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Im-possibility and Democracy 'to Come' in Derrida's *Rogues*

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Of democracy there could only be but a trace.¹

It seemed as if the time for Derrida's reflections on sovereignty, democracy and the morality behind the belief that "force 'trumps' law"² especially as it unfolded in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* had come and passed. Delivered as two lectures in the summer of 2002, in the interval between the aftermath of 9/11 and the impending invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003, *Rogues* claims for its theme, as Derrida announces in the first lecture, "democracy in America, or, more precisely, democracy and America [...]."³ And yet, almost twenty-three years after its publication, this critical text that contains Derrida's most intricate analysis of the enigmatic phrase 'democracy to come' has taken on a new significance. Pretexted on wars, refugee and border crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, terror attacks and the forceful return of the so-called "Rogue States," democracies around the world, including most recently democracy in America, have experienced a resurgence of what Derrida in the preface of *Rogues* calls the "old-new enigma" of sovereignty.⁴ Furthermore, the transformation of the space of democracy itself – the public sphere – by intensifying globalization and new technologies has brought the very question of democracy back to the forefront of political and philosophical discourse.⁵

Within this context, a reflection on the many turns and crises of democracy today benefits from a closer look at Derrida's exigent critique and affirmation of the concept of democracy in *Rogues*.⁶ Yet, the pivotal syntagma 'la démocratie à venir' remains one of the most enigmatic notions of Derrida's *Rogues*. In fact, by way of what is purported to be an "elliptical sending"⁷ [*l'envoi elliptique*], Derrida's first lecture entitled "The Reason of the Strongest" in *Rogues* opens with the perplexing declaration: "The democracy to come: it is necessary that it give the time there is not."⁸ In what follows, this utterance that receives its sending in the introductory remarks of the lecture will make

elliptical turns around several problematics such as autoimmunity, reason, freedom, autonomy, right and justice before returning, in the final section of the first lecture, back to the sender to have its last send-off (*renvoi*). For a pair of lectures that claims in its preface to take the “old-new enigma” of sovereignty as its principle guiding thread,⁹ this peculiar strategy of beginning with the partly imperative, partly descriptive declaration “*La démocratie à venir: il faut que ça donne le temps qu’il n’y a pas*”¹⁰ seems at first glance an odd choice. For how is this syntagma ‘democracy to come’ to be understood, a phrase which, in a declaration that acts as a quasi-independent sentence, has no active verb to clarify its meaning? Why is it necessary for it to give the time that is lacking, and what is this time that is lacking? Yet, as the lecture unfolds in the first part of *Rogues*, the role of Derrida’s declaration as an envoy that carries an enigmatic message on democracy, that leaves traces of its meaning along its many elliptical turns becomes evident in the course of its reception – its reading.

Rogues does not constitute the first instance of Derrida’s use of the notion of a ‘democracy to come.’ As Derrida notes within *Rogues* itself, in earlier texts such as *Right to Philosophy I*, “*Sauf le nom*,” *The Other Heading*, *Spectres of Marx*, and *Politics of Friendship*, democracy to come is already treated in its structural affinity to equally enigmatic notions such as the secret, justice and the promise. *Rogues*, however, arguably does contain the most comprehensive examination of this peculiar concept of a democracy to come. But what does ‘democracy to come’ signify according to Derrida, and what is the peculiar lacking time that it must give? To whom or to what must it give time? This paper parses Derrida’s thinking of the democracy to come by analysing the declaration “*the democracy to come: it is necessary that it give the time there is not*” at the heart of Derrida’s *Rogues*. Rather than merely constituting an allusion to a future instantiation of an already pre-determined political regime called democracy, or to the future determination of a yet-undetermined democratic political constitution, this paper argues that for Derrida the democracy to come highlights and raises the stakes of the essential undecidability at the very heart of democracy. This undecidability of the democratic, although it brings attention to the aporetic experience of thinking, of conceptualizing, of identifying democracy, does not consequently lead to an incapacitation of all action. Rather, as this paper seeks to show, Derrida’s treatment of democracy via the syntagma ‘democracy to come’ articulates a genuine theory of possible political critique.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section reconstructs Derrida’s distinction between the circularity of sovereignty and the wheel that constitutes the democratic. The second section then examines Derrida’s analysis of the autoimmunity of the concept of democracy. In the third and central section, I unfold the enigmatic expression ‘democracy to come’ alongside Derrida’s puzzling utterance that this democracy to come must give the lacking time. In addition to summarizing the main points of this essay, the

concluding section will touch upon the continued relevance of Derrida's deconstruction of democracy in *Rogues* for thinking political responsibility today.

