CONCLUSION

Profane Democratization

I have sought in this book to trace divergent ways of conceptualizing the sources of transformative political action in radical thought. In so doing, I have tried to draw into view how radical theorists’ interest in democracy is not simply driven by a concern with substantive or procedural questions of governance, participation, resistance, or rule. Democracy arises in a broad range of Left theory as a worry about the status, the legitimacy even, of the vocation of critique itself. What is at stake in assessing different theories is not simply whether they successfully identify the possibility of social transformation, perhaps by illustrating the historical formation of current patterns of power and privilege or by demonstrating the ontological contingency on which solid foundations rest. The issue is not even whether radical theories can identify plausible agents of transformation on the basis of these systematic explanations and new ontologies, perhaps in the form of “a movement of movements” or elusive figures of “the multitude.” Rather than supposing that the only response to the critique of false universalizing and unjustifiable foundationalism in liberal political theories is the embrace of one form or other of revisionary metaphysics—in a kind of flight from the ordinary—we should instead attend more closely to the conceptual prioritization of injustice in critical theories of democracy. From this perspective, critical assessment turns on the question of whether the plausibility of alternative visions can be matched with an account of the validity, or the justifiability, of both the means and ends pictured in those alternatives.

One result of approaching radical political thought in terms of the justificatory dilemma is a much more ordinary view of the purposes of critical theory. In the wake of the vanished image of organic intellectuals analyzing conjunctures and diagnosing strategic possibilities while deferring decisions on courses of action to the Party or the Movement, radical theories are thrown back on different pictures of the public spaces in which criticism circulates in positing their purchase on the world. To a perhaps surprising degree, radical political theories often hold fast to an epistemic understanding of the dynamics of human action. Too often we are
invited to imagine that social life hangs together, and must be transformed, by “getting at” people’s beliefs, desires, and feelings without their knowing it. The view of critique as a process of denaturalization and defamiliarization is a legacy of theorizing about the ontological conditions of subject formation rather than thinking about the rationalities of action. The revelatory model of demystification held to by classical Marxism, and much modernist thought more broadly, is easily transposed into cultural theories that seek to lay bare the devices of people’s own subjection, while ontologies of the political posit the immanent energies of mute subversion always potentially waiting to disrupt settled patterns of identification. Theoretical arguments that proclaim ontological contingency and multiplicity all too happily embrace an ethos of revelatory education and aesthetic disruption.

My contention is that theoretical arguments elaborating on plural rationalities of action, of the sort discussed in part 3, are informed by a more ordinary understanding of critique. In this strand of thought, critical theory is just one voice in an open space of plural disputes about the justifiability of social relations and institutional forms. The task of critique, in this view, is to interpret the shared and contested meanings found in the activities in which we partake, with a view not to uncover hidden meanings or subterfuge but to remind us of things we perhaps already knew.

The premise of my account of critical theory is that power is not only a pervasive feature of life but also a crucial resource for making things better. This view is essential for any meaningfully democratic social theory, not least because it should lead us to be constantly aware of the political evils done in the name of power as well as those associated with wielding power in the name of the people, the rule of law, revolution, or indeed, democracy itself. To understand the potentials and pitfalls of democratic politics, we do not need refined theories of ideal justice. Nor do we need to perfect our understanding of the political as a distinct ontological layer or as a dimension of human affairs withdrawn from all but the most extraordinary events or refined sensibilities. We would do well to follow Raymond Geuss’s recommendation that theorizing about “real politics” needs to avoid the temptation to search for “an antecedent ontological specification of a distinct domain called ‘politics.’” To think about politics “is to think about agency, power, and interests and the relations among these.” Understood in this way, political analysis is guided by the question of “Who <does> what to whom for whose benefit.”

