretation, Cavell invites us to think differently about the problem of criteria, not to imagine that we can do away with the problem of criteria altogether. To embrace the standard interpretation of the arbitrariness of meaning is, for Cavell, to shrink away from the shared world in which questions of meaning arise as problems in the first place. Forms of life are not the consoling substitute for certainty that allow one to remain secure about the ability to decide finally on the meaning and value.
of things. For Cavell, they are the scenes to which we are referred in order to see what is really at stake when matters of meaning arise as problematic. In Cavell's invocations of Wittgenstein, the emphasis is always on forms of life, which distinguishes his account from a conventionalist or contractual image that would place the emphasis on forms of life. The emphasis underscores the importance, for example, of scenes of distress, pain, pity, and suffering as the occasions when problems of criteria arise, occasions that require more than knowing how to apply rules and that call for some form of acknowledgement.

Cavell's account of criteria provides an understanding of how concept use works that is deeply democratic in its imagination. It stands in contrast to the interpretation of Wittgenstein's account of rule following and language games popularized by Richard Rorty, for whom the lesson of meanings being referred to forms of life is that there is a range of issues about which reason cannot be of much help. Rorty's account depends on an image of communities as enclosed and all enveloping. Cavell's view, by contrast, depends on the image of communities as fragile achievements, which therefore are open to the future. For Cavell, making use of concepts works not by reference to a preexisting community of established meanings but through the projection of examples into new contexts in which something has been unsettled. In turn, and not unlike Arendt's vision of judgment, this view invites us to think of the use of concepts as a way of making claims—of asserting commitments and responsibilities that project the possibility of both “geniality” and “sociality” without prior guarantees of felicitous outcomes. And it is important to underscore that the suggestion that concept use is a matter of knowing how to “go on” with words and actions in new contexts is, for Cavell, not a matter of dramatic willfulness. It is a feature of ordinary usage. Again, it is possible to see in this a reassuring appeal to the comforts of a community. But the emphasis in Cavell's work is on the sense in which being able to “go on” with action always involves a claim to community that might well be queried, generate dispute, or simply fail.

If we follow Cavell, the idea of concept use as always a matter of finding the right nuance for the context one finds oneself in has a clear implication that ordinary usage is, as he puts it, “normative for what can be said.” We should not think that this is a reassertion of the idea that ordinary contexts are normative in the sense of providing hard-and-fast rules for future application. These contexts might be better thought of as providing possible examples for the drawing of analogies and the making of claims. More fundamentally, Cavell is asserting that when questions arise explicitly about appropriate application, it is because something unusual is going on, because something has become problematic. And the becoming problematic of situations is an ordinary aspect of forms of life, rather than being reserved for events of catastrophe or emergency.

As I have already suggested, Cavell's work is relevant here not just because it provides an account of what it is to apply concepts but also precisely because it
provides a democratic account of this issue. Cavell's account of criteria revolves around the question of what it means to be in agreement with others. His answer is that this is not a matter of arriving at a consensus, nor is it a matter of establishing a structure of rules. It is more like being attuned to others. Cavell, like Arendt and Derrida, affirms that judgment is not merely a matter of applying standards to determine whether something satisfies preestablished criteria. Using criteria involves being able to spot the difference that makes an action the specific type of action that it is and being able to spot this difference when called on to do so in contexts when being able to tell what an action is really matters: “In judging (saying something true or false) you have to be able or willing to judge a contraction of the face as a wince, to recognize a smile as forced, to find a slap on the forehead to express the overcoming of stupidity by insight, a fist to the heart to express the overcoming of stiff-neckedness by contrition, a tone of voice to be that of assertion.” Cavell brings into view the degree to which questions of meaning, once they are approached in terms of practices of application, extension, and projection, always raise normative questions—questions of authority, community, and responsibility. And to the degree that it is concerned with relations of assent and dissent and the arrogation of voice in claims to speak for the community to which one asserts affinity, Cavell's image of being able to project meaning into new situations provides a resolutely agonistic understanding of the dynamics of joint action.