Between the Sovereign Circle and the Free Wheel of Democracy

Derrida's meditation on democracy in "The Reason of the Strongest" opens with the avowal of an inescapable aporia. On the one hand, Derrida acknowledges that the strange expression 'la démocratie à venir' that embellished the 2002 conference at Cerisy-la-Salle is one that turned and returned in his discourse over a decade, hinting therefore at a pre-comprehension at work behind the chosen theme. On the other hand, Derrida confesses that in the decade of his use of the syntagma, he ultimately seems to have been expressing the suspicion that, despite being heirs of the Greek word 'democracy' "addressed to us for centuries [...] we ourselves do not know the meaning of this legacy, the mission, the emission, or commission of this word [...]"¹¹ Derrida thus likens the task that the preliminary question of the democracy to come enjoins him to perform – i.e., to speak of the democracy to come – to a torturous wheel that turned and returned Derrida to the expression 'democracy to come' not only in preparation for the *décade* of the conference, but over the past *décennie* of his life. Furthermore, insofar as this question of the democracy to come is in fact a double question, a "question [...] at the same time and/or by turns historical and conceptual or semantic,"¹² this wheel, Derrida admits, turns out to also be a quartering wheel, pulling him in two seemingly opposite directions.

Indeed, Derrida's reflections on democracy in *Rogues* will consist, sometimes *at once* and at others *by turns* (*tour à tour*), of an examination of the concept of democracy in the history of philosophy, starting with Plato and Aristotle, as well as a semantic analysis of the always differing and deferred meaning of democracy itself in this history. On the basis of this double reflection, one also finds interspersed in these analyses lucid assessments of contemporary political events and discourse in their use and abuse of the concept of democracy. The distinguishing feature of *Rogues* remains, however, Derrida's intricate engagement with his perplexing expression 'democracy to come.' By inserting a 'to come' to democracy, Derrida constructs a concept that accounts for the absolute openness to its own transformation – the absolute historicity – distinctive of democracy. Hence, what start out as merely autobiographical notes on Derrida's part – about the aporia of having to determine a concept without knowing its meaning to the fullest extent in advance, the torturous experience of a wheel that turns and returns to, from and even around its sender, even the quartering of a body in opposite directions – turn out to be constitutive of the concept of democracy itself. In fact, Derrida doubts that any thinking or speaking of democracy "was ever possible [...] before the rotation of some *wheel*."¹³

But what does Derrida see in the wheel and what does democracy have to do with the figure and motion of one? In the first section of “Reason of the Strongest” entitled ‘The Free Wheel,’ Derrida compares the figure of the wheel to the enigmatic notion of sovereignty. Beside the circular and spherical form of a geometrical and ultimately mechanical object, the wheel, Derrida argues, stands for a figure of a rotary motion of some self, some *autos*, an *ipse* that sends itself off towards itself, that turns and returns to a self in a circular motion. Insofar as this motion typifies autonomy, the giving of law to oneself in whose very movement a self is constituted as a gathering of the self-same, the wheel symbolizes sovereignty. Moreover, sovereignty for its part has historically been associated with ipseity. And in turn, this capacity of an *ipse* to give itself the law is linked to power, possibility, a force (*kratos*) that asserts itself in its return to self. Sovereignty, then, names the consolidation of the power of decision, the power of determination by a sovereign, indivisible self that stands outside of both time and language. For both time and language involve difference, a nexus of differential relations within which the finite time of history or of meaning is constituted. Hence, inasmuch as a sovereign self seeks to exclude any reference to an outside, to an *other*, the circular figure of a sovereign remains principally ahistorical and silent. Thus, like the figure of an indivisible, indestructible God, sovereignty in general remains impervious to critique, it’s legitimacy never being open for questioning.

Building on this analysis of sovereignty, in ‘The Free Wheel,’ Derrida then proceeds to present the following reading of the traditional notion of democracy:

[D]emocracy would be precisely this, a force (*kratos*), a force in the form of a sovereign authority [...] and thus the power and ipseity of the people (*dēmos*). This sovereignty is a circularity, indeed a sphericity [...] This circular or spherical rotation, the turn of the re-turn upon the self, can take either the alternating forms of the *by turns*, the *in turn*, the *each in turn* [...] or else the form of an identity between the origin and the conclusion, the cause and the end or aim, the driving [*motrice*] cause and the final cause.¹⁴

Based on his examination of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Derrida notes in the subsequent paragraphs that such absolute, indivisible sovereignty without faction that Tocqueville so admired in American society in 1831, did in fact harken back to Aristotle’s and even Plato’s conception of a sovereign, indivisible, self-same first principle. However, unlike Tocqueville’s ascription of a God-like status to democratic society, inasmuch as democracy consists of multiplicity, faction and division, Aristotle and Plato oppose democracy to their sovereign, indivisible, ultimately simple principles.

