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## Review

# Decolonizing democracy: Intersections of philosophy and postcolonial theory

Ferit Güven

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‘The discourse of democracy,’ Ferit Güven writes, ‘is the continuation of a (neo)colonial world order’ (p. xi). This is so because ‘democracy manifests itself in the form of colonization of the future,’ or as a discourse without alternatives (p. xiii). In ‘colonizing the political space that is supposed to be open to the future,’ democracy therefore occupies ‘alternativity’ as such (pp. 3–4). The *idea* of democracy, then, is ‘tyrannical, in the sense that it expresses a desire for universality beyond its scope’ (p. 2) by colonizing what is thinkable. Güven’s objective in *Decolonizing Democracy* is to elaborate the basis for this claim by tracing intersections between democratic and postcolonial theory, both broadly conceived.

Democracy, on Güven’s rendering, takes on what Lewis R. Gordon calls a ‘theodicean grammar.’ Theodicy refers to the effort to reconcile God’s goodness and omnipotence with iniquity. To ‘demonstrate the compatibility of evil and injustice’ alongside the existence of God, Gordon argues, we render its contradictions *external* (2013, p. 726). As democracy circumscribes the conceivable, political failing cannot be the consequence of the system’s order; rather, it is an aberration or the result of poor execution. In other words, when democracy fails to fulfill its own promises, fault is externalized to preserve the category’s coherence. The system’s contradictions, then, are shifted to the limits of what Güven calls ‘democracy in practice’ (p. 10). Democracy, as a result, much like God, is not problematic. We are simply bad democrats. Democracy’s colonial logic emerges here. Colonization, Güven writes, is a ‘process and discourse of disciplining, ordering, rendering visible, unveiling, and making comprehensible’ (p. 4). In positing itself as *the* standard of justification, democracy’s internal logic produces a series of exclusions. The result is a paradox: ‘democracy can only protect and has always protected itself *undemocratically*’ (p. 13). This paradox emerges most forcefully when democracy is confronted with its oppositions, which it either incorporates in a way that leaves the system fundamentally intact, or expels because the excluded falls ‘outside the rules of democracy’ (p. 16). This works within a ‘theodicean grammar.’ When God is



confronted with oppositions, there are only two alternatives: either submit according to God's standard of justification or be expelled from God's presence. The space of action is, therefore, overdetermined.

Implicit in democracy's internal logic is also the correlated ethical duty to introduce it to others. God is not God only *to believers*. God simply is God. The impetus to universalize democracy is therefore tantamount to conversion. And democrats are missionaries. Democracy, then, on Güven's rendering, carries with it an attendant 'will to teach' (Miller, 2018). After all, how can someone be against God? Political and global colonialism, then, Güven argues, is the inevitable result of a sincere belief in democracy's deification.

While democracy protects itself undemocratically, the mechanisms of exclusion are often not repressive, strictly speaking. So, the question is: how does democratic colonialism function? Güven's objective is to reveal this scaffolding.

In Chapter 1, Güven traces a genealogy of democracy, from Plato to Carl Schmitt, in order to reveal the process by which democracy is universalized, which is fundamentally a contest of power. 'The sovereign, which coincides with the state in modernity, decides who the enemy is and distinguishes the friend from the enemy and thereby delimits the space of political unity by excluding the other' (p. 26). In other words, democracy demarcates limits. In defining 'the inside of sovereign space' (p. 30), it always-also defines its exception, or its absolute negation because democracy's 'theodicean grammar' identifies democracy with humanity as such (p. 28). The equality of 'us' [therefore] requires our inequality from 'them,' rendering the universal principle of equality impossible' (p. 20).