Cavell's account of criteria is central to linking the idea of democracy as an ordinarily appraisive concept to the vocation of critical inquiry. Understanding the meaning of universal terms is not a matter of grasping a definition of necessary conditions and then successfully applying it. That much we can learn from Derrida, or from Wittgenstein. Concepts such as democracy, justice, or art all involve too many elements to enable the clear-cut definition that this image of concept use requires. Gallie helps us grasp that what is at stake in this difficulty is not a matter of ambivalence or undecidability—it's the appraisive qualities of such concepts. Which is to say, of course, that the difficulty is not really an internal feature of the concepts themselves but a feature of the types of context in which their application becomes a live issue. Understanding a concept is a matter of being able to use it, that is, being able to apply a term in a given context and, crucially, being able to give reasons for doing so.

James Tully, another thinker who draws on Wittgenstein, suggests that understanding a term is a matter of “being able to give reasons why it should or should not be used in a particular case, either to provoke or to respond to a dispute, being able to see the strength of the reasons given against this use by one’s interlocutors, and then being able to give further reasons, and so on.” The reasons offered might well appeal to general models or universal principles, or to examples, but it is the activity of giving reasons that is worth emphasizing. Cavell helps us see that invoking this or that criterion is always likely to be a contentious action, one that invites dissent because the stakes are so high, pertaining as they do to matters
Criteria for Democratic Inquiry

of belonging, community, and identification. More so than Cavell, Tully draws out the agonistic energies involved in the process of understanding concepts and applying criteria. Giving reasons for applying a concept in a new context is “done by describing examples with similar or related aspects, drawing analogies or disanalogies of various kinds, finding precedents, exchanging narratives and redescriptions, drawing attention to intermediate cases so one can pass easily from the familiar to the unfamiliar cases and see the similarities among them; thereby being both conventional and creative in the use of the criteria that hold our normative vocabulary in place.”71 In Tully’s account, as in Cavell’s, agonistic engagement goes alongside giving reasons, rather than the two practices being opposed as stark opposites—giving reasons is, in a sense, both an index and medium of agonistic engagement.

In this section, in arguing that democracy needs to be thought of as an ordinary idea, I have drawn on the idea of democracy as an essentially contested concept. Its meaning is certainly a matter of dispute and disagreement. But democracy is also a particular type of concept, one with an irreducibly normative dimension to it. The contested quality of democracy is neither a sign of confusion, nor of ambiguity, nor even just disagreement. Nor is the contested quality of concepts such as democracy a function of an inherent undecidability or openness of language. It follows, rather, from the fact that affirming one version of democracy has practical consequences. The reason to argue that the concept of democracy is essentially contested is to affirm the sense that democratic politics is practically oriented by reference to claims regarding “Hurrah” words like “the common good,” “equality,” “fairness,” “freedom,” and “justice.” Democracy is not, we have seen, a static concept. Its significance certainly cannot be secured by alighting on robustly exact definitions of the political, as if there were such a thing. Grasping the type of concept that democracy is does not require us to recall a forgotten or covered-over meaning. And we have seen that thinking of democracy as essentially contested is, to switch theoretical registers back to Derrida for a moment, to think in terms of a supplementary logic of democratization. It implies that new attributes can and do become attached to democracy in the ongoing dynamic of contestation about the relationship between its different values and their practical enactment.

Democracy as a Form of Life

I have used the theme of essentially contested concepts to address the problem of theorizing the contextual variability of normative concepts that lay claim to an element of universality. I have suggested that this problem requires us to adjust our understanding of what criteria are and how they operate in practice. The challenge of acknowledging both the provincialism of theoretical traditions and the syncretism of distinct configurations of political practice requires us, I have
further argued, to think of democracy as *ordinary*, where this refers to a certain style of reasoning. This is a style that seeks to be responsive to situations from which novel and innovative variations of democratic practice emerge. In the rest of this chapter I elaborate on some of the commitments associated with this style of reasoning by moving from the rather philosophical tenor of the chapter so far, turning instead to considerations of critical thought that provide a thicker social scientific imagination of these same issues.