While acknowledging this meaning of democracy as a force or power of the people, *from* and *for* the people, and its affinity with the principle of

sovereignty, Derrida nevertheless wonders whether there isn't another truth of the democratic: "the truth of the other, heterogeneity, the heteronomic and the dissymmetric, disseminal multiplicity, the anonymous 'anyone,' the 'no matter who,' the indeterminate 'each one.'"¹⁵ Indeed, in the analysis of democracy in the subsequent chapters of *Rogues*, this *other* truth of democracy will take center stage in a discussion where a democratic polity, especially in its Greek form, is associated with freedom (*eleutheria*) and equality. Turning to Plato's and Aristotle's treatments of the common opinion (*doxa*) that a democratic constitution – be it in an individual or a city – fosters freedom of choice, freedom to decide and pursue one's desires, Derrida notes that this freedom of self-determination is also impossible to think without the power of ipseity, without a sovereign 'I can' already implied within it. However, Greek *doxa*, which Plato and Aristotle appeal to in their treatments of democracy, also perceived such democratic freedoms to be vulnerable to misuse, engendering especially in the youth licentiousness and a certain disregard and disrespect for the law. What is in fact recognized as a privilege of the democratic polity is thus found to host the seeds of its own perversion within itself.

Democratic freedom is, therefore, susceptible to turning into license (*exousia*). Hence, to counter this tendency of democratic regimes to promote lawlessness, and to guarantee justice in the wider populace, the democratic principle must further be infused with the notion of equality. Since absolute freedom in a democracy must be prevented from creating a condition of absolute injustice and impunity among individuals in the polity – each wishing not to be governed by anybody else – it is the democratic rule of equality that assures freedom to an individual to the finite extent possible. As Derrida expands in his reading of Aristotle's *Politics* in *Rogues*, the aporia of the democratic is tempered by the circular principle of *in turn* and *by turns*: freedom and equality are assured in a democratic polity insofar as each individual, equal to another *in number*, governs and is governed alternately.¹⁶ Thus, Derrida writes, "[T]he absolute freedom of a finite being (and it is of just such a finitude that we are speaking here) can be equitably shared only in the space-time of a 'by turns' and thus only in a double circulation [...]"¹⁷

Autoimmunity and The Concept of Democracy

What do these two 'truths,' these two historical determinations of the democratic tell us about the *concept* of democracy? If the first meaning of democracy is constituted by possibility and freedom – i.e., the right to self-determination characteristic of sovereignty – Derrida notes that this power of sovereign decision-making is itself based on a prior, more original "freedom of play, an opening of indetermination and indecidability *in the very concept* of democracy, in the interpretation of the democratic."¹⁸ That is, if democracy

grants the sovereign right and freedom to determine oneself one way or another, the condition of possibility of a democratic constitution to grant such a right and freedom in the first place is a more originary indetermination, a space of play in the *concept* of the democratic itself, a space which enables this free play of determinations. For if the capacity for free, autonomous decision-making proper to sovereignty were based on any other pre-determined concept or principle, then such sovereignty could neither be considered absolute nor autonomous inasmuch as its law would be derived from a principle other than itself. Hence, the semantic indetermination or “free wheel” that keeps the concept of democracy always open to reinterpretation is responsible for turning the history of democracy.¹⁹ This freedom is not to be conflated with particular freedoms granted to the citizens of a democracy. Rather, it is a freedom operative in the very concept of democracy. The freedom in the concept, Derrida insists, which “takes into account, as the empty opening of a *future of the very concept* and thus of the language of democracy, an *essential historicity of democracy*,”²⁰ makes democracy the only regime open to its continual self-critique.²¹

