

De-centred Democracy

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Any concept of democracy that is more than plebiscitary, which polls citizens as if they were isolated atoms, requires a concept of a context of interaction, traditionally called ‘the public sphere,’ in which citizens debate their views in relation to diverse courses of action at a specific juncture and, thereby, inform and form themselves into individuals and a collective body capable of determining the future of the polity—insofar as it is in their hands and not subject to the decisions of others outside the polity or to the whims of chance and fate. Recent debates concerning deliberative and communicative democracy pertain to the methods of argumentation and persuasion that such a context of interaction requires.¹ Liberal conceptions of public debate have generally been weak in the sense that the prior self-interest of separate individuals or corporate bodies was understood to determine both the motivation and content of deliberation. The recent revival of republican theory, in contrast, has drawn on its strong notion of deliberation in which politics is understood to be constitutive of the substantive form of ethical life of a

polity. A conception of politics that wants to assert its pre-eminence over other, prior, partial interests and goods, such that it can be critical of their role in the polity as a whole, is thus drawn to a constitutive conception of public deliberation and persuasion.

One difficulty of the republican tradition, however, that haunts its contemporary revival is that ‘the people’ who deliberate were assumed to be, for the most part, culturally homogeneous, such that deliberation could occur within a common frame of reference, and could therefore aim relatively unproblematically toward a *telos* of agreement and unanimity. The substantive ethical life of a people does not seem to have a place for substantive differences in ethical, political or religious traditions. At the very least, such ‘minority’ traditions could not have the same impact on public life as the tradition that constitutes political understanding and action. The notion that a public plurality of traditions cannot fit with a strong, constitutive concept of democracy ironically determines the other main option taken when such a plurality predominates—the exclusion of all substantive ethics from politics. The ‘procedural republic,’ like the republican revival, supposes that a plurality of substantive ethical traditions within ‘the people’ undermines a constitutive conception of democratic deliberation.² It is, as it were, a mirror-image of republicanism that attempts to resolve the problem by assigning all substantive ethical commitments a merely private status and confining politics to the clarity and fairness of procedures. However, aside from the unlikelihood that procedures could be defined without dependence of substantive commitments, procedures can neither guarantee nor motivate a strong conception of politics that extends to judging private interests and beliefs.

Insofar as democracy means widespread participation in decision-making, it depends upon a conception of public deliberation. We have come to expect that public deliberation and decision-making occurs within established institutions and is limited by their parameters. Democracy would, in this sense, be limited to the role that it can play within the institutions deemed legitimate by the forces of the international capitalist economy and the nation-state. I use the term ‘radical democracy’ to reverse this assumption and thus to suggest that the legitimacy of established institutions must depend upon the degree to which they are rendered so in widespread public deliberation. I certainly do not deny that this is a good part of the original meaning of the term ‘democracy.’ However, I think that, in the present context, it is necessary to underline that democracy is ‘radical’ to the extent that it does not depend for its legitimacy on established institutions, but rather becomes the basis for whatever legitimacy established institutions may claim. In short, for radical democracy public deliberation is prior to institutions, with respect to their legitimacy, even though institutions may well be prior to democracy with respect to history and power.

In this essay I want to defend a radical concept of democracy that seems to be excluded by the alternatives of republicanism and proceduralism—a substantive conception of political participation alongside a recognition of the public legitimacy of a plurality of ethical-religious traditions. I will argue that (what I will call) a multi-cultural and post-colonial concept of democracy itself contains and promotes a substantive and constitutive common good, which, nevertheless, cannot be articulated separately from the

substantive and constitutive goods inherent in the traditions of various partial communities existent within the polity.

