

## **The Community to Come: Reconsidering Democracy by Way of the Ethics of Life**

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How can engaging in the question of the ethics of life in contemporary Spain, or in any other ambit, for that matter, form the basis for reconsidering democracy—a concept, to be sure, lodged at the core of Spain’s post-Francoist historical trajectory and most pressing socio-political issues in the new millennium? Contributors to the volume *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* collectively pinpoint some overlapping tendencies that help forge a response to this question. On the one hand, many essays challenge the strict demarcation between human and non-human forms of life (Beilin, Ares López, Viestenz) and consider how a posthumanist paradigm better achieves the radical openness to otherness and contestation of the fixed institution of power that function as two of democracy’s most salient hallmarks (Rancière 54). In addition, ecological thinking (or, in Morton’s terms, the ‘ecological thought’), in essays by Prádanos, Feinberg and Larson, and Trevathan, is a conduit toward more significant and broadly inclusive participatory networks whose horizontal ‘enmeshment’ also departs from top-down, vertical forms of State power.

The concept of democracy, of course, presupposes, to varying extents, open participatory frameworks in which the *demos*, or public, self-rules. But against this principle of radical openness, democracies also enact procedures that are binding for the citizenry, even if each member of the polity does not decide on or participate directly in such resolutions. Indeed, this is the crux of the current stalemate in Spain with respect to the movement in Catalonia toward the right to decide on its self-rule: on one hand, a nation in the northeast of the State, with a historical tradition of self-governance and autonomy, has made claims to allow for the collective expression regarding its sovereign status be heard through the democratic process of a referendum. On the other hand, democracy is also invoked by those in support of the Tribunal Constitucional’s abrogation of parts of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy in 2010 and the court’s determination of the putative

unconstitutionality of calling plebiscites to decide on self-rule in 2014. As the Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, affirmed in February of this year, renegeing on the law is incompatible with democratic process: “sin ley, no hay democracia” (Rajoy qtd. in Cué) (without law, there is no democracy). Subtending Rajoy’s assertion is the inseparability of sovereignty—indeed, of *cratos*—from rule of the *demos*. Or, in what amounts to the same, that Catalonia and Spain are at loggerheads over competing rights to decide invites discussion on the concept of cratic sovereignty and the specter of democracy’s impossibility. Embodied within the very verbal locution ‘to decide’ is an indeterminacy that is consistent with democracy itself as a governable system, in the sense that in the conducting of the affairs of the State, final judgments must be issued that, regardless of their basis of consensus, settle disputes, but to a certain degree this resolution necessarily *cuts* a line between rulers and challengers. This is abundantly clear in the Tribunal Constitucional’s declaring null and void any *consulta soberanista*, but even the most marked overlapping of consensus is not immune to the machinations of power.

The dispute in Catalonia and Spain harkens to mind the assertion that Jacques Derrida made in seminars and in writings not long before his death that democracy easily becomes immunological; or rather, its openness to plurality inevitably permits the inclusion and flourishing of elements that threaten the foundations on which the State rests. As a result, the State turns against itself in a gesture that is auto-destructive and potentially inconsistent with its very self-fashioning as a democratic entity (32–36). Derrida’s thought concerns primarily the possibility that democratization allows for processes that bring anti-democratic entities to power, such as the free election of a party with an authoritarian platform. However, the Catalan case reveals that this self-regulation can also be *auto-immunizing* in the sense that it curtails a democratic claim, from within the State, to a plebiscite, which in Spain is meant to maintain its status quo geo-political configuration. In this, democracy’s self-regulation can also become auto-immunological, in that it attacks tissue perceived to be threatening, but is in fact a healthy component of the openness of participatory frameworks that the system of government conceptually promises.