Therefore, the life of democracy presupposes what Derrida in the third section of “Reason of the Strongest” calls “a certain suicide of democracy.”²² This suicidal tendency of democracy – what Derrida will subsequently name in *Rogues* as “autoimmune suicide”^{23 24} in reference to the logic of autoimmunity at work in the concept of democracy – involves a suspension, a deferral, a “sending off” (*renvoi*) of democracy not only to immunize a democracy against an imminent, external aggressor. But also, to defer democracy in order to save, preserve, keep open the space and time for a democracy *to come*, for future democracies to come. And Derrida will see this suspension at play in the case of the Algerian military coup of 1992. But this formalization of democracy as autoimmune – i.e., either deferring the other in preserving itself, or deferring itself in preserving itself – is an odd characterization. For, to take Derrida’s examples from *Rogues*, what is democratic about turning people away at voting booths, in rejecting the results of a democratic election, in exiling dissenting voices within a democracy? Even if such undemocratic measures are sought in the name of a democracy *to come*, how can such a force be deemed as *more* democratic than the democratic process itself? On the other hand, if an undemocratic, even anti-democratic alternative is chosen through a democratic process, how can a measure to set aside the results of such a democratic process – an undemocratic measure in itself but nevertheless acting in the interest of democracy – be declared *less* democratic than a democratic force vying for an undemocratic alternative?

Owing to the autoimmune logic being inscribed onto the very concept of democracy, such a *double bind* or undecidability, Derrida insists, makes any attempt at objectively proving a choice to be *more* or *less* democratic always unsatisfactory. In fact, the very condition of possibility of democracy rests in

this difference of forces, this limiting and threatening itself *at once* and/or *by turns*, this “murder and suicide”²⁵ of the democratic. Democracy is therefore never a simple, indivisible, selfsame force. If there is to be the space-time for a self that calls itself a democracy at all, it must necessarily not be one with itself. Put differently, in order for a democracy to exist, be it a present, past, or even future democracy, to be intelligible, legible *as* democratic, it must necessarily stand in relation to the non-democratic. Only so long as a unitary meaning, idea, even ‘truth’ is elusive – only insofar as the meaning or truth of democracy defers itself, differs from itself, remains incomplete – can there be time and space for any particular democracy as such. Democratic sending off (*renvoi*) is therefore, Derrida concludes in the third section of “Reason of the Strongest,” related to *différance*: “Democracy is [...] what it is only by spacing itself beyond being and even beyond ontological difference [...]”²⁶

Giving the Time There *Is* Not: Derrida’s Democracy to Come

Derrida’s analytical exploration of the inherited concept of “democracy”²⁷ thus far revealed that a concept, a meaning, an idea of democracy there *is* not. “Of democracy,” Derrida writes, “there could only be but a trace.”²⁸ It is on the basis of this thought – that there can only be a *trace* of democracy, according to which, to borrow Derrida’s expression from *Spectres of Marx*, democracy is originarily always *out of joint* – that Derrida promises to reread the expression that turned and returned in the past decade of his life, namely ‘democracy to come.’ Yet, if one is to engage with the question of what ‘democracy to come’ signifies, one must also simultaneously clarify what it does not. Early on in “The Reason of the Strongest,” Derrida admits that the “to-come of democracy is also, although without presence, the *hic et nunc* of urgency, of the injunction as absolute urgency. Even when democracy makes one wait or makes one wait for it.”²⁹ In fact, Derrida argues, democracy to come oscillates between the two, i.e., between an imperative urgency, an enjoinder to do something on the one hand – to calculate, to determine the essentially incalculable, essentially indeterminable inheritance of democracy – and a passive waiting, an exposure and openness to the messianic coming of the meaning and truth of democracy on the other.

Derrida unfolds the *double bind*, the aporetic structure of the expression ‘democracy to come’ by developing what he already albeit fragmentarily alluded to in earlier works such as *Force of Law*, *The Other Heading*, *Spectres of Marx*. To treat the different inflections of democracy to come as promise, as justice, as secret, among others, within the various contexts of Derrida’s earlier texts is beyond the scope of this essay. However, given Derrida’s attempt in *Rogues* to develop the operation of this notion in greater detail, the treatment of democracy to come in “The Reason of the Strongest” can indeed help shed light on what remained only briefly indicated in his earlier texts. Hence, in the section entitled ‘The Last of the Rogue States,’ Derrida develops

the thought of the democracy to come around five foci. In this section of the paper, I unfold the basic thought behind Derrida's strange syntagma 'democracy to come' as he explains it through the five foci.

Firstly, democracy to come is not a regulative ideal, in the Kantian sense or otherwise, that designates a possibility which an 'I' or a self can actualize for the sake of a teleological end. Rather, democracy to come, Derrida explains, belongs to the realm of the "im-possible" – of what Derrida calls with recourse to Plato's discussion of the democratic *by turns* in the philosophical class in the *Republic* "the order of the possible, of the nonimpossible [...] not negatively impossible."³⁰ But how is this *im-possibility* to be understood? This order of the "nonimpossible" – which is not an *impossible impossibility* nor a possibility that is within the power of any sovereign self – is that of an unforeseeable, incalculable event. It is impossible for me, for any *I*, to will, to predict, to calculate or bring about this event that can only come from the *other*, by the decision of the other even in me. It comes by the decision, the law of the other in me. However, this *im-possibility* of sovereign decision does not consequently imply that this event is impossible, even inaccessible as such to me, remaining a pure, *sovereign* actuality that is absolutely intangible in its timelessness.