I will begin by analyzing the relationship between a speech act and its context of meaning in order to develop the core idea of a radical democratic political theory based in a substantive plurality of ethical-religious traditions. The concept of a speech act, as explained by J. L. Austin, refers to statements which do not describe an action, nor state something about an action, but rather *perform*, or actually *do*, the action itself.³ A classic example of a performative statement is ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife.’ Considering speech as action has the advantage of shifting attention from the internal truth or falsity of a statement towards what is done, or accomplished, by the statement. To consider language mainly in its performative dimension brings into focus the whole range of issues that have been traditionally classed as problems of rhetoric rather than dialectic, issues of persuasion rather than truth.⁴

My interest is not in the classification of statements as such but in the role of speech acts in democratic debate. It is in this sense that I want to focus on the type of speech act that would constitute public deliberation for a theory of radical democracy. In many, if not all, of its classic versions democratic theory assumed the homogeneity of the people in all senses relevant to public deliberation. It is fairly clear in our present world that this assumption is no longer valid, that ‘the people’ that deliberates is subject to linguistic, race, class and gender divisions. These divisions, which are usually pursued under the heading of the ‘politics of identity,’ pose the question for radical democracy of how public debate can recognize such differences without utterly destroying the commonality

upon which democracy depends. I cannot address all of these questions here, of course, but I do want to ask how the issues raised by multiculturalism and by postcolonialism can be integrated into a theory of radical democracy.

A discourse can be said to be multicultural insofar as the cultural tradition upon which a given speech act draws for its legitimation is not the only relevant cultural tradition upon which a responding speech act can draw. A discourse can be said to be postcolonial insofar as the institutional tradition within which a speech act occurs is open to debate about the rules on which it is based, not only the practices that refer to the rules. My argument will be that a multicultural and postcolonial discourse decentres the hierarchy between a speech act and its context in a way that widens the concept of critique. This expanded notion of critique decentres public deliberation such as to turn it towards a more radical democracy that can sustain a plural but substantive conception of ethical life.

1. Who makes up the rules of inter-action?

In chapter four, I introduced the term the *multicultural speech act* in order to explain the way in which an utterance and the field of discourse within which it normally takes on meaning may shift their relationship. Such a paradoxical relationship brings a tradition of thought into question in the context of a specific debate. The multiculturalism of the multicultural speech act consists in the inter-connected plurality of traditions of legitimation within which a given speech act makes sense and takes effect. The plurality of traditions of legitimation has the consequence that a given act no longer is

straightforwardly dependent, as it were, on the discursive context provided by a tradition. A given act can also become the site for a critical interrogation of a tradition as a whole, since it does not depend on a single tradition for its meaning and effect, but upon a multicultural context constituted by the inter-relation and mutual translation of traditions.

For example, a speech act which draws upon a tradition in which the commitment to the rights of the individual is weak, or even non-existent, is, in the multicultural context, required to respond to other traditions in which such a commitment is strong. Similarly, a tradition in which commitment to communal rights is strong may legitimate a speech act which can have the effect of strengthening the commitment to communal rights in other traditions. In both cases, it is the debate across ethical traditions that strengthens, or weakens, strains in other traditions. Thus, my argument relies upon a conception of tradition that regards it as necessary to the formulation of the ethical import of a given statement—that no statement is meaningful simply by itself and requires a context of meaning to become so. However, neither is a tradition simply monolithic. It contains different strains, arguments and commitments that can be strengthened, or weakened, in the context of a specific application of the tradition to debate concerning a contemporary issue. It is the debate across traditions that enables the multicultural speech act to contain an expanded notion of critique that can extend to cultural traditions as a whole—unlike the restriction of critique to the extension of a tradition which, as hermeneutic philosophy has taught us, is inevitable if the legitimating tradition is singular. In this description multiculturalism is taken to mean the legitimacy of a plurality of traditions in public discourse and is not equivalent to multiculturalism understood merely as government

policy or sociological fact. I take it as evident that the plurality and mixing of legitimating traditions is a feature of life in the early 21st century which can be expected to continue and accelerate and, thus, that political theory must respond by conceptualizing this teleology.

