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Keeping the old name: Derrida and the deconstructive foundations of democracy

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Abstract
This article explores Jacques Derrida's notion of 'democracy to come', showing how democracy generates what might be described as a 'deconstructive' relation to foundational ideas. This article opens with an overview of the political theory literature on Derrida's political thought, arguing that scholars mistakenly present it as naïvely anti-foundationalist. The body of this article then briefly demonstrates that a Derridean approach to foundations does not aim to destroy or transcend them, but to interrupt our expectation that foundations be stable and certain. Turning to *Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues*, this article shows that Derrida's notion of the democracy to come hinges around the idea that there is precisely such a 'deconstructive' relation between democracy's dual foundations of freedom and equality. Democracy is thus itself 'deconstructive'. Far from the inconsistent and insincere defender of democracy that his critics describe, Derrida emerges as a provocative contributor to democratic theory.

Keywords
Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, democratic theory, equality, foundations, freedom

Introduction

From the late 1980s until his death in 2004 the focus of the writings of Jacques Derrida shifted towards political themes, making explicit an understanding of politics that was largely implicit in his earlier articulations of deconstruction.[1] Despite the wide influence of Derrida's philosophy, however, the reception of his political thought by scholars of political theory has been remarkably negative. Scholars of political theory are especially dubious of Derrida's claims in support of democracy through his idea of *la démocratie à venir,* or 'democracy to come', in his later

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works – especially *Politics of Friendship*, and *Rogues*.[2] As Derrida himself notes, his sometimes-obscure rhetoric makes his allegiance difficult to detect: 'An advocate for democracy should have learned to speak to the people, to speak democratically of democracy.'[3] While Derrida's presentation of 'democracy to come' is not necessarily tantamount to an endorsement of democracy, I nevertheless argue that his political thought advocates democracy as the most desirable form of political organization we have. I also suggest that such a commitment to democracy is consistent with the broader 'metaphysical' claims of deconstruction, and that Derrida, furthermore, gives us provocative reasons why democracy is *itself* 'deconstructive'.

I begin with an overview of the political theory literature on Derrida's political thought, arguing that it overemphasizes the negative or critical elements of deconstruction, and in so doing misunderstands the nature of Derrida's defence of democracy. Against this view I argue that Derridean analyses aim neither to transcend nor destroy metaphysical foundations, but that Derrida is instead concerned to change our orientation towards such foundations. In other words, Derrida's is not an indiscriminate critique; he affirms the need for foundations, but aims to interrupt our expectation that foundations be stable and certain. Derrida thus aims to 'shake' foundational ideas in such a way as to allow multiple – even conflicting – foundations to be affirmed.

Such a strategy, I argue, is consistent with Derrida's mature reflections on democracy in *Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues*: in *Politics of Friendship* Derrida approaches the subject of democracy by examining the paradoxical democratic notion of the citizen as a 'countable singularity', and in *Rogues* he emphasizes the incommensurability of democracy's two foundations, freedom and equality. Derrida argues that democracy's foundations of freedom and equality can be affirmed only in turn, thus that this operation is 'deconstructive'. Derrida not only views