The "im-possible," Derrida explains, rather precedes me, "announces itself [...] seizes me *here and now* in a nonvirtualizable way, in actuality and not potentiality."³¹ It comes, Derrida continues, in the form of an injunction that I do not see coming but that concerns me. It affects me – this *other* that I can neither see nor fore-see – it concerns me. It does not let me send it off, put it off for later: "It is what is most undeniably *real*."³² However, there is no recognizable *being* there that is doing the enjoining. In fact, the syntagma 'democracy to come,' as Derrida points out several times in *Rogues*, remains without presence. It remains a phrase without a verb, a phrase that neither modifies the ontological status of a being that *is*, nor *is* itself a selfsame *being* that I can isolate, recognize in its identity, that will turn or return in its selfsameness in the future. It is another instance of the "thingless thing" ("chose sans chose")³³ – as Derrida puts it in his final *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminar – the phantasm, the ghost that anticipates another thinking of the event. What does this other thinking of the event, as Derrida writes in *Rogues*, one that is unforeseeable, "without horizon, un-masterable by any ipseity [...] which is marked in a 'to-come' that, beyond the future [...], names the coming of *who* comes or of *what* comes to pass [...]"³⁴ make happen?

This coming of the ghost, the *im-possible* event of democracy enjoins me to think, to decide, to do something, to determine, to fore-see in the *here and now* what I cannot yet determine, what remains indiscernable, undecidable, namely, this enigmatic inheritance which does not present itself that we call 'democracy.' The inheritance of democracy, whose heirs we are, goes ahead of us, precedes us and enjoins us. Insofar as this inheritance gives itself to us, sends itself out of itself on a mission to preserve itself, and insofar as we

receive this inheritance, carrying its message as delegates of what is assigned to us, bequeathed to us, we ourselves are nothing but this inheritance that remains yet to come. Hence, we find ourselves already caught up in the turn and return of the emission back to itself, we ourselves being nothing but the emissaries of this inheritance in whose orbit we find ourselves thrown. The inheritance, therefore, befalls us, *happens* to us. We find ourselves the heirs of a tradition, an inheritance that we do not choose. In the context of *Rogues*, it is of the Greco-European tradition in whose history and language we speak, of the inheritance of the *something* called “democracy,” from within which we already speak, in the name of which we are enjoined to speak, by which we are given and deprived of the time to speak. This structure of the inheritance as that which constitutes us, limits us, limits what we see and say about it, yet, which gives us a certain freedom to determine it each time anew, each time otherwise, is why Derrida, in the opening sections of *Rogues* speaks in a quasi-autobiographical manner of himself, the “I,” being “tortured on the wheel, since it too takes the form of a machine in the form of a circle, indeed a hermeneutic circle. Tied to the machine, bound hand and foot, I would turn, exposed to a round of blows. Quartered.”³⁵

Therefore, any thinking, questioning or *doing* of democracy begins from this aporetic place without space, time without time – the *spacing* – that constitutes the inheritance of democracy. There is no time for democracy without the initial sending (*envoi*) that turns and returns to itself, but that can paradoxically never return to some originary self. For there is no originary self of democracy, no selfsame of democracy outside of this spacing that constitutes its openness. If there is to be a finite time for democracy – and insofar as iterations of regimes that call themselves democracies do appear, do exist, there must be a finitude of time and space within which they appear, within which we encounter them, understand them – it can only be as long as democracy *defers* itself, *differs* from itself, in order to give the time there is not. Hence, an originary default must constitute democracy. “*La démocratie à venir: il faut que ça donne le temps qu’il n’y a pas.*”³⁶ In returning to this utterance that opened *Rogues* in the final section of “The Reason of the Strongest,” Derrida points out that in the “*il faut*” – it is necessary – we need to hear at once default, a failing, a weakness: “‘time is needed [*il faut le temps*]; ‘it is necessary, for democracy, that it give the time there is not.’”³⁷