In chapter five, this understanding of multiculturalism was expanded to include the somewhat distinct notion of a *post-colonial* speech act in order to clarify a certain component of the plurality of legitimating traditions. This plurality—which has been present in Canada since its colonial inception and has, at least to some degree, always found official recognition—can be domesticated through the colonial assumption that one discourse is the only *legitimate* basis for the adjudication of competing claims. The post-coloniality of a speech act thus consists in the recognition that the plurality of traditions is legitimate and therefore legitimates a plurality of traditions to which a speech act may refer to provide a meaningful context in intervening in public discourse. Post-coloniality thus refers to the impossibility of hierarchizing the plurality of traditions. My intention in highlighting this component of contemporary democratic theory was to justify a certain interpretation of Federalism as the history of processes of inclusion of particularities into a proposed universality. Thus, as a tradition of diverse accommodations rather than submission under a homogeneous set of institutional arrangements. It is upon this tradition of accommodation of particularities that a post-colonial democratic practice can orient itself. The centring legacy of Canadian Federalism due to its origin in the British Empire, and its continuing imperial relation to internal nationalities through conquest, has been dis-placed—though certainly not overcome—through the history of specific acts of

accommodation to particularities. Empire allows the other to speak but controls the rules of interaction between speakers such that the context, or the rules of interaction, is itself monopolized. Radical democracy therefore contains an emergent concept of federation that must not only address the question of ‘the right of the other to speak’ but also the question of the ‘legitimate tradition(s)’ within which such speech will be interpreted. Aboriginal speech, for example, has been present in Canada since its inception, but the Canadian nation-state has never ceded it an equal right of interpretation. Speech that is barred from touching the rules of interaction becomes a ‘minority’ speech precisely through this bar. It is relegated to being a content, whereas imperial speech not only provided content but also a tradition which decided the definitive interpretation of the speech act in question. In principle, post-coloniality thus refers not only to the presence of a plurality of traditions in a given context but primarily to the inability of any one of these traditions to monopolize the rules. If no single tradition ‘owns’ the context, then every speech act functions in a double fashion: as a statement in a given debate and as a ‘representative’ of the tradition which gives it meaning, such that this representation constitutes a claim to interpret the context of interaction.

A key feature of the concept of radical democracy is that the multicultural and post-colonial political subject is constituted by two ‘levels’ of identifications. Instead of identifying directly with the nation, the subject identifies with a sub-national group such as a linguistic, ethnic, gender or regional identity, and *through this identification* identifies also *in a particular way* with the nation. The nation is thus constituted by its

internal plurality. The political subject is consequently in an us/we relation with other groups, not an us/them relation.

Perhaps I should say at this point that I am not under the illusion that any governmental force in this country or, as far as I know, in any other has adopted the idea of a multicultural and post-colonial democracy, in the senses in which I am using these terms, as its own. However, that these two tendencies have become significant because of the social movements that have challenged actually-existing democratic institutions in our time. My present intention is not to evaluate how far this process has gone nor assess its prospects. It is rather to develop a radical democratic political theory that would aid such de-centring forces in articulating their—or, I will say, our—goals.

In this paper want to develop a model for democratic speech that can address the multicultural and postcolonial condition of our time. To be sure, this condition is yet still emergent. It is held back by many tendencies that attempt to centre discourse in a single dominant and authoritative tradition reinforced by entrenched power. Nonetheless, current critiques of mono-culturalism and the legacy of colonialism converge on a critique of all ‘centrism’ that would attempt to insulate democratic debate from the decentring consequences of the interaction between cultures and the loss of a stabilizing imperial context. ‘Centring’ is understood as the monopolizing, or attempted monopolizing, of the rules of discourse whereby those statements whose traditions are excluded from pertaining to the context of interaction become ‘minority’ or ‘marginalized.’ Radical democracy depends upon an *in principle* critique of centrism that, in two distinct senses, de-centres the hierarchization of discourse and speech act

which has confined democratic speech within the limitations established by dominant powers acting through the nation-state and the capitalist economy. Recently, its friends have fought on the street in Seattle and Prague to assert democratic accountability in the face of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other international 'free trade' agencies. My intention is to clarify the conception of democratic discourse toward which radical democracy tends.