This auto-immunological critique of democracy—the manner in which it cleanses internal elements perceived to be incongruous with a certain vision of the State—is surprisingly consistent with the anthropomorphic notion of humanism. Dominick LaCapra’s incisive dismantling of the humanistic paradigm shows this overlap between the two terms. In essence, notions of the human tend not only separate that class of life from other forms of animality, but also create exclusive, scapegoated categories of belonging that deprecate certain types of human beings whose undesirable qualities come to constitute a form of ontological Otherness:

A question concerning humanism is whether it has always required a radical other, perhaps even a quasi-sacrificial victim and scapegoat, in the form of some excluded or denigrated category of beings, often other animals or animality itself. As categories of humans (such as women or nonwhite ‘races’) have been critically disclosed as the encrypted other of humanism, however universalistic in its pretensions, the other-than-human animal in its animality has been left as the residual repository of projective alienation or radical otherness. (154)

Precisely in the same fashion that Derrida critiques the auto-immunological tendency of democratic governance to eschew adopting behaviors and practices that presuppose an otherness ‘to come,’ LaCapra takes humanism to task for maintaining infra-ethical zones of animality that preclude even the presupposition of engagement and coexistence with certain denigrated categories of beings, whether other-than-human-animals or other-than-human-humans. The encrypted otherness within humanism not only approaches animality as a type of excluded repository, a void against which the human negatively defines itself, but simultaneously fulfills a political function by determining the outer limits that mark eligibility for inclusion within participatory socio-political networks.

The next logical step would be to assert that democracy’s radical openness to otherness and its presupposition of a plurality to come, which always already awaits “the next resurgence” (Derrida 38), is incomplete if the encounter between subjects remains circumscribed within the exclusive space occupied by the class of humanistic life separated from the calumniated class of animality and other-than-human life outlined by LaCapra. How could democracy be remodeled without the foreclosure between human and animal, or even the internal cleavages within humanism itself? Timothy Morton puts forth such a proposal when he asserts that democracy, ideally, implies a coexistence in which encounters are staged between “strange strangers.” “The stranger is infinity. Since the strange stranger is not my mirror, there is no way of knowing whether she, or he, or it is a person. So before we get to mutual recognition, we must have radical openness” (80–81). ‘Strange strangers’ is Morton’s substitute for the term ‘animal’ precisely because the latter carries connotations linked to how humans fail to tolerate other forms of life on their own merits, overlooking epistemological barriers and ontological complexity by denying the strangeness of their existence. Encountering strange strangers, whether they be included within the jettisoned categories of the human or the animal, is a risky, uncomfortable procedure as an openness to new attachments and ways of being-in-the-world trump the imperative to first recognize the other as a

(human) subject, which, if it were the first step, would tend to solicit a mapping of the self onto the other, which is the core of anthropocentrism.

Because encountering strange strangers is a Levinasian glimpse at infinity, the Other cannot be primordially mapped with signification because he or she precedes experience; “the relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it” (Levinas 25). This statement from *Totality and Infinity*, an excerpt of which forms the epigraph of Morton’s *The Ecological Thought*, suggests that radical openness to risky, perverse encounters with the Other is not only a tenet of democratic principle but also an ethical cornerstone for one’s stance toward the world. A democracy of strange strangers opens up agency to the breadth of being because the encounter with the Other’s infinity, by overflowing judgment, precludes a categorization of beings into ontological boxes. The strangeness of a strange stranger “itself is strange. We can never absolutely figure them out. If we could, then all we would have is a ready-made box to put them in, and we would just be looking at the box, not at the strange strangers” (41). Sovereignty, of course, as well as the classical notion of the human, prioritizes the box and the ability to make decisions on the exception.

Beyond rupturing the Aristotelian delimitation of political animality to certain members of the human collective, a democracy of strange strangers also ruptures the fixity and totalizing thrust of any sovereign political unit. In short, a State’s incapacity to decide upon exceptions to political agency based on sovereign determinations that elevate and denigrate certain forms of life creates a political sphere that is itself risky, unpredictable, and unstable. These new types socio-political networks can be thought of as Deleuzian assemblages where the included parts are both constantly in flux and shifting meaning according to the quality and complexity of their attachments to other parts (Deleuze and Guattari 4–5). What any particular democracy ‘means’ or ‘signifies’ thus becomes eminently variable and open to contingent encounter, as a network of strange strangers never reaches a point of totality at which the assembled parts are definitively known, recognized, and overdetermined in any stable sense. Rancière echoes this thought in his qualification of democracy as an anarchic arrangement: “democracy is neither a pre-determined distribution of roles nor an attribution of the exercise of power to a disposition for ruling. The ‘drawing of lots’ presents the paradox of a ‘qualification without qualification’, of one that spells the absence of *arkhè*” (51).