While the process of universalization is always violent, it is not always *obviously* violent because democratic societies mystify the colonizing work done to the agent at the heart of politics: the human subject. In Chapters 2 and 3, Güven utilizes Michel Foucault's analysis of regimes of power to demonstrate that democratic subjects, to follow Simone de Beauvoir, 'are made, not born.' 'Democratizing power,' Güven writes, 'is not one that emanates from one group to the other [but rather functions] in multiple locations in society. It does not create oppression, as there is no unitary group that holds this power, yet in these multiple locations we normalize, discipline, educate, and hence, democratize each other' (p. 51). Democracy, then, operates structurally to overdetermine the habits and ways of life of well-meaning people. The objective is to create what Güven calls 'cogitological subjects,' which are 'political, thinking subjects imagining themselves at the center of the problem of unity' (p. 51). In other words, politically responsible subjects are manufactured through a discourse of rationality that conceives of all political problems 'in terms of the difficulty of forging the unity required for democracy's implementation' (p. 51). A democratic disposition is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but one disciplined into being. Güven calls this bio-power with a cogitological supplement (pp. 51–52), which limits in advance what political ideas are even thought and so, too, the range of options imagined possible.



Chapters 4 and 5 explore contemporary lines of flight from democracy's colonial impulses. Güven explores bio-power's disciplinary effects on the body through an analysis of hunger strikers and suicide bombers. His objective is to expose the limits of attempts to refashion democratic subjectivity through the language of embodiment. The act of a hunger strike, for example, turns one site of disciplinary power (the body) against itself by 'erasing the condition for the possibility of the success of the system' (p. 83). While the body cannot ground a subjectivity unburdened by democracy's colonial impulses, it can be used to turn these mechanisms against themselves. And colonial agents understand this, hence the compulsion to force feed. In Chapter 5, Güven critiques Jacques Derrida's notion of 'democracy-to-come,' which promises a democracy radically open to future configurations of itself but conceals a toxic colonial presupposition: in totalizing inevitability as such, 'democracy-to-come' 'in advance structures that which is to come' (p. 104). There always remains a fissure between the 'ideal' and the 'empirical.' But what is the justification for theoretically colonizing 'the future in the name of democracy' (p. 97) other than a theodicean one?

Güven's central objection is that democracy defends itself in internally inconsistent ways. No less a democratic theorist than Jean-Jacques Rousseau dealt explicitly with this tension, particularly through his efforts to reconcile the fact of socialization with individual liberty. I end, then, with an outline of what I think Rousseau's response would be.

The issue of individual choice, Rousseau insisted, requires consideration of *what* a person chooses and the *way* the choice is being made. This is so because we assimilate ourselves to our environment. Who we are is therefore always the manifold outcome of social processes. Politics, for Rousseau, is fundamentally educative as it reshapes both the content of our choices and the reasons we choose them. In other words, democracy makes socialization intentional. Second, we are not equally capable of determining the shape, contour, and limits of that which constructs us. Using politics as a mechanism to merely serve our ends ignores the power asymmetries that construct the terrain upon which our ends become our ends. The question is not 'Are we constrained?' because of course we are always constrained subjects, but 'Are we democratizing the *sources of constraint*?' This is true as an empirical matter because material conditions enable some, but not others, to make a range of choices. But it is also true in another way. At the heart of Rousseau's theory is one of many paradoxes. How can we have citizens capable of willing generally and so who produce democratic laws if we only become those kinds of citizens when acculturated under democratic laws? Herein emerges the infamous figure of the 'Legislator,' who sets the conditions for democratic socialization. Liberty, then, will always entail some subjection.

Güven would note that this is a colonial moment. Through a discussion of Chantal Mouffe's defense of 'agonistics,' Güven illustrates that agonism is never pluralistic around first principles. Political contestation is acceptable *so long as the*



participants presume democratic standards of justification and acceptability. But this same closing off of possibilities is alive in the varieties of liberalism, socialism, anarchism, and conservatism. Güven's position begs the question at the heart of the matter: what does it mean to freely act 'as a liberal,' 'as a socialist,' 'as a conservative,' and so on? John Locke, for example, understood the necessity of including illiberal elements in our liberal education. Locke's obsession with parenting illustrates this. We don't just become liberals. The background conditions must be right. Race, class and gender regimes convert existing privileges into norms and routines, where 'becoming democratic' often conceals the re-production of power asymmetries. Still, democracy directs our attention to this problematic because it does not position itself within a friend–enemy clash but, rather, in a relationship with others, where the goal is to co-construct the background conditions within which that relationship emerges.

## References

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