The clarification of a decentring speech act can avoid the false alternative of a mere particularism or a homogenizing, rule-bound universalism in favour of the accommodation of particularities into a proposed universalization by way of the recognition of a legitimate plurality of traditions. A discourse can be said to be multicultural insofar as the cultural tradition upon which a given speech act draws for its legitimation is not the only relevant cultural tradition upon which a responding speech act can draw. A discourse can be said to be postcolonial insofar as the institutional tradition within which a speech act occurs is open to debate about the rules on which it is based, not only the practices that refer to the rules. A multicultural and postcolonial discourse thus decentres hierarchy in two senses. It decentres the hierarchy between cultural tradition and speech act by pluralizing the cultural traditions to which a speech act may refer in establishing its meaningfulness. It decentres the legitimacy of the institutional arrangements that have allowed the nation-state to address sub-groups within the nation or potentially sovereign groups from 'above,' as it were, by dictating the rules of discourse. In short, the 'multiculturality' of the speech act refers to the plurality of traditions within which a

given statement takes on meaning. The ‘postcoloniality’ of the speech act refers to the absence of a definitive hierarchy between traditions.

2. A Hermeneutic Model of Critique

A single speech act is not comprehensible in itself but only in relation to a tradition of thought. However, the dominant understandings of this point, which are clearest in hermeneutic philosophy, suggest that this relation is a one-sided dependence of act upon tradition. My argument is that this one-sided dependence is undone if one considers the consequences of the context of interaction between a plurality of legitimate traditions. Thus, a speech act in a multicultural and postcolonial context incorporates an expanded notion of critique.

A tradition—which can be defined as a form of life with a specific style—can be said to be ‘centred’ when the next speech act cannot call radically into question the institutional frame of meaning within which it will be interpreted. As a consequence, the speech act is incorporated into the parameters of the tradition and the seamless web of imperial history, class domination and ethno-cultural uniformity. This does not mean that criticism cannot occur, but rather that the process of continuation remains attenuated since it is bound by the limits of acceptable speech defined by the institutional frame of meaning. This limitation of critique can be clarified with by an outline of the hermeneutical theory of criticism sketched in model one. Though it is impossible to substantiate here, the model of critique that, for present purposes, I am calling ‘hermeneutic’ is meant as a formalization of the model of critique stemming from the

Enlightenment, pervasive throughout the democratic revolutions, and expressed in such contemporary approaches as the Frankfurt School, phenomenology, and Marxism, as well as hermeneutical philosophy.

Model One: A Hermeneutic Model of Critique

Discourse = context of inter-action = the public sphere	Statement[1], statement[2] ... statement[n]
Institutions and critical social movements	Topic[t]
Origins and legitimations	Tradition[1]

The statements that constitute a contemporary discourse pertinent to a given topic refer to a single background tradition such that 1] each statement is dependent on the same tradition for its meaning, and 2] each statement criticizes and, thereby, continues the tradition. Public debate is thus the externalization of a topic in relation to a tradition such that it is applied to contemporary political judgment.

Hermeneutic theory shows that a single intervention in a discourse, or speech act, is meaningful only against the background of a tradition. A tradition is a history of speech acts that are bound together through mutual references, historic events, and interpretations of the tradition that have oriented subsequent action. This binding-together gives a distinct character to a tradition due to its topics, dominant metaphors, theoretical positions, and universals such that it can be distinguished from other traditions. Thus, despite mutual influences, one can speak of French and German philosophy, the English system of law, or Canadian Federal multicultural policy. The tradition contains universalizations of the particular experiences that have formed its binding-together. While these universalizations later can be criticized for remaining

imbedded in the particularism of their origins in order to argue for an extension of the universal claims of the tradition, they also enable criticism in a way that purely particular claims would not.