In *Ethics of Life*, one finds striking examples of democratic networks that arise out of the unpredictable, risky assemblage of actants, human or otherwise, and the contingent signification of political subjectivity by way of uncertain encounters with certain material and other-than-human singularities. Trevathan’s inquiry into the *Nunca Más* movement and

*Prestige* oil spill is illustrative. Trevathan outlines the several layers of risk attached to the disaster, particularly the ecological riskiness of embedding the transport and combustion of petroleum in global networks of capital. Following Morton, one comes to see an additional riskiness in how the catastrophe unleashes a chain of events leading to a confluence of strange strangers, which ultimately produces a movement of popular rule referred to as *Nunca Más*. Who are these strangers? The ship, for one, grows in its peculiarity the more it is documented, photographed, and studied—a dynamic Trevathan pinpoints in his analysis of Xurxo Lobato's famed photograph of the ship's final moments. The spilled oil is an additional actant, as are the numerous forms of wildlife negatively affected by the spill. The *Nunca Más* protest movement is itself a collective effort, borne of an encounter with strange strangers, to restore the *cratic* function of the *demos* with respect to its relationship to the environment and is also a dissensual objection to how the marriage of the neo-liberal, late capitalist Nation State with the global economy disbars the political agency of non-human agents, like the affected wildlife.

In my analysis of Salvador Espriu's *La pell de brau* included in the volume, *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, I endeavored to show in part that tracking uses of the animal as a figuration of the political allows one to see a discourse of power that pairs two classes of being that exist at each other's antipodes: the sovereign and the beast. Over the course of Espriu's work, I put forth that the figure of the bull comes to occupy a horizontal plane of movement shared by human agents, and the two—using a concept of John Frow's—come to exchange properties rather than being considered two classes of being at a vertical, hierarchical remove from one another. Over the course of Espriu's collection, the beast becomes a bull, and in this restoration a kind of strangeness emerges because the animal is no longer a totemic stand-in whose sacrifice and mutilation is quilted into the meaning production of human mythology and collective memory. A renewed encounter between strange strangers thus reemerges in the sands of Iberia that privileges radical openness. Other touchstones of democracy similarly reemerge.

For example, the work asserts new parameters for shared governance of Sepharad, the Iberian peninsula, and leaves behind the models of authority founded on the State's unilateral right to violence in favor of an egalitarian, non-hierarchical order instituted on the overlapping of dialogic consensus and the divisibility of power. Poem V avers, for example, that “no pot escollir príncep qui vessa sang” (he who spills blood cannot choose a prince) while Sepharad's new call to political co-existence in poem XXX asserts “diversos són els homes i diverses les parles, / i han convingut molts noms a un sol amor” (diverse are men and diverse are their speeches, / and many names are capable of expressing a single love). Given the sharp biblical

overtone of the collection, one could surmise that this type of political love is agapeic, or akin to agape. Žižek most notably pinpoints agape as a type of revolutionary egalitarian affection that ties together singularities in an emancipatory configuration, with St. Paul's deconstruction of the primary organizational binaries of his epoch being a touchstone example (106). In Espriu, similar sentiment appears in Poem XLVI in an address to the Sephardian collective: "Fes que siguin segurs els ponts del diàleg / i mira de comprendre i estimar / les raons i les parles diverses dels teus fills" (make sure that the points of dialogue are secure / try to understand and respect / the reasoning and diverse speeches of your sons). An openness to a diversity of dialogue subtends this verse, but it also fraught with what Derrida would argue are immunological procedures. First, the stability of the points of exchange emerges out of two poetic mandates—"fes que siguin segurs els ponts del diàleg," which lays a principled foundation for the exchange of speech, and "mira de comprendre i estimar les raons i les parles," a demand to understanding and respect that disallows univocal modes of being that would destroy the democratic respect for otherness. The imperatives assert a set of preconditions that bracket the free play of dialogue such that anti-democratic voices cannot emerge from within and auto-destroy the collective. These immunological procedures reflect the conditions of democracy as such, as it must enact conditions that bring one regime of power to a conclusion but also set the self-limiting parameters that permit a new political beginning.

