

Sustainable Democracy: Ethnographic Perspectives

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In response to the organizers’ invitation to reflect on disciplinary concepts and resources, my discussion is aimed at clarifying the relevance of anthropology as useful knowledge in relation to the issue of sustainable democracy. Some, perhaps even most, readers might assume that the value of anthropology would be in filling in on the side of the popular reception of democratic initiatives – support for new regimes, demands for participation, satisfaction with outcomes, accounted for as artifacts of cultural orientation or worldview. These questions about aligning democracy with cultural markets are important, but – paradoxically, perhaps -- not the ones to which anthropology speaks most directly. Anthropology speaks to diversity more than to governability, and to the conditions of partnership more than liberty. These emphases and anthropology’s traditions of approaching the large scale through the lenses of the small scale may take some translation or acculturation for novice readers, and this essay speaks in part to those issues as a matter of method. But more fundamentally, the nature of that adjustment calls for an understanding something about the circumstances that have brought democracy into anthropology of late. In turn, this means understanding, also, what has kept the topic off the table (cf. Spencer 2007:74-75). My essay is aimed at sketching this double context, so as to explain some of the ways in which the subject of *democracy* poses challenges for the discipline, challenges (as I shall suggest) compounded by the question of sustainability.

To begin with a few observations as points of departure: anthropology’s engagement with democracy is not at the country level. For one thing, *country* is not a unit of analysis in anthropology; we deal in *relationships* and *meanings* in real time, as tangible and intangible aspects of *social processes*. Further, anthropology’s interpretive and comparative methods are grounded in ethnography – a methodology of the small scale, even in relation to global issues. Anthropology’s literature thus accumulates laterally – the method is classically called *cultural relativism*<sup>i</sup> -- meaning that we derive our comparative questions ethnographically rather than *a priori*. The modern approach to cultural comparison looks to social processes that are themselves adjacent or interacting in some way: as kin or co-religionists, trading partners or producers or consumers of common goods, as citizens subject to common policies, as social movements with shared ideologies or common goals – but not as a menu of beliefs or adherence to a checklist of ideas. In short, *culture* gives us our mode of inquiry, but not our unit of analysis – since cultures are not ideologies or organizations, and they do not form wholes. When modern anthropologists talk about culture, we tend to be referring to the interpretive premises that shape people’s mutual understandings and communication; we often refer to *cultural discourse* as a shorthand for these communicative repertoires and their effects. Ethnography is often intensely local for this reason. A ceremony – an inauguration, say – can yield rich evidence of discourse, once it is read, so to speak, in relation to other

elements of its context and significance for participants and audience. One might say the same of institutions – they are not objects for ethnographers, but ideas about social attachment put into practice as routines of various kinds.

I review these methodological points to help readers anticipate the discussion – and also to explain why anthropologists generally cannot answer questions in the form of “How many cultures do X?” or “How do other cultures do X?” or “What can we do to encourage the Y to do X?” Cultures are not individuals, they are not wholes, they do not speak, and they cannot be changed by design. We ask other questions. For example: How do communities mobilize around a sense of membership? How is cultural recognition implicated in the distribution of power and resources? How does citizenship accommodate cultural minorities? How does political legitimacy lend or borrow its key terms from the discourses of authority associated with constituent cultural communities and their social practices? What are the social relationships that account for competing interests and antagonisms? What are the stakes? What kinds of inclusion to communities seek, and in what terms?-- among many others. One consequence of these disciplinary orientations is that while there are rich anthropological literatures on the cultural dimensions of politics and law, authority and legitimacy, social movements and social change, demands for power and its uses, and – in the tradition of Max Weber, or Michel Foucault, or both<sup>ii</sup> – on aspects of governing, there is little anthropological writing on *government*.