Normally, that is to say, outside a multicultural and postcolonial context, a statement is straightforwardly given meaning by a one-sided dependence on the tradition. The hermeneutic model of critique pertains to *universalization*, that is to say, the carrying-forward of a tradition by universalizing against the particularistic origins of the tradition. For example, the ‘rights of man,’ in their original formulation assumed that a ‘man’ was a male human and an owner of property. Subsequently, because of the universal *claims* of the rights of man, despite these particularistic limitations, the working class (who were not owners of property), women (who were not of the masculine gender), and non-white people (who had not been acceded full humanity) could be seen as ‘men’ in the universal sense *claimed* within the tradition. One can then revise the initial formulation’s reference to ‘men’ and refer instead to ‘persons.’

This hermeneutic model of critique thus contains what can be called a universalization-dynamic whereby it comes to refer to an increasingly large class of subjects claiming the rights in question. This process, of course, does not occur automatically, but rather through the social struggles against entrenched power which the previously-excluded subjects wage. It is crucial, however, that the struggle for inclusion can refer to the *putatively* universal original claims in order to point out their *actual* limitation and thus argue for their *possible* extension. Put negatively, without the overblown universalizing—and, indeed, for this very reason, classist, sexist and racist—

assumptions of the original term ‘man,’ the critique would not be possible as an *internal* critique driving a universalization-dynamic.

Let us note several aspects of this model of critique. 1] The tradition can never be entirely objectified.⁵ While elements of it can be stated in order to clarify the meaning of the statement, the tradition as a whole remains an unthematic background upon which claims draw. 2] The role assigned the topic in the tradition can shift only within certain strict limits as a consequence of a statement. This is because the statement refers to a topic whose place is settled within the tradition and can shift the role of the topic within the tradition only to the (partial) extent that it can objectify the tradition through its interventions in contemporary discourse. 3] Thus, while the tradition and the role assigned to the topic can, and does, shift historically, this historic shift can not be addressed by statements. The shift in tradition as such is outside the thematic orientation of debate.

The basic assumption of the hermeneutic model of critique is the pre-existence of a concept of critique within the tradition such that it can later be universalized. If there were no claim to the ‘rights of man,’ for example, later extensions would be impossible. Moreover, the claim to ‘rights of man’ itself is a critique of the previous assumption that there was a hierarchy within humanity such that only the aristocracy were fully human and could claim rights against the king. It is for this reason that many analysts, rightly in my view, claim that the democratic political tradition is dependent on philosophy for its model of critique—even though it is there first articulated within a closed circle.⁶

3. A Multicultural and Postcolonial Model of Critique

It is my contention that, in the present multicultural and postcolonial condition which is emerging, the features of critique evident in the hermeneutic model are, at least potentially, radicalized. We can glimpse the possibility of a new model of critique that functions differently in relation to the plurality of traditions and toward any attempts to stabilize hierarchically the relations of this plurality. The ‘multiculturality’ of the speech act refers to the plurality of traditions within which a given statement takes on meaning. The ‘postcoloniality’ of the speech act refers to the absence of a definitive hierarchy between traditions. The key features of this condition are sketched in model two.

Model Two: A Multicultural and Postcolonial Model of Critique

Discourse = context of inter-action = the public sphere	Statement[1]	Statement[2]	...	Statement[n]
Institutions and critical social movements	Topic[t]	Topic[t]	...	Topic[t]
Origins and legitimations	Tradition[1]	Tradition[2]	...	Tradition[n]

Let us first explain certain aspects of this model. Statement[1] and statement[2] refer to each other because they speak about the same topic. The topic can be defined as that which is at issue in the current political context of institutions and social movements. The totality of statements referring to this topic within a current debate can be called a discourse. A discourse is thus rooted in the interplay between established institutions and

the new claims made by social movements. A plurality of topics is bound together by a tradition. Any given statement thus intervenes in a discourse, speaks about a topic in relation to current politics, and refers to a tradition within which the statement takes on meaning.⁷