What are the implications of this aporetic *double bind* that constitutes the inheritance of democracy, brought out by Derrida’s utterance ‘democracy to come,’ for a political or philosophical thinking of democracy? If the imperative injunction that the “*to come*” and the “*il faut*” communicate is indeed of such aporetic nature – enjoining one to *do* something that is structurally impossible, i.e., decide, speak of, determine a democracy that remains unforeseeable, incalculable, undecidable, a concept that calls for yet resists calculation, determination, decision – what is to be done? The one truth of the democratic – the incalculability, the unpredictability – suggests that one

can only passively await, receive, be exposed to what arrives, the event of democracy that has already come or could very well *not* come. The other truth, however, calls for one to try and calculate, in the name of this event, who or what may arrive, but has not yet arrived, or what has already arrived, but whose meaning remains a secret. Is it possible to reconcile these two truths of the democratic injunction?

Derrida returns to the thinking of “by turns” central to *Rogues* to argue precisely for this possibility. Derrida writes “[T]he *to* of the ‘to come’ wavers between imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient *perhaps* of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come).”³⁸ The two approaches can either alternate – i.e., happen *tour à tour*, turn by turn – or at the same time. For insofar as the one approach haunts the other, insofar as one is parasitic on the other, always recalling and differing itself from the other even in its absence, to have one is to have the other at the same time. However, the undecidability that is brought about by the oscillation of democracy to come between its two possibilities is not an absolute limitation. Rather, Derrida concludes, this undecidability is exemplary of the democratic freedom to decide – the freedom to either performatively *make happen* or passively *let happen* – that is afforded by the very concept of democracy. But how might these possibilities concretely come about? Derrida briefly provides certain indications of these possibilities.

Firstly, Derrida admits that the expression ‘la démocratie à venir’ is indeed a call for “a militant and interminable political critique.”³⁹ Any political regime that stakes its claim to democracy must be examined, critiqued, exposed to the inadequacy of that which calls itself a democracy – a democracy, which will always be built on the exclusion of the other, be it other nations, other peoples, other non-human beings, or even the unborn and *no longer living* – to what democracy *is* – precisely something that *is* never there, never fully present, existing in its being. Moreover, beside the active moment of critique, one must also highlight that, structurally, democracy is the only system that enables a critique even of its own self, that takes its own historicity into account. The other thinking of the event that is not dependent upon the mastery of a sovereign *ipse*, discussed earlier in this section, demands a rethinking of hospitality to *who* or *what* arrives beyond the limits of hospitality based upon nation-state sovereignty. And it is only democracy that opens up the space for such re-interpretations. Subsequently, Derrida suggests a reworking of nation-state sovereignty and a “creation of an international juridico-political space [...]”⁴⁰ that constantly rethinks the sharing of powers.

The “living being, the cadaver, and the ghost”⁴¹: Democracy at its Limits

Who constitutes a democratic polity? Throughout “The Reason of the Strongest” Derrida repeatedly raises the question of the limits of one of the truths of democracy, namely “the anonymous ‘anyone,’ the ‘no matter who,’ the indeterminate ‘each one’”⁴² that is appealed to by the democratic principle. Indeed, democracy is the only constitution that proclaims such a radical hospitality, radical equality with regard to the power to decide. However, as Derrida notes in his elucidation of the phrase ‘democracy to come,’ despite this radicality, democratic polities within which a people count towards the “anyone” and “no matter who” have historically been built on exclusion. Be it citizens of other nation-states, resident aliens, stateless people, children, prisoners, etc., that are excluded from the electoral process, even within a democratic nation-state the refusal of the right to decide to certain groups has been inherent to democracy. This exclusion is, in fact, attributable to a structural constraint of democracy itself. For, as Derrida wrote in the earlier sections of *Rogues*, democracy is subject to an autoimmune logic: “democracy protects itself and maintains itself precisely by limiting and threatening itself.”⁴³ Consequently, democracy will always oscillate between being more or less democratic, based upon an exclusion of one or the other group.

Nevertheless, democracy remains the only system that is open to its own transformation. Each time, one is impelled, enjoined, given the freedom to determine, decide, choose a form of the democratic that differs from itself, that refers itself back to itself and to its other – to its essential self that is nothing but this spacing *as* radical indetermination. Capitalizing on this essential undecidability, on the indetermination that constitutes the democratic, as expanded in the preceding section of this paper, Derrida’s democracy to come calls for an inexhaustible self-critique – a political critique – of democracy *in the name of* democracy. This would involve rethinking the conventional model of extending ethical and political right, even hospitality based on the principle of indivisible and absolute sovereignty. This would call for a critique of ethical and political rhetoric that excludes, denigrates, dispossesses, deprives both groups of not only human but also non-human beings in the name of sovereignty, capacity, of democracy. Moreover, Derrida writes, paraphrasing Jean Paulhan:

[to] think democracy is to think the “first to happen by” [*le premier venu*]: anyone, no matter who, at the permeable limit between “who” and “what,” the living being, the cadaver, and the ghost. The first to happen by: is that not the best way to translate “the first to come”? The “to come” not only points to the promise but suggests that democracy will never exist [...] because it will always remain aporetic in its structure (force *without* force, incalculable singularity *and* calculable equality [...])

heteronomy *and* autonomy [...], an empty name, a despairing messianicity or a messianicity in despair, and so on).⁴⁴

Does this extract from *Rogues* simply indicate that Derrida, as he does indeed point out in several of his other works like the *Hospitality* seminars and even in *Rogues* itself, is calling for an inclusion of the excluded, for extending the concept of democracy – the “anyone” and “each one” – to “the dead, to animals, to trees and rocks”?⁴⁵ While not dismissing the thought entirely, Derrida is rather calling into question the limit between the living and non-living in general. In fact, Derrida repeatedly points to a reevaluation of life, turning and circling around “another thought of life, of what is living in life”⁴⁶ as what is at stake in his rethinking of democracy.

This other thinking of life⁴⁷ would not only call into question the legitimacy of thinking life as sovereign, indivisible, always existent and present to itself, life as opposed to the non-living or the dead. Rather, insofar as this other thinking of life reveals the inherent *hetero*-affection of life – the originary co-constitution of life and death, of the self and the other, the living and the *not yet* and *no longer* living – this *other* logic that Derrida in *Rogues*, as well as in earlier and later texts appeals to in terms of the logic of the ghost, of autoimmunity or the logic of the phantasm, radically reinscribes the question of responsibility into the very concept of democracy itself. For if “each one” and “anyone” is structurally never a simple self, being constituted *as* a self only in and through the inheritance, by the law and memory of the other *in me*, then any power and right entrusted to the “one,” the “self” must take into account its constitutive heterogeneity. But would this mean trying to extend the right to vote to the other, be it living or nonliving? On the contrary, what makes Derrida’s treatment of democracy to come so potent in its ethico-political potential is the responsibility and accountability it calls for even in the mere establishing and extending of democratic freedoms to a traditionally determined people of a democracy.

What then would this look like? In contrast to the tendency of a majority of democracies today towards a short-sighted politics, of democracies that focus on the *here and now* in the literal sense of the purely present, democratic responsibility reconfigured according to the *other* logic of life would call, on the one hand, for respect and a critical inheritance of the tradition, of the revenant and the *no longer* living. For, the *here and now* is what it is only by virtue of the fact that it is the differential trace of both the past that is inherited – the memory of a promise – and the future as that which is pregnant in this memory. We ourselves are the legacy, the heirs, of this past that comes to us, determines us, from the future, *as* the future that is open to us in accordance with this past trace. This does not mean a passive inheritance and reverence for the past – be it for a past determination or iteration of the democratic – but a *critical* inheritance, precisely in the spirit of democracy as interminable self-critique. On the other hand, the *other* logic of life would necessitate a responsible consideration of the interests of the future. As those whose

inheritance we ourselves are, decisions must be made in the name of the future, of the *not-yet* living, a future that will inherit its own past, but also its future from us *as* memory, *as* history. After all, doesn't the democratic promise consist precisely in preserving and maintaining itself as this historicity, as this openness to the future? So that democracy may not be sent off, exiled, set aside once and for all, even if it were at the ballot box, even as it were in the democratic choice of an anti-democrat. But rather, for it to turn – around itself, around its others – and return eternally as the only system that rigorously safeguards the possibility of its own perfectibility.⁴⁸