Democracy, for anthropologists, tends not to be about governing, but about social participation and its implications for the distribution of power and other resources. In the next section, I will briefly describe the route by which anthropologists have come to the topic of democracy of late; for now, I will just observe that it is not, for the most part, through *states*.<sup>iii</sup> It is much more prominently through regions and other transnational relations – but only selectively. For example, although there is now an important anthropological literature on post-socialism<sup>iv</sup>, there is not yet an equivalent ethnographic literature framed around democracy. Post-socialist studies in a sense became heir to regional studies of eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc. By contrast, democracy has no regional legacy, in part because the main centers of democracy – at the country level, in the West, and more locally, in cities, were not on anthropologists’ screens until relatively recently. Ethnographic studies of Europe and the United States, not to speak of urban life, are relatively new in anthropology – dating from the same period in which democracy emerged from social fields affected by the transformations of the period (see, e.g., Abeles on the European Parliament, Chock on the U.S. Congress xxx).<sup>v</sup>

Anthropologists arrived at democracy only relatively recently – through the study of nationalism and social movements (David Nugent’s work being a leading example) and the transnational private sector institutions associated with global capitalism or human rights (or both). Only recently, in other words, have the public-private partnerships associated with neoliberal reform, and identity-based demands for sovereignty and land, brought localized democratic discourses more prominently in the foreground. The Bush administration’s National Security Strategy and the complex politicization of democracy attendant on “war on terror” – as well as the recent surge of attention to human rights among anthropologists -- have also contributed to broadening the scope for ethnography along localized horizons of democratic discourse (Greenhouse 2006).<sup>vi</sup> In general, democracy arrives at anthropology as a localization of transnational

concerns such as these – i.e., global capitalism, human rights, and security. This accounts for a sense of problem that tends to overstate what Nugent calls “normative democracy” (2008) as a template for politics in general, and to understate both the diversity of political forms and processes and the importance of non-political aspects of life that are also essential to whatever we might mean by democracy.<sup>vii</sup>

*Democracy* involves important challenges for anthropologists – challenges at once ethnographic, reflexive and critical. In what follows I explore aspects of these three challenges as opportunities for methodological and theoretical innovation. First, with respect to ethnographic challenges, I begin with the circumstances that account for the recent emergence of democracy as an ethnographic and comparative issue. Second, in relation to the reflexive challenges, I consider the ways the issue of *sustainability* presses us to reassess fundamental premises about the nature of society, collective consciousness, and the public.

## I. Tools and concepts: Democratic implications

As a topic for anthropology, democracy emerged out of the end of the cold war, and more broadly, from the combined intellectual challenges of the collapse of state socialism in Africa, Europe and the former USSR as well as the end of apartheid in South Africa.<sup>viii</sup> A new politics of representation was nourished by post-colonial and subaltern studies (see Spencer 2007:3). New claims to autonomy and sovereignty proliferated, often in ethnonationalist terms; state responses to such claims differed in their recognition of identity-based political communities as consistent with contemporary terms of citizenship. Anthropologists’ studies of these processes concentrated on ethnogenesis and minoritization (i.e., constitution of minority groups through processes of recognition) as well as continuities and discontinuities in the constitution of identities relative to earlier forms of collective self-identity. At the time, studies of the historical constitution of identity were integral to the displacement of race and mentality as determinants of cultural identity.

In these new contexts, then, anthropologists concerned with cultural minorities and social mobilization developed their main methodological approaches around problems of hegemony, ideology and agency – three moments, so to speak, in the circulation of power – effectively converting conventional notions of social structure into questions of contestation and social transformation. Especially in ethnographies from Africa and South Asia, these issues were historically framed around coloniality – but they were also very much about the current scene. To take just one example, Comaroff and Comaroff’s (1991) historical ethnography among the Tswana reinterprets colonial experience as generating the preconditions for the anti-apartheid Black Consciousness movement. Their work – widely influential among anthropologists and sociolegal scholars -- unsettles the distinction between colonizer and colonized, ruler and subject, state and citizen, conjuring an opening – at once dialectical and democratic -- in the very concept of consciousness:

Hegemony is invariably unstable and vulnerable. Never merely an assertion of order, it always involves an effort to redress contradictions, to limit the eruption

of alternative meanings and critical awareness. From the mute experience of such tensions arise new kinds of experimental consciousness, new ideologies that point out the discrepancies between received worldviews and the worlds they claim to mirror (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:314).<sup>ix</sup>

At the same time, democratization entailed a powerful international discourse that transnational media made available for localized struggles (Nugent 2008:22-23).<sup>x</sup> Legal scholar Heinz Klug summarizes the moment of the 1990's produced by this new sense of problem around culture as the conceptual location of democratic struggle *outside* the state:

[T]he defining feature of the wave of political reconstruction and constitution-making that has characterized the end of the cold war is its historical timing. Not only has the alternative of state socialism and many of its associated forms been at least temporarily discredited, but there has also emerged a hegemonic notion of electoral democracy and economic freedom that is rooted in the history of twentieth-century struggles for democracy and individual freedom... [T]he sum and combination of social movements and struggles that have characterized the twentieth century have shaped international political culture. *It is this legacy that has eclipsed the state-centred notions of politics that were the product of the massive interstate conflicts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries* (Klug 2000:9; emphasis added).<sup>xi</sup>

The rise of identity-based social movements in settings imprinted by successive displacements of local authority by colonial rule and national governments attracted the attention of sociocultural anthropologists – as *culture* shifted, or expanded, from an academic term of art to a banner of belonging and revindication. As events of the time revolved around profound challenges to state power (in South Africa, in the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, and in the creation of the European Union, among other developments) anthropologists were pulled – often by the people among whom they worked – into new questions about state power. Important review essays of the time sound a double refrain – ringing both the novelty of the moment and its complex challenges to conventional anthropological thinking. Notable among the latter is the urgency of need to reevaluate the habits of scalar thinking that tend to distance state power from personal agency and intimate self-knowledge (Aretxaga 2003, Edelman 2001, Kowal 2008, Nagengast 1994).<sup>xii</sup> That connection carries with it a democratic implication, fusing state power to personal self-fashioning through social participation.

Democracy did not enter anthropology *as a topic*, in other words, so much as it did as an *interpretive repertoire*, a way of connecting the dynamic transformations in the global geopolitical scene to the situations of minority communities in their own struggles for survival, subsistence and recognition. But the map of that path – marked out, as noted above, by a broad dialectical question about the hegemonic effects of state power on the conditions of self-knowledge and social action – did not lead anthropologists immediately into domains of government. Rather, it led them to questions of knowledge and power, and to the mutual (if asymmetrical) embeddedness of knowledge production and power relations in discourse. To put this another way, anthropologists were drawn to questions of what counts as knowledge, and what counts as legitimate means of

knowledge, as indices of power relations – with power, in turn, understood as a problem of internalized meanings, and not merely the direct effects of coercive force. This is a profoundly democratic reading of power, as Laclau and Mouffe all but state in their discussion of hegemony and democracy; they argue – *contra* what they regard as liberal centrists’ appeals for a “democratization of democracy” through consensus – for an “extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations” (1985:xv).

For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony should not be generalized in theory, or imagined as a force that can be swept away by consensus. Rather, they argue, hegemony’s effects can be countered only by addition – as political communities succeed in pluralizing hegemony through political opposition (xiv-xv). Political antagonism, from this perspective, has “the status of an ontology of the social” (xiv, emphasis omitted) and, in their influential view, the multiplication of hegemonies through the proliferation of expressive communities is sustained by their common (if divergent) discursivity.<sup>xiii</sup> While anthropologists absorbed their interest in discourse from many sources (importantly Foucault – as well as by osmosis), Laclau and Mouffe’s work is a vivid example of how and why attention to discourse was (is), in a sense, an extension of democratic sensibility – and methodologically attuned to the specificities of social and political life such as are the main concerns of ethnographers. Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation is born out of the specific geopolitical context of the 1980’s and the emergence of a “third way” between liberalism and socialism, but it is fundamentally about local politics – laterally, as competition, and vertically, as antagonisms in a more structural key. It is crucial to understand the democratic implication of *discourse* conceived in this way. It is not simply or merely language. Rather, it is theorized as an answer to the question of how private knowledge worlds (whether individual or collective) become plural and public through political life. Other scholars at this same time addressed the elusive question of the state in similar terms – as a discourse with powerful – but never total -- hegemonic effects (Abrams 1988, Alonso 1995, Mitchell 1991).<sup>xiv</sup>