Compared to the hermeneutic model, the co-reference of the statements of a discourse is still rooted in a topic, but the topic is, in a certain sense, 'unloosened' from a single tradition by the reference to a plurality of legitimate traditions. Thus, the topic takes on an enlarged meaning in the sense that its contemporary gathering of traditions takes over some of the establishment of meaning from the single tradition. Also, while the relevant tradition still functions as the context of meaning for a statement, the statement does not 'continue' the tradition in the same sense since the 'weight' of the topic in the tradition is externalized not only in the context of contemporary exigencies but also in relation to the way this context is meaningfully defined in relation to a plurality of traditions. Public debate is thus the externalization of a topic in relation to the plurality of traditions such that it is no longer one-sidedly dependent on tradition, but traditions are also defined through the topic. Contemporary political judgment thus experiences a 'loosening' from tradition and a correlative 'freeing' of the topic so that statements bear greater weight in relation to the contexts that establish their meaning. Indeed, the way in which these contexts are re-presented within the statement and discourse becomes a major point for further criticism.

In a situation in which there is more than one tradition to which one can legitimately appeal to give a current statement meaning, the discourse consists of statements about the

same topic made against the background of different traditions within which their meaning is constituted. Each tradition uniquely constitutes: 1] the meaning of the statement, 2] the *history* of the topic, and 3] the manner in which the topic is bound into a history—which gives it a differential weight—such as the importance credited to individual versus collective rights, for example—in relation to another tradition.

This contemporary context allows a given speech act to take on an expanded critical role with respect to both established institutions and legitimating traditions. Let us begin by recalling the limitation of critique within the hermeneutic model. Hermeneutic critique pertains to the universalization-dynamic rooted in the particularistic origins of the universal claims made within a tradition and assumes that the universalization of an imbedded concept of critique is adequate to contemporary political demands. An expanded, decentred concept of critique will thus operate in two dimensions: First, it speaks to the possibility of making a claim pertinent to a tradition but not possible within that tradition, through what we might call the *borrowing*, or translation, of legitimations from other traditions. I am not an expert in constitutional history, but I believe that the calls in English Canada for a constitutional convention are of this sort in that they borrow from French constitutional history which is—now, by virtue of our mixed history in Canada—a source of legitimation in English Canada. Radical democracy thus requires a new concept of political debate. Second, it speaks to the possibility of objectifying a tradition within current discourse, that is to say, to the limits of a tradition as such. I will conclude by briefly considering each of these in turn.

4. Radical Democratic Debate

‘Plurality of legitimate traditions’ means that the relevant context of a speech act is, on the one hand, the topic to which various statements refer and, on the other hand, the tradition(s) on which it draws. Whereas for hermeneutic critique the topic is enfolded within the continuation of a given tradition, here it is split into synchronic and diachronic dimensions with different references because the place of the topic differs within different traditions. The relevant context can thus increasingly only be defined through the way the statement itself positions itself in relation to the topic and draws together strands from various traditions. Context no longer precedes and defines the place of a statement but is defined solely through the act of gathering a context accomplished by the speech act.

Content and context shift places.⁸ Instead of the context establishing rules for the interpretation of a given act, the act gathers a context so as to illuminate the interaction between various sets of rules—both the institutional rules of the current discourse concerning a topic and the historically-embedded rules of traditions. The consequence of this shift is that unlike the stability of a prior context, a gathering that defines a context is inevitably arguable. Debate of this radical democratic type is at least as much over whether the relevant context has been properly gathered as over the established question of whether what the statement proposes is advisable. It concerns what one argues *from*, not that *towards which* one argues and is, for this reason, essentially and necessarily contestable and reflexive. It proceeds backwards, as it were, along the argument made in

the utterance to the gathering of context that makes it possible.⁹ It is thus a beginning statement, not a final one. It calls for response, not resolution.