A resolutely realist understanding of politics of this sort helps to deflate the importance ascribed to concepts of antagonism, enmity, and hostility in radical theories of democracy without falling into the traps of ethical idealism—it is a view premised, after all, on the vices as well as the virtues to which people are prone. Politics involves relations of conflict, rule, contestation, decision, enmity, and interest as well as compromise, bargaining, deal making, agreement, reconciliation, and sometimes even consensus. It has to do with the unequal distribution of scarce material resources and non-material benefits. It has to do with scheming,
calculating, and expediency. These are common enough usages, though hardly exhaustive. One or more of these usages are at work when we use the adjective “political” to describe some activity, behavior, or situation. Saying something is “political” no more implies the existence of an ontological substance that one should call “the political” than does describing someone’s actions as having unconscious motivations require one to suppose the existence of anything like the unconscious.

I have outlined the style of reasoning appropriate to thinking of politics in this more ordinary way in part 1, “Democracy and Critique.” There I focused on the question of how to theorize about the force of concepts such as democracy that combine an element of universalism with an observable variability of meaning and form. I also elaborated on an account of concept use as an ordinary dimension of going on in the world. The emphasis of these first two chapters was on the situational emergence of democratic politics. Parts 2 and 3 engaged with a range of intellectual traditions with this emphasis in mind, seeking to identify strands of thought best able to assist in further understanding the dynamics through which political energies emerge as an ordinary dimension of social life.

In part 2, “Rationalities of the Political,” I focused on the relationship between action and its conditions in theoretical traditions that search for the autonomy of politics in ontological qualities of the world. I identified a genre of theory characterized by a shared picture of the world as being shaped by forces of stabilization and disruption. Locating the political in the metaphysical space between contingency and fixity, this genre limits the dynamics of political emergence to dramatic forms of insurrection or rare events of constitution.

I have argued that this genre of theory is poorly suited to appreciating the ordinary qualities of the political, in the sense of the ordinary introduced in chapter 2. There I elaborated on Stanley Cavell’s idea of the ordinary, which is oriented by an affirmation of skepticism not as something to be guarded against or expelled but as a constant possibility of life. The ordinary, from this perspective, appears not as a world of settled common sense, unreflective habit, or taken-for-granted obviousness. Instead, the possibility that the world as we know it is not all that it may seem is an ever-present condition of action. When Cavell says “ordinary,” he is referring to the constitutive “vulnerability to doubt” of our relations to the world. This vulnerability is an integral feature of action, and learning to negotiate it is a pervasive condition of our routines and habits.

I have used the idea of the ordinary to suggest that, ironically perhaps, post-foundational ontologies of the political might well remain trapped in an epistemological way of thinking about political action. In ontologized ways of thinking, the discovery that such action has no secure foundations, either in a science of society or a philosophy of the subject, is interpreted as a confirmation of the pure contingency of action in the world. There is, then, a scholastic blind spot that underwrites the distinctive spatialization of the political in terms of openings and
closures, contingency and necessity, fluidity and fixity. In contrast to this way of elaborating on the meaning of the political, I identified a strand of thought that uses the politics/political distinction in a more analytical or heuristic way, to open up new ways of investigating the conditions of political action.

Building on this heuristic interpretation of the difference between politics and the political, part 3, “Phenomenologies of Injustice,” reconstructed strands of critical theory that respond to the challenges of thinking about political life in a way that is more respectful of the emphasis on the ordinary noted above. Across the range of thinkers discussed in the final part of this book, one finds that the critique of overly rationalistic accounts of political action does not have to be associated with a search for deeper and deeper ontological sources of political dynamism. It can just as easily inform a conceptual pluralization of the types of action through which political life is animated. Taking this path involves reordering the relationships between justice and injustice in theories of democracy. This reordering is framed in part by the use of a set of geographical tropes to position the revival of republican political ideas at the core of a critical theory of democratic politics, one that gives normative precedence to values of freedom as non-domination or to the even stronger value of freedom as power. The conceptual reorientation around themes of injustice and non-domination should be, I would say, central to further development of the form of democratic inquiry outlined in chapter 2, one in which analytical attention focuses on the emergence and processing of claims against situated experiences of harm, injury, or wrong.