The democracy implication of discourse is protean (viz., again, Laclau and Mouffe’s identification of political antagonism as the matrix of the social) in a way that potentially extends the field of politics over the entirety of social life -- “the political turn” making the *topic* of democracy conceptually redundant or “banal” (in Spencer’s view; 2007:74-75). Be that as it may, the political turn fostered great ethnographic innovation, as anthropologists sought out key locations of discursive production and contestation from the horizons of the global and the local. Important new literatures emerged at the zones of contact between international or transnational institutions and local (even interpersonal) forms of power – for example, development (e.g., Ferguson 1994, Gupta and Ferguson 2002, Li 2007), migration (e.g., Coutin 2000, Zhang 2001) and rights (e.g., Merry 2006, Goodale and Merry 2007, Engel and Munger 2003, Lazarus-Black 2007) -- greatly advancing anthropologists’ understandings of how citizenship functions though identity at the margins of transnational power.<sup>xv</sup> The democracy implication of discourse was also vivid in new ethnographic studies of violence – for example, at the margins of state power (Goldstein 2004, Lazarus-Black 2007) or as the failure of state power in relation to massive harm (Fortun 2001, Petryna 2002).<sup>xvi</sup> Again, while these are not studies of democracy as such, i.e., as institutional systems, they are strongly framed by the democratic premise inherent in the concept of

discourse as it was reworked in this period – as a generalized social matrix in which agency is guaranteed legibility and significance, in theory, if not consistently at the level of events. They are also powerful engagements with people's own efforts to marshal remedies or relief through varied claims of membership (see Nugent 2008:24 ff., Mines 2002, Banerjee 2008, West 2008).<sup>xvii</sup>

## II. Sustainability as an interpretive and reflexive problem

Democracy changes the terms by which people know themselves, and as we – as anthropologists – come to know them; the recursivity of the democracy implication is deeply enmeshed with anthropology's origins, practices and motivations. The intense specificity of ethnographic accounts is often opaque to non-anthropological readers; however, the particulars should be read as evidence of the range of people's claims to standing in the world as they know it, and scholars' commitment to registering those claims in the archive of the future. Where anthropologists do engage the institutional technologies conventionally associated with democracy and state sovereignty – elections (Coles 2007, 2008), media (Hull 2008), borders (Chalfin 2008), social security in various forms (Hamdy 2008, Schwegler 2008), parliaments (Abeles xxx), public-private partnerships (Shever 2008), paying taxes (Sykes 2001), maintaining records (Gupta 2008, Riles [Documents]), and so forth – they are cautious in ascribing to these any automatic guarantee of political agency. *Agency* is the technical term anthropologists use to refer to people's relevance – in these cases, to governing. The nature of political agency is never entirely clear, but the prevalence of neoliberal reform is inseparable from the context and content of these accounts. Thus, the elusiveness of democracy as a topic in anthropology must be attributed in part to the elusiveness of democracy itself – i.e., the fact that globalization fused capitalism to democratic implication but also to the conditions of democracy deficit (Applbaum, Roitman, Gal, Nagengast, Comaroff in press, Greenhouse in press, contributions to AE 35(2).)<sup>xviii</sup> Thus anthropologists tend to locate political agency in partnerships, practices and potentialities well outside the conventional parameters of normative democracy.