An utterance in a radical democratic discourse is thus not, even in principle, an attempt to resolve a debate with a definitive statement. It is rather an invitation to explore the gathering that constitutes the statement's actuality (in both the English and French senses of that word). Debate doesn't counter one statement with another in an agonistic contest—as the model of athletic competition or war that has dominated the concept of political debate since the Greeks implies—nor does it point to an ideal commonality understood as identity, or sameness—as the Christian undermining of the oppositions that define politics suggests. Radical democratic debate takes an utterance as a knot in order to unwind the various strands that render it sensible in the present context. Decision-making is neither winning or losing, nor finding a pre-existent harmony, but rather peace-making within different gatherings. Peace, understood in this way, is not merely the absence of war, but is the knitting-together of strands from different traditions that overcome the pure externality of other traditions (an externality that is the presupposition for violence)—even though the connecting strands have different meanings within the traditions that they connect.

5. Peace and Treaty

Tradition is, in a certain sense, *suspended* when it no longer functions as an assumed horizon within which all speakers speak and which therefore confers meaning on all utterances.¹⁰ The context of tradition that gives meaning is still operative, but its

operation shrinks, as it were, to confer meaning on a single speech act which must then be rendered meaningful to interlocutors by translation. Such translations constitute a contemporary political discourse oriented to a certain theme. The synchronic and diachronic dimensions of meaning are no longer encompassed within a tradition but are stretched between a contemporary ‘discourse’ and a historical ‘tradition’ such that meaning no longer refers one-sidedly to ‘origin’ but is stretched between ‘origin’ and ‘translation.’ The necessity of translation means that the appearance of tradition in the present no longer stands behind the speakers but is *gathered* by an utterance and *translated* to other speakers.

This expanded possibility for objectifying tradition emerges when a reflexive statement cannot be stabilized by a hierarchization of levels of discourse. Since every speech act depends upon a tradition is it always at least implicitly reflexive. However, if the tradition does not pre-exist but is gathered in the act of speaking, then the hierarchy between acts cannot be definitively stabilized. One-sided dependence of act on tradition is displaced by a co-reference of two levels of discourse in which neither can claim primacy. In this way, a given speech act can put into question the rules of interaction between traditions without simply assuming a given tradition as primary—which is the content-context reversibility. The postcoloniality of radical democratic discourse consists in the abandonment of the attempt to monopolize and hierarchize the rules of interaction between traditions. It is a de-centring of the discourse of interaction insofar as the rules are themselves subject to negotiation. It leads to a politics of treaties rather than hermeneutic extension of attenuated claims to universality within a tradition. A treaty can

be accepted by both sides, but in different terms based on their internal understanding of it. There are no rules for treaties, only a history open to a plurality of interpretations. This gives rise to a common history shared by the treaty-making groups that is constituted by the necessary plurality, not only of different interpretations, but of different conceptions of interpretation themselves. Treaties imply a politics of peace-making based upon mutual respect. Such respect is not founded on knowledge of the other, but on the history and ethics of interaction with the Other.

The lack of a hierarchy between traditions such that they present simply an indefinite, though overlapping, plurality has the consequence that the multicultural and postcolonial speech act contains a paradoxical self-reference. The essentially and necessarily contestable and reflexive character of the speech act means that the position of the subject from which the statement is made is itself constituted by the utterance. In other words, the identity of the speaking subject in radical democratic discourse is constituted by the speech act. Since the speech act itself gathers the relevant traditions, the subject cannot be understood as pre-existing the utterance. Thus, the subject is constituted within current discourse through the gathering of traditions in relation to a topic, which expands the sense in which a tradition can be objectified, and thus judged, within a current discourse.

The speech act constitutes the speaking subject not within a tradition but *against* a tradition. This doesn't necessarily mean in political opposition to it, but rather in conceptual distinction from it, which implies a standing-apart from tradition that enables a greater objectification of a tradition as a totality than previously possible. The tradition is objectifiable as a totality with respect to the relative position, or importance, of a topic

within it—which, as we noted above, is not possible within hermeneutic criticism. This objectification does not extend to the tradition as an aggregate (empirical) totality, nor as a (Hegelian) totality of determinations, but rather as a (phenomenological) horizational totality defined in relation to the given topic—which we can understand as a Gestalt theme-background relation.¹¹ The radical democratic political subject is not outside tradition but is beyond any single tradition and is constituted through the encounter with meanings that are not shared. Such a subject does not expect agreement, but seeks alliances—alliances which are always partial and thus protect the singularity of the subject, do not take it up into a ‘higher unity.’

I have attempted to follow some of the consequences of a radical democratic political theory that insists on the inadequacy of any ‘centrism,’ which we can define as the carrying-over of particular features of traditions into a claim to universals which are taken to standardize the context of interaction with other traditions. I have argued that only the constitutive paradox of the multicultural and postcolonial speech act can undermine centrism. Rather than encouraging a general relativism, as many critiques of centrism suggest, I have focussed on the *context of interaction* between traditions in contemporary discourse. This context of interaction grounds a new conception of the public which expands the notion of critique available in contemporary politics and which we have begun to see emerge in the streets of Seattle and Prague.

Notes:

¹ See, for example, Alan C. Cairns, John C. Courtney, Peter MacKinnon, Hans J. Michelmann and David E. Smith (eds.), *Citizenship, Diversity and Pluralism* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1999) and Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

² Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self" in *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 1, February 1984, pp. 81-96.

³ J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) p. 6.

⁴ See my *Primal Scenes of Communication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000) chapter 1.

⁵ While this position originated within hermeneutic philosophy, it has since been much more generally accepted as an expression of the dependence of a statement, even a critical statement, on a historical context to establish its meaning. Jürgen Habermas was influential in this larger acceptance when, in his debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer, he accepted this point as a valid contribution of hermeneutics. See his "A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*" in *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, eds. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

⁶ This exposition skips over the important question of the role of Christianity in universalizing the concept of equality—initially only 'before God' but later in more directly

political application—through the idea of conversion and thus initiating the universality of modern democracy. The question of the extent to which the Christian concept depends on the Greek philosophical tradition takes us to the vexed question of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem which I cannot address here.

⁷ Some of this terminology is stipulative, at least in this context, but I hope not confusingly so. Since the term 'discourse,' due to its derivation from Saussure, usually refers to the co-given-ness or synchronicity of the differential elements of a *langue*, I have analogously used the term to refer to the contemporaneity of current statements on a topic. The term 'tradition,' in contrast, usually refers to the temporally-imbedded character or diachrony of the meaningful context. I have used it in this way to refer to the multiplicity of such legitimate traditions.

⁸ See the example in Ian Angus, *A Border Within*, p. 166.

⁹ This means that radical democratic debate adopts a different model of reflexion that that normal in post-Cartesian philosophy. When beginning from the subject-object dualism as the model of knowledge, modern philosophy defined philosophical reflection as a second reflection upon the subject-object relation such that it united them in a third, or synthetic, act of thought. In contrast, the model of debate presented here as a reversal of the movement of argument, a "step back" in Heidegger's terminology or a "phenomenological reduction" in Husserl's, does not press toward a synthesis but looks backward at the prior existence of the strands that are synthesized and at the manner of the synthesis accomplished in the utterance.

¹⁰ This formulation of the relation between act and tradition thus overcomes the apparent fork between either the hermeneutic ‘one-sided dependence of act on tradition’ or the deconstructive search for ‘an act not encompassed by tradition.’ See, in this context, Jacques Derrida’s attempt to portray the U.S. Declaration of Independence as a self-instituting speech act and the well-grounded critique of this attempt by J. Claude Evans. Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence” in *New Political Science*, No. 15, Summer 1986, pp. 7-15 and J. Claude Evans, “Deconstructing the Declaration: A Case Study in Pragmatology” in *Man and World*, Vol. 23, 1990, pp. 175-89.

¹¹ I have explored the significance of this difference between Hegelian and Husserlian concepts of totality for contemporary political philosophy in *(Dis)figurations* (London and New York: Verso, 2000) chapter 4.