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- ¹ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 39.
- ² *Ibid.*, xi.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.
- ⁵ An earlier volume dedicated to interpretations of the theme of ‘Derrida and Democracy’ can be found in the special edition of *Diacritics* from 2008 edited by Jonathan Culler and Phillip Lewis, which includes a range of reflections on literature and democracy, America and democracy, autoimmunity and democracy in relation to Derrida’s thinking of democracy. See *Diacritics* 38, no. 1-2, (2008).
- ⁶ While interest in Derrida’s *Rogues* has waxed and waned in the intervening twenty-three years since its publication, the treatment of Derrida’s notion ‘democracy to come’ has remained consistent. Most recently, in “Jacques Derrida and the Life-Death of Democracy,” Michael Naas demonstrates how Derrida’s use of the vocabulary of life-death and autoimmunity to discuss democracy is not merely a metaphorical transplant in political discourse. Rather, by tracing Derrida’s notion of “another thinking of life,” Naas shows how Derrida takes recourse to the discourse of ‘autoimmunity’ to point to a more fundamental, structural law preceding the very individuation of the living from the non-living or the dead. In this essay, Naas also masterfully brings Derrida’s thought to life by putting it in dialogue with contemporary events. See Naas, “Jacques Derrida and the Life-Death of Democracy,” *Research in Phenomenology* 55, no. 2 (2025): 174-188. Another recent work on this topic is Annabel Herzog’s contribution to the special issue of *Angelaki* published on the 20th anniversary of Derrida’s death. In the article “Derrida’s ‘Very Idea of Democracy,’” Herzog argues that Derrida’s ‘democracy to come’ articulates the antinomic yet conceptually necessary relation between sovereignty and ethics. By focusing on the three autoimmunities of democracy, Herzog seeks to demonstrate that Derrida’s deconstruction of democracy is involved in an “ethicization of democracy activated by the concept of sovereignty, and a deconstruction of sovereignty via ethics.” (60) Whereas my paper touches upon the ethical dimension of Derrida’s ‘democracy to come’ as well, its focus largely rests on the structural logic behind Derrida’s capitalization of the moment of critique in the very concept of democracy. Cf. Herzog, “Derrida’s “Very Idea of Democracy,’” *Angelaki* 29 (2024): 59-70.
- ⁷ *Rogues*, 1.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Cf., *Rogues*, xii.
- ¹⁰ *Voyous: Deux Essais sur la Raison* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2003), 19.
- ¹¹ *Rogues*, 9.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ¹⁶ Cf. *Rogues.*, 23-26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹ Derrida also notes that this free wheel is conditioned by a history of freedom, although he does not delve into this history in *Rogues*. This opens up the question whether, to unfold the force of the entire analysis of democracy and the free wheel in *Rogues*, isn't all the more necessary to examine the history and the concept of freedom, inasmuch as the former is the condition of possibility of the free wheel's turning.

²⁰ *Rogues*, 25.

²¹ In his conceptually rich 2002 essay "Derrida's Democracy to Come," Matthias Fritsch highlights the *futural* inheritance of democracy that Derrida's positing of a 'to come' to democracy emphasizes. Fritsch also provides a critical analysis of the normative content of Derrida's notion of democracy to come as well as its limits. In my essay, I highlight the double character of inheritance - both of and from the future, as well as the past - operative in Derrida's use of democracy to come. While Fritsch's extensive examination of the normative aspect of Derrida's treatment of democracy to come deserves a deeper engagement than this article can provide, and has received the same in the decades after its publication, my article has a humbler goal. With this paper, I aim to return to Derrida's provocative and increasingly relevant discussion of democracy to first explicate the sense behind Derrida's programmatic sentence "*the democracy to come: it is necessary that it give the time there is not,*" (*Rogues*, 1) a perplexing sentence which has hitherto received little consideration in works that attend to Derrida's 'democracy to come.' Secondly, I seek to show how this utterance not only draws attention to the aporetic nature of choice, action and decision in a democracy, but most importantly *situates* the possibility of action. See Matthias Fritsch, "Derrida's Democracy to Come," *Constellations* 9, no. 4 (2002): 574-597. See also Fritsch's article "Taking Turns: Democracy to Come and Intergenerational Justice," *Derrida Today* 4, no. 2 (2011): 148-172.

²² *Rogues*, 33.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cf. Michael Naas' 2006 paper "'One nation...indivisible': Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God" for an expansive treatment of the problematic of sovereignty and autoimmunity in Derrida's works from around the time of *Rogues*. In: *Research in Phenomenology* 36, no. 1 (2006): 15-44.

²⁵ *Rogues*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁷ In a few of its kind monograph on the normativity of the notions of inheritance and democracy in Derrida's thought, Samir Haddad's *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* highlights the centrality of inheritance in Derrida's political philosophy in general and Derrida's treatment of democracy in particular. See Samir Haddad, *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

²⁸ *Rogues*, 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 185-186; *Séminaire La Bête et le souverain Volume II (2002-2003)* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2010), 263.

³⁴ *Rogues*, 87.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Voyous*, 19.

³⁷ *Rogues*, 109.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁷ Cf. Michael Naas, “Jacques Derrida and the Life-Death of Democracy.”

⁴⁸ A special thanks to Michael Naas for his thoughtful insights and editorial help with an early draft of this article.