Broadly speaking, the premises I have referred to “democracy implications” are located in methodology -- deeply inscribed by the classic traditions of social science and their echoes of the liberalism that maintains the social sciences in the public lexicon of problems and solutions in modern times, from Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society* to the present day. Social science evidence is sometimes a technical proxy for active consent, or a material sign of “the public.” And conversely, the classic formulations of positivist social science and democracy focus on issues of individual choice (Greenhouse and Greenwood 1998).<sup>xix</sup> Together, these privilege certain assumptions about the ways public and private life are coordinated -- problematically aligning consumption and citizenship, cultural pluralism with liberalism, markets with civil society and, perhaps above all, discourse with consensus, as new forms of difference wound through novel capital formations and political subjectivities around the world. (XXXX discussion of examples and critiques.)

Accounting for these elisions and their shadings would take us to older questions about the nature of social life. Once behaviorism rewrites agency as social action, it is but

a small step to imagine that social structure is an archive of individual intentions, congealed around majority norms (Giddens). It is easy, too, to misread norms as law (viz. reception of Weber) and knowledge as interests (viz. reception of Durkheim). To do so would mean reading discourse as consent – and missing the extent to which *hegemony* perpetually defers the moment when political opposition would become discursive opposition (see previous discussion, and Greenhouse 2008 and 2009).<sup>xx</sup> These are among the ways democracy-thinking seeps into social science theory and methods; and accordingly, they became contentious theoretical and methodological issues in anthropology as the political field changed globally around our subject matter, calling deep-seated assumptions about identity, individuality and interests (among other things) into question (see Rosenau xxx).<sup>xxi</sup>

Sustainability is an interpretive question about the relationship between political and non-political spheres, states and public sectors, communities and cultural meanings. The interpretive reflexes that turn questions about social life into assertions of individual liberty, and cultural questions into assertions of universal freedom, have ancient roots. In this sense, *sustainable democracy* is an old topic for anthropology – older than anthropology, by far – hard-wired into its very motives and methods. This compounds the extent to which democracy is an elusive subject for ethnographers – since it presses us to be clear about our assumptions and to disentangle them from our questions. This is a significant reflexive challenge. In essence, our commitment to ethnography compels us to work the question of democracy from grounded fieldwork, while our very rationale for doing fieldwork (wanting to know what people want for themselves) is already democracy-thinking at work.

How should we study sustainable democracy ethnographically, if we assume that society is itself already democratic in the sense of being shaped by people's interests, wants and agreements? The more we want to know what keeps democracy going, the greater the risk that we will find ourselves back at square one, confronting *society* construed as a natural democracy, bound together by a social contract. The premise that democracy is natural to a free society is a potent slogan of our era, but it is not a testable proposition. There is no necessary or empirically confirmed connection between democracy and freedom. Indeed, there is no such thing as “a” democracy since its referent is social processes and bundles of relationships over time. *Society* is not a unit of analysis for anthropology; even less so, as already noted, is a country.

The solution to this set of problems is not to seek a way around them, but to enter them. If we cannot assume some inherent unity to democratic ideals around the world, neither should we assume a blank slate. Ethnographic “tools and concepts” (to borrow from the conference's call for papers) promise neither a universal or synthetic checklist for *recognizing* democracy nor a comparative repertoire for *relativizing* its varied forms around the world. Rather, it offers a means of acquiring knowledge about how people marshal their own democratic intentions for particular means and ends: the relations such means and ends sustain or foreclose, their symbols and key images, their rites and practices, their mobilizations and intended purposes, their scenes of encounter, and so forth.

*Sustainable democracy*, from this perspective, is less a question of how democracy can be maintained of itself, but rather, how democratic intentions are put into

practice, how the mediating institutions of any given time and place function, and, in practice, how social connectedness is sustained – when it is -- by relations outside the political sphere. As a practical matter, sustainability invites an approach to democracy that is *experiential*, *selective* and *episodic*, i.e., without an expectation that democratic practices and relations “add up” to some coherent or unified system with instrumental value. Experiential – since that is where democratic ideas are put into practice or emerge in practice. Democratic institutions are not necessarily democratic in their effect; Tocqueville famously observed that a democracy can do anything but check its own propensity for exclusion. Selective – since democratic institutions are of different kinds. Within the United States government, for example, the three branches are democratic in quite different ways. They have undemocratic elements (of command, and the authority of office); these, too, have their functions. Episodic – since sustainability does not necessarily mean *continuity*, and discourse – never singular – has a long a memory.