For Sepharad to be a thinkable object distinct from other political entities, some minimum qualifications for belonging are required, which comes about at the end of the verse, as those invited to the dialogue are Sepharad's "fills." The radical openness to otherness is thus tempered and restricted. Poem II in fact qualifies the boundaries of the third person plural form that populates the poems: "El sol no pot assecar, pell de brau, la sang que tots hem vessat, la que vessarem demà" (The sun cannot desiccate, bull's hide, the blood that we all have spilled, that which we will spill tomorrow). The 'we' refers specifically to those who have spilled blood in the past—including, it seems, the bull in the opening lyrics of the collection—and will spill blood in the future. Later in the collection, the new political reality of Sepharad is conceptualized poetically as the reconstruction of a lost temple, another clear Old Testament reference to the Third Temple prophesied in the Book of Ezekial in the wake of the Second Temple's ruination. Resurrecting Sepharad from its period of decadence precisely involves constructing "el lent temple / del teu treball" (poem XLVII) (the slow temple / of your work). The concept of work is thus the conduit through which one receives grace and the blessing needed to continue *trepitjant* (stepping over) the geopolitical space demarcated by the stretched out skin of the bull. Importantly, the terms for belonging to the

Sepharadian political body are open, not predicated on ethnic, religious identity. The poetic voice thus acknowledges the interminability and contingency of Sepharad's own composition, as anyone who dedicates work to the temple's construction can become a *fill* of the State. Yet the reality of this mass of *fills* is always beyond the printed page of Espriu's poetic text; its verses are written around an absence that eludes textual inscription. Democracy is thus a contingent assemblage of parts that each form relations of exteriority with other strange strangers, but because of its multiplicity of virtualities, the absolute significance of 'Sepharad' as a political space is always deferred into the future. What matters is that one act under the presupposition that a radical openness will lead to new encounters that might be, as Morton writes, "loving [for Espriu, agapeic], risky, perverse" (81). The work of instituting Sepharad is thus never complete, and the temple to come exists only in the *somnis* of those called to work and sacrifice. For this reason, the final lines of the collection proclaim that "anem escrivint / en aquesta pell estesa . . . a poc a poc el nom / de Sepharad" (we go about writing / in that stretched out hide, [ . . . ] little by little the name / of Sepharad). The gerundial form connotes both a movement fraught with vitality, but also a present action that yields to a future moment of work; a deferral to coming conjunctions of *diverses parles, homes*, and, without doubt, strange strangers.

In conclusion, the poem offers a meditation on a question that Derrida, due to his death, also defers to us as the future audience of his texts: What does democracy mean, if it means anything at all? The democratic character of Sepharad only emerges due to its having followed a period of repressive dictatorship, but the extended bull's skin is a space becoming in time, a configuration that one goes about writing, propelled by the incommensurability between Sepharad existing as a poetic text and its excessive, overflowing flux of diversity on the ground. The meaning of Sepharad's democratic character, in other words, will be judged by a future iteration of the State and either the disruptibility of its self-grounding or its auto-immunological suppression of otherness. As the essays in *Ethics of Life* make clear, this disruptibility depends not only on the machinic assemblage of human socio-political networks but also on the ways that a whole host of strange strangers—humans, other-than-human-life, things, (hyper)objects—form relations, exchange properties, and submit to one another's dynamic organizational modalities.

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