Emergent Spaces of Democracy

My discussion of different strands of political thought in the preceding chapters has been shaped by a concern to theorize democracy not as an ideal form but as an object of inquiry that has a variable historical geography of emergence and consolidation, extension and crisis, decline and rebirth. In a sense, then, this book is intended as a kind of prolegomena to democratic inquiry in a geographical spirit. Central to the project is the focus on the generation of democratic energies through situated claims for redress, redistribution, or recognition (and the importance of being able to judge the substantive difference between such claims). I have argued that the conceptual transformation of the concept of all affected interests is central to foregrounding contestation in the ongoing evolution of critical theory as a tradition of radical democratic thought. We have seen how the principle of all-affectedness is translated into a medium for the articulation of oppositional claims against oppression and domination. We have in turn seen how the development of the notion of affectedness as a register of claims-making leads to the identification of a particular form of harm—the arbitrary subjection to the will of others, or domination—as the central object of a critical theory of democracy.
And we have seen how these conceptual shifts are associated with a reorientation of the very idea of what critical theory is good for, toward critical engagement with the claims through which the sense of injustice is publicly enacted, problematized, and processed.

My account of the translation of all-affectedness into the registers of action theory challenges the methodological globalism through which much of the tradition of critical theory has engaged with issues of domination and injustice. It does so by drawing into focus the importance of the problematic situations out of which democratic political agency emerges. In turn, this implies a “topological” understanding of political action, if all we mean by this is an understanding that politics is a worldly practice that emerges from emplaced contexts of action. Or to put it another way, politics is always about something. I have argued that the transformation of the all affected principle and the prioritization of injustice in critical theories of democracy require us to do more than simply track the territorializing effects of globalized chains of cause and consequence. It requires us also to attend to the geographies of the situated emergence and imaginative reach of issues, along two dimensions. First, thinking of affectedness as a register of contestatory claims-making requires paying attention to the settings out of which felt senses of injustice emerge and are articulated as political claims. Second, thinking of affectedness as a phenomenon ascribed in situated communicative contexts requires an analysis of the milieus in which the capacity to “learn to be affected” and to develop solidaristic identifications is worked up and sustained. In both respects, the cultivation of what we might call “context-transcendent” capacities to imagine, judge, and act democratically is understood to depend on necessarily partial conditions of social integration.

The prioritization of injustice that is associated with the translation of the all affected interest idea into a deliberative norm therefore suggests an analysis of the variable geographies through which democratic politics is articulated. Thinking of democracy in terms of claims-making might, at first sight, seem to support a view that privileges accessibility to classically defined public spaces. It seems to invite us to think of claims as being expressed in particular ways, through protest, demonstrations, or other forms of more-or-less spectacular presence in physical space. There is, however, more to claims-making than practices of assembly, dissent, encounter, and protest. I argued in chapter 8 that the idea of claims-making needs to be extended beyond the mere expression of a demand to encompass the processes by which claims are evaluated, adjusted, acted on, and accorded recognition legitimacy. The focus on claims-making therefore requires us to think about the ways in which the spatialities of democratic politics might extend beyond the preference for models of assembly to include the articulation of spaces of mobilization, demands, deliberations, compromises, deal making, decisions, delivery, accountability, and revision.

The sort of geographical imagination one needs to fully elaborate on the view...
of democratic politics that follows from prioritizing injustice would, therefore, focus not on spaces of co-presence but on spaces of circulation, articulation, and re-presentation. Rather than seeking to pin down the correct ontological view of space or spatiality, democratic inquiry requires us to think of spatial concepts heuristically, in ways that allow us to further explore the threefold sense of affectedness that I elaborated in chapter 6. We might, then, explore further how some aspect of being affected in a causal sense can be illuminated by explanatory concepts associated with theorizing the production of space, the urbanization of capital, or accumulation by dispossession; we might investigate how the aspect of learning to be affected can be informed by interpretative traditions of thought concerned with concepts of place, landscape, and public space; and we might examine how the aspect of acting or responding, of affecting, can be clarified by reference to traditions of thought concerned with issues of governance, scale, and territory.

This way of thinking about spatial concepts is consistent with the approach to theorizing democracy geographically that I have articulated in this book. Democracy is not a static concept with a singular meaning or one whose sense can be derived through ontological reasoning. As a prolegomenon to democratic inquiry, the theoretical underlaboring undertaken in this book therefore directs attention to three analytical protocols.