Anthropology is relevant to scholars and others interested in democracy to the extent that they are prepared to prefer distinction over division<sup>xxi</sup>, specificity over generality, diversity over system, the episodic over the eternal, plural over singular, agency over structure, effects over origins, expressions over intentions. Anthropology’s relevance is secure wherever history – past, present or future -- asks to be rewritten along these and related lines (see Geertz 1973). Anthropologist Jonathan Spencer captures something of the stakes:

We live in a world in which it has become brutally apparent that our collective survival depends on the ability to understand, and sometimes to anticipate the strange world of other people’s politics. (And, yes, the first problem is pinning down who ‘we’ might be, and asking just who ‘other people’ are, in formulations like this.) To achieve this, we need to pay sympathetic attention to the workings of apparently different versions of the political in places with different histories, and apparently different visions of justice and order. Anthropology is an academic discipline apparently well-suited to this task... (2007:2).<sup>xxiii</sup>

Well-suited, yet democracy is, for the most part, a question drawn into anthropology from conversations outside; it represents a limit of sorts – at anthropology’s border-zones with other disciplines, as well as between theory and practice, and scholarship and activism (Paley 2002:esp. 469-472).<sup>xxiv</sup> It is this very quality that has made democratic implication theoretically productive as a prompt to innovation. The issue of sustainability underscores even further the extent to which democracy hovers between subject, object and method -- wound into the very premises of social science. If we cannot avoid the mobius strip aspect of democracy’s perfusion within the very concept of the social, this does not cancel our ability to do meaningful work on democratic cultures; however, it might mean we cannot do so from a distance.

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- <sup>i</sup> The classic source is Benedict, Ruth 1934 *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- <sup>ii</sup> For entrée into these literatures, see: Weber 1954, Burchell et al. 1991.
- <sup>iii</sup> An excellent recent review of the anthropological literature on democracy is Paley 2002; see also Paley 2008a.
- <sup>iv</sup> Buyandelgeriyn 2008, Humphrey 1983, Ries 1997, Verdery 1996.
- <sup>v</sup> Abeles, Chock XXXX
- <sup>vi</sup> Greenhouse 2006.
- <sup>vii</sup> For a foundational statement of democracy as a relation between the political and the non-political, see Dewey 1954:esp. 113-114.
- <sup>viii</sup> Paley 2002 provides a detailed history of democracy's arrival as an anthropological subject in her review essay.
- <sup>ix</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff 1991.
- <sup>x</sup> Nugent 2008.
- <sup>xi</sup> Klug 2000.
- <sup>xii</sup> Aretxaga 2003, Edelman 2001, Kowal 2008, Nagengast 1994.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Laclau and Mouffe 1985.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Abrams, Alonso, Mitchell...
- <sup>xv</sup> Coutin 2000, Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Li 2007, Engel and Munger 2003, Merry 2006, Petryna 2002, Goodale and Merry 2007, Zhang 2001.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Fortun 2001, Goldstein 2004, Lazarus-Black 2007.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Banerjee 2008, Mines 2002, Paley 2008b, West 2008.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Chalfin 2008, Gupta 2008, Hamdy 2008, Hull 2008 Schwegler 2008, Sherine 2008, Shever 2008, Sykes 2001.
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- <sup>xix</sup> Greenhouse and Greenwood 1998.
- <sup>xx</sup> Greenhouse 2008 and 2009.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Rosenau
- <sup>xxii</sup> The tension between these keywords is drawn by Pottage (2004:3) to highlight the difference between persons and things as legal categories on the one hand, and cultural meanings on the other – the former claiming certainty where the latter are inherently indeterminate.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Spencer 2007.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Paley, Julia 2002 *Toward an Anthropology of Democracy*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31:469-496.