The challenge of responding to new forms of political life has been crystalized since the end of the Cold War by questions of whether the norms of Western, liberal, representative electoral democracy can and should be practically applied in non-Western contexts and deployed as normative benchmarks of critical analysis. At the same time, experiments in extending and deepening established democratic practices have also challenged the norms of liberal democracy. As the hegemony of liberal democracy has been extended it has also been challenged and resisted. The proliferation of both more-than-liberal and less-than-liberal forms of democracy generates a conceptual problem: the acknowledgment at an analytical level that democracy is a highly variable social form seems to undermine any attempt to assess and evaluate the democratic status of specific adjectival versions. As the concept is stretched to include all sorts of things, the worry arises that it risks losing its force both descriptively and normatively: “analytical differentiation” threatens to weaken the “conceptual validity” of the core idea.

We have already seen how one response to this sort of worry is to adjust our picture of what critical reasoning about democratic politics ordinarily involves. The purpose of following the path outlined so far in this chapter is to fundamentally shift the terms for inquiry into democratic politics. The ways in which we reason about democracy matter because they shape the things we look for in our inquiries, as well as the ways in which we interpret the things that present themselves in those inquiries. I want here to specify further the ordinary spirit of democratic inquiry that follows from the account of criteria, judgment, and essentially contested concepts outlined so far.

A different, more pragmatic response to the worry about the descriptively capacious and normatively slippery qualities of the idea of democracy is to think in terms of a threshold that defines democracy, such as free and fair contested elections, full suffrage, and the rule of law. In this spirit, Giovanni Sartori proposes a two-step formula for investigating democracy: start by asking whether a country is democratic or not, and if it is, then ask just how democratic it is. The approach depends on the premise that “what makes democracy possible should not be mixed up with what makes democracy more democratic.” Sartori’s formula has a clear analytical sequence. First comes an either/or judgment, and then comes an evaluation of degrees of democracy. The formula has been refined to theorize the relationship between more formal aspects of democracy, like free and fair electoral representation, which might be thought of as necessary to defining
the threshold level, and the deepening of democracy through nonelectoral forms of representation and participation.77

Discussions about adjectival democracy and thresholds of democracy seek to revise a paradigm of social inquiry that relies on a taken-for-granted model of comparative analysis. Particular places are taken as paradigms and then the degree to which other places succeed or fail to emulate the experience of those places is assessed.78 Such a form of analysis too readily presumes that all the known variants of democratic politics have already occurred in a small number of places. As Jack Goody observes, this form of comparative epistemology makes European and North American traditions “the guardians of certain prized institutions.” Along with such values as humanism and individualism, democracy is often viewed as “a universal value of which the contemporary western world is the primary custodian and the only model.”79 Goody argues that democracy is a value that can be seen in many societies, most often manifested in opposition to authoritarian modes of rule. Amartya Sen has likewise argued that democracy is a genuinely universal concept, on the grounds that it has global sources.80 He too opposes the claim that democracy has uniquely Western origins and that certain conditions are necessarily required for democracy to flourish. Sen defines democracy in terms of a broad range of practices of public argument: “Democracy is intimately connected with public discussion and interactive reasoning.”81

Sen’s capacious democratic universalism emphasizes the resemblances between various practices of public reasoning. It avoids the trap of presuming that democracy means completely different things in different places or that democratic norms are not appropriate for certain places. But there is a stronger argument to be made here, one that shifts the emphasis away from simply finding analogies of democratic procedures across space and time and toward thinking more specifically about conflict and struggle as the medium of democracy’s universalization.82 In the course of situated political conflict, actors use concepts such as democracy and associated ideas strategically. This includes sometimes appealing to Western traditions in the process of trying to mobilize support or delegitimize opponents.83 We should always keep in mind that democracy is a product of struggle.84 According to Pierre Rosanvallon, this fact implies that the presumption that democracy belongs originally and normatively to the West needs to be set aside once and for all. The route to doing so, he suggests, lies in doing without the idea of self-enclosed cultures that underwrite what he calls a “universalism of closed systems.” Rosanvallon proposes instead thinking in terms of “an open universalism grounded in competing experience.”85 Such a way of thinking would involve a project of comparing democratic experiences in order to inform an “experimental universalism.”

Recalling the ways in which democracy emerges out of conflict, dispute, and struggle helps us better pinpoint the aspects of political concepts that allow them to travel across contexts. It suggests not only that concepts of democracy are con-
tested in the way already described but that they are particularly effective means for carrying on contestation of certain sorts. In this spirit, John Dunn has argued that the resonant force of democracy as an idea and practice through time and across space lies in “the horizon of identification it has held out to so very many and the basis it has offered them for discrediting and denouncing their immediate enemies.” For Dunn, the meaning of democracy is not just broad and encompassing as well as variable. More precisely, the meaning of democracy is embedded in the grammar of making distinctions and drawing dividing lines in order to mobilize, organize, persuade, and petition.

Thinking of democracy as a concept whose meaning emerges from situations of conflict should help us deflate the comparativist worry that the differentiation of democratic forms somehow undermines the possibility of assessment. We should by now be able to see that the worry arises from a particular picture of judging and applying criteria. But it also arises from a particular picture of the conditions of democratic politics. Here we can turn to Charles Tilly, who suggests that theories of democratization are characterized by different temporal imaginations. Historians have tended to focus on long timescales, concentrating on the role of collective popular mobilization in explaining differential patterns of democratization. By contrast, political science and international relations, closely articulated with the geopolitics of good governance and democratization, have focused on shorter timescales shaped by a concern for developing successful programs of democratic transition and consolidation. Tilly suggests that there are two different images at work across these debates—one in which democracy is like an oilfield and one in which democracy is like a garden: “An oilfield, the specific product of millennial history, conforms to regularities strong enough that petrogeologists can spot likely untapped deposits or explain how an oil well works. Yet experts cannot produce a new oilfield at will wherever they want. The presence of oilfields depends on long, long conjunctions of circumstances that appear rarely in history, and are little amenable to human manipulation.” In contrast, Tilly suggests, “Gardens are different. They will not flourish everywhere, but given adequate soil, sun, and precipitation, many different sorts of gardens grow in a variety of environments.”

At one level, Tilly’s metaphorical flourishes are meant to dramatize the ways in which different temporal imaginations determine contrasting understandings of how far democracy is susceptible to deliberate promotion. His more fundamental point is that the assumption that democracy should be theorized in relation to the problem of establishing necessary and sufficient conditions might not offer the best way to proceed with comparative analysis in the first place. And the reason is because democracy does not resemble either an oilfield or a garden. It is, rather, like a lake:

A lake—a large inland body of water—can come into being because a mountain stream feeds into a naturally existing basin, because someone or something dams
up the outlet of a large river, because a glacier melts, because an earthquake isolates a segment of the ocean from the main body of water, because people deliberately dig an enormous hole and channel nearby watersheds into it, or for a number of other reasons. Once it exists, nevertheless, a lake nurtures characteristic ecosystems and maintains characteristic relations with its surroundings, so much so that limnologists have built a scientific specialty around the study of those regularities. Democracy behaves like a lake: although it has distinguishing properties and a logic of its own, it forms in a variety of ways, each of which retains traces of its singular history in the details of its current operation.88

Tilly’s point in using the analogy of lake formation is not just that democracy has no single origin, no essential form or model. The variability that he affirms is not meant to render general concepts redundant. It is intended to shift our sense of how such concepts work. It is, after all, still possible to talk about lakes—or democracy—as a class without having a cast-iron set of principles that each case must accord to. The idea that democracy might be best conceptualized through the analogy of lake formation is tied closely to Tilly’s own appreciation for how the different trajectories taken by democratic politics are rooted in the dynamics of political contention.89 The meaning of democracy—in the sense of what democracy is meant to be good for—emerges as an issue when matters of definition and assessment are at stake in relation to situated configurations of authority and dissent, domination and resistance, exploitation and solidarity. This emergent aspect ensures that democracy has no proper meaning, only exemplary forms. In the next section I will suggest that the emergent dynamic of the meaning of democracy requires us to adjust our picture of theorizing so that we might attend more sensitively to the resistances and impasses, hopes and expectations, out of which democratic politics arises.

Theorizing Democracy Geographically

We have traveled from a discussion of judgment and thinking in examples through an account of the essentially contested and ordinary quality of concepts of democracy to a consideration of how these issues of concept use are related to the worldly challenge of thinking in nonethnocentric ways about democracy as a global phenomenon. I want now to draw together these strands of thought, all of which revolve around the theme of how criteria work in the world, in order to outline a form of geographically sensitive inquiry that focuses on democracy as a contextually enacted and ethnographically emergent phenomenon.

One of my reference points for imagining a form of inquiry into democracy that is sensitive to postcolonial critiques of falsely universalizing assumptions but is also able to focus on the inherently appraisive dimensions of all discussions of
Democracy and Critique

democracy is Michael Saward’s account of the enactment of democracy. Saward’s discussion begins from the observable proliferation of democratic innovations as well as the geographical spread of democratic practices across the world. His strong claim is that thinking about the enactment of democracy is well attuned to the fact that democracy “can be practiced in radically different, including unconventional, ways.” He recommends such an approach because it can contribute to the “positive decoupling of ‘democracy’ from ‘the West.’”

Saward’s account of the enactment of democracy depends on a distinction between three aspects of democratic politics: democratic principles, democratic devices, and sequencing. First, the principles associated with democracy need to be thought of in a particular way: “Democratic principles are primarily things that we do rather than rights or statuses that are conferred.” This is the core claim of Saward’s argument that democracy’s variability can be theorized via the idea of enactment.

The idea of enactment that Saward uses is drawn from Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. Enactment, in this sense, refers to the constitutive possibility that meanings can be transferred across contexts. More fundamentally, from this perspective the transferability of meanings ruins any appearance of an original source of meaning. This notion is indebted to Derrida’s account of the “logic of supplement,” the deconstructive principle whereby features that seem at first to be a secondary, unnecessary, or superfluous addition to an apparently authentic and natural form are shown to be necessary and essential to it—writing to speech, in Derrida’s most famous example, or translation to original, or perhaps representative elections to direct democracy. So to say that democracy is enacted implies the structural possibility that it could be repeated or re-presented in new contexts that add a novel slant to its full significance, a potential that must be accounted for in any discussion of its realizations. Butler’s own iteration of this theme of the iterability of meaning in her social theory of performativity shifts attention away from the task of prying open authoritative discourses with tools that demonstrate the impossibility of the pure presence of authoritative meaning. Instead, she turns toward the analysis of the practices that disrupt norms by mobilizing their constitutive instability.

The notion of the enactment of democracy, then, is not just an assertion that democratic ideals are necessarily performed in various contexts. It involves the stronger implication that their performance in any one context involves the transformative reiteration of meanings and actions. Saward’s invocation of the idea of enactment therefore supposes a practical interest in how the potential for democratic principles to be combined in new ways and acquire new meanings plays out in the world.

Saward argues that democratic principles are enacted through various devices. These devices include not only elections, deliberative polls, referenda, and judicial review but also forms of civil society activism and protest. In short, democratic
principles are practiced through diverse forms of action." In this account, the vocabulary of performatives, acts, and enactments is not simply meant to emphasize contingency as an ontological condition. It is informed by a sense that the meaning of political practices is unavoidably interpretative, not only as a matter of external analysis but internally, as a condition of how these practices take on their meaning in the world.

The point of Saward’s argument is not, then, merely that there are a number of democratic principles and that these are enacted through various devices. The third aspect of his account is concerned with how the practical enactment of democratic politics also involves a process of sequencing, of tying principles and devices together into temporal relations of agenda setting, debate and discussion, authorization, decision, implementation, review, and accountability. Rather than simply assuming in advance the value of, for example, elections or deliberative consultation, Saward’s approach raises the question of just how practices of voting or of talking enact certain democratic values depending on the contexts in which these practices acquire their significance for the actors bound into them. The significance of democratic values is not therefore intrinsic to particular devices. It is emergent from the politics of contestation that any particular sequencing of devices helps to configure.

Saward’s account of the enactment of democracy puts a strong emphasis on democracy as a relational field of claims and counterclaims. The enactment perspective provides helpful analytical resources for thinking about how new forms of political action emerge from, engage with, and transform existing configurations of political power. It affirms that the crucial dynamic behind the translation and combination of principles and devices involves practices of claims-making, compromising, concession, bargaining, and mobilization. The values enacted through the contingent articulation of principles, devices, and sequences—the ways in which interests are represented, conflicts resolved, participation practiced, accountability enforced—are likely to vary across different contexts. Democracy is related to various principles, including political equality, inclusion, expressive freedom, and transparency. Democracy includes practices of talking, choosing, revising, being obliged, being respected, having a say, being listened to, making decisions, being held accountable, taking responsibility. And it combines in different ways various institutional devices for ensuring the rule of law, transparency, majority rule, minority rights, equal representation, and other values.

Saward’s interpretative theory of the enactment of democracy takes the contingency of existing arrangements not as a lever for disobliging or denaturalizing critique but as the occasion for outlining a mode of inquiry into how this contingency is shaped by the dynamics of political action. In this emphasis on the variable formation of democratic politics there is, I think, a significant affinity between Saward’s interpretative democratic theory and the anthropology of democracy proposed by Julia Paley. The link is suggested by Paley’s own foundational state-
ment that democracy “is not a single condition that countries do or do not have, but rather a set of processes unevenly enacted over time.” Paley makes the case for thinking about the emergent dynamics through which democratic practices are translated and given new meanings and from which new, innovative aspects of democracy are developed. In so doing, she places these dynamics squarely within the worldly politics of conflicts against authoritarianism, messy democratic transitions, the contested politics of reconciliation and redress, and the unanticipated consequences of marketization, privatization, and consumerism.

Paley’s concern is primarily with understanding democracy in the context of transitions from authoritarian rule. Her own research has explored the meanings of political accountability in postdictatorship Chile. She argues that the imperatives of policy makers and elected politicians in that context were to satisfy the desires of citizens. These were in turn shaped both by citizens’ experiences and expectations of life under an authoritarian dictatorship and by the specific form of transition to democracy in Chile. This example suggests that the idea that non-Western patterns of democratization are shaped by a greater concern with “substantive” issues of inequality and redistribution of resources should not be taken for granted. The formal or procedural dimensions of democracy, such as the rule of law and free and fair elections, are likely to be a fundamental dimension of the meaning of democracy in such contexts, because these aspects are central to the public performance of relationships of dignity, respect, and recognition between rulers and citizens.

The most significant contribution of Paley’s agenda for an anthropology of democracy is the assertion that the meaning of democracy is ethnographically emergent: “The use of the term ‘democracy’ occurs neither alone, nor steadily, nor completely; it is, rather, ethnographically emergent. Therefore we must ask: Whose term is it? What does its usage in any particular case signify? Where does the term arise and where not?” Approaching democracy in this spirit involves more than pursuing a meaning-centered analysis. It entails sensitivity toward why it is that democracy matters in particular situations: “An analysis of democracy benefits from attention to the intersection of meaning and practice—what is done with meaning, how politics operate.”

The idea of democracy as ethnographically emergent places particular emphasis on understanding the political experiences out of which democracy’s contested meanings emerge. There are two dimensions to this emphasis. First, Paley suggests that thinking of democracy as ethnographically emergent “impels us to look more closely at the strategic deployment of the term democracy.” Contestations of the meanings of democracy are related to the uses to which the idea can be put in furthering certain interests, in building alliances, or in outmaneuvering opponents. As already suggested, we should emphasize not the contested qualities of democracy per se so much as the parts played by democratic concepts as means of ongoing contestation. Paley’s agenda therefore helps us understand why certain
concepts and practices of democracy travel readily into new contexts. If we think of democratic concepts and practices as means of contestation, then we can see that they travel not so much as ideals to be emulated but as ideals that can be called on in the midst of political conflict.

The second dimension of Paley’s account of emergent democratization is the suggestion that there is a path-dependent relationship between the forms of conflict through which democratic transitions are generated and negotiated and the forms of democratic contention that follow formal transitions to democracy: “what comes before transitions to democracy shapes what comes after them.”

The pacts, negotiations, compromises, silences, and forms of violence through which democratic regimes are established shape the subsequent trajectories of democratic politics. Not the least significant implication of this perspective is that democratic inquiry must involve attending to the particular harms, injustices, or sources of indignation that generate political contention in a specifically democratic register.

The two dimensions of what we might call democratic emergence that Paley identifies throw a different light on a seemingly intractable paradox, identified by Albert Hirschman, that lies at the heart of existing democratic politics in any context. Historically, pluralistic democracies tend to emerge as forms of grudging compromise, “because various groups who had been at each other’s throats for a prolonged period had to recognize their mutual inability to achieve dominance.” At the same time, the normative claim made in the democratic present, as it were, is that the legitimacy of democracy depends on free and open opinion-forming deliberation between equal participants. The disjuncture between historical process and contemporary justification should not lead us to disavow those claims to legitimacy. It should, at the very least, remind us of the irreducibly political character of any and all democratic practice, however agreeable it may appear. But more than that, it should encourage us to avoid the temptation of simply embracing the image of democratic politics as beset by various “paradoxes,” a recurring theme in radical theories of democracy. One would find the association of democratic legitimacy with values such as civil peace, material well-being, or security, for example, to be paradoxical or contradictory only if one continued to insist on an abstract and constricted model of popular sovereignty and political obligation. Democratic politics emerges as a resolution of sorts to experiences of dispossession, slavery, or war and as a response to anticipations of emancipation, redress, reconciliation, or security. Thinking of democracy as emergent from these forms of experience and their attendant conflicts involves, I suggest, attending to the way in which the essential contestability of democracy is in itself an aspect of these experiences and conflicts.

In recommending that we should think about democracy ethnographically, I do not mean to suggest that there is only one, methodologically cherished form of immersive fieldwork through which democracy can be properly investigated.
Democracy and Critique

Instead I propose that democracy should be thought of as an ordinary phenomenon embedded in more or less extended forms of life, so that interpreting its variable meanings requires a sensitivity to contextual “thickness.” From different disciplinary perspectives, both Saward and Paley ascribe importance to attending to what things mean from the inside for participants engaged in political action. The idea of thinking of democracy as both contextually enacted and ethnographically emergent therefore implies not just attending to the multiple meanings of democracy as a word. It directs our attention to the situated disputes and the structures of expectations that shape particular formations of political contestation.

Democracy Is Ordinary

By tracing debates in political theory, philosophy, social theory, and social science, I have sought in this chapter to address the recurring problem of squaring the universal register of democratic discourse with the historically and geographically variable shapes taken by democratic politics. We saw in chapter 1 that this problem is central to the justificatory dilemmas that have shaped various traditions of radical democratic theory. I have approached this problem in the spirit proposed by Pierre Rosanvallon, seeking to reframe democracy’s universalism not as a thesis to be confirmed or refuted but as a difficulty to be explored. Exploring this difficulty requires us to rethink our model of concept formation and concept use. We should resist the temptation to draw firm boundaries around political concepts, as if we might use them to measure the degree to which phenomena accord to these definitions. I have instead proposed a way of thinking about concept formation that is sensitive to the affirmations of ordinary life that are at the core of both grand and mundane expressions of agonistic conflict.

The problem of justifying the use of context-transcending criteria of evaluation is inherent to the very practice of democracy. Democracy is an emergent practice whose very meaning is not just essentially contested in an empirically observable way but, more strongly, whose meaning and value lie in its essential contestability. I have argued that this contested quality is a function of the unavoidably appraisive dimensions of ideas about democracy.

My treatments of issues of judgment, thinking in examples, essentially contested concepts, and ordinary appreciation of criteria suggest that critical attention does not need to be focused on assertions of ontological contingency or interpretative undecidability. Rather, critical attention should be focused on understanding how normative issues arise in situations in which existing understandings of political life are interpreted in new ways. My purpose in the rest of this book is not to apply this way of thinking through empirical analysis. My aim is, rather, to engage with different traditions of political thought with an eye toward finding resources for further elaborating on the idea that democracy is an
emergent form of political life—a form of politics that arises in problematic situations of conflict and that is shaped by experiences of subordination, humiliation, and exploitation. In part 2, “Rationalities of the Political,” I consider the ways in which these issues are presented in a range of traditions of thought that tend to deduce the possible emergence of democratic energies from strongly ontological interpretations of the concept of the political. Recourse to an ontological register means that the political always ends up being rendered in an image that is already known in advance. In part 3, “Phenomenologies of Injustice,” I discuss the ways in which the ethnographic disposition toward appreciating the ordinary qualities of democracy that I have discussed in this chapter can also be found to be at work in traditions of critical theory that are often thought of as being much more normative, perhaps even prescriptive, in their inclinations. I will argue that it is in those traditions of thought, concerned with questions of action and rationality, that the resources for further inquiry into situated senses of injustice that shape the emergence and enactment of democratic politics can be found.
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