First is the principle of the charitable interpretation of the imaginary geographies of democratic theory. By invoking this principle I mean to distance myself from the form of scholastic chauvinism that has come to often characterize traditions of critical spatial theory. Rather than presume that there is one, single, correct spatial ontology that serves as the master vocabulary against which all other spatial grammars must be judged inadequate, I have approached the use of spatial figures in various traditions of political thought with the intention of maximizing understanding. I have sought to provide an interpretation of the conceptual problems that are at stake in the recourse to concepts of insides and outsides, extension, and closure. We should be sensitive to the analytical worries that political thinkers might be trying to articulate when they make use of what, from the perspective of critical spatial theory, appear to be rather simplistic or naïve understandings of globalization, the transnational, or deterritorialization. For example, discussions of geographical boundaries can address the problem of how to translate broadly diffused processes of opinion formation into legitimate and effective forms of will formation, or stable geographical objects such as the nation can serve as a frame through which to reflect on the qualities of social solidarity associated with democracy. In focusing on the spatial tropology at work in theoretical discussions of such concepts as political representation or the public sphere, the default position should not be to call these discussions into question simply because they do not utilize the same theoretical understandings of spatiality that are favored in critical spatial theory.
Second, democratic inquiry involves a diagnostic investigation of the types of influence to which particular patterns of the exercise of power are susceptible. This follows from the argument, outlined in chapter 5 in particular, that attention should be paid to the structural characteristics, as Hirschman called them, of issues around which political conflict emerge. An analysis of the means of coordination through which different fields of practice are reproduced should focus on the forms of contention and grievance they generate and the type of democratic politics that might be expected to emerge around them.

Third, democratic inquiry of the sort envisaged here would involve a supplementary analysis of the ordinary deployment of normative concepts in political conflict. Chapter 2 outlined an approach to understanding the contestation of democratic norms in historical-geographical contexts of non-paradigmatic application. Such an analysis would help to disclose what values are invoked and what harms or concerns motivate different actors when recourse is made to the discourses and devices of democracy. Such a style of analysis would be sensitive to context but also attuned to processes of translation through which democratic practices travel; it would be attentive to different understandings of what democracy is good for; it would be concerned with understanding the articulation of democratic practices with non-democratic practices such as bureaucracy, violence, or patriarchy; and it would be concerned with the ways in which new meanings accrete to democracy in processes of contested application.

These three protocols of democratic inquiry reflect a commitment to theorizing democracy ordinarily, that is, to appreciating the ways in which democracy’s meanings emerge in the course of political action. This commitment does not abandon the normative dimension of democratic theory but recognizes that democratic politics collects a series of different values, including liberty and equality, participation and publicity, accountability and accommodation, contestation and consensus, responsibility and representation. Critical analysis should focus on how particular claims to instantiate democracy advance certain values over others. Judgment of the validity of any such combination will, no doubt, remain open to further contestation. That is why this sort of inquiry should also enact a commitment to giving reasons for preferring certain combinations of values over others.

Democracy is a form of politics, not a substitute for it. To paraphrase and embellish Harold Lasswell, politics has to do with who gets what, when, how (and where). Democratic politics is a form of politics in which these questions are folded into ordinary judgments about whether people should get what they get, when and where they get it, and how they get it. A program of democratic inquiry therefore needs to be able to address the normative force of democratic values in practical situations. Some democratic theories are better equipped to do this than others, and so are some social theories. In order to fully cash out the potential of the living tradition of critical theory as a tradition of radical democratic thought, it
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is necessary to disrupt received conventions of theory formation, especially those conventions that determine that normative theories can serve only as ideals and those that ensure that open reflection on normative values is always subordinated to ontological assertion or messianic declaration. After all, the horizon of democratic politics is not formed by the eschatological hope for a wholly different future. Rather, we should join with Habermas and affirm that faith in democracy has its origins in “the profane expectation that our praxis in the world, despite everything, may help to bring about a shift towards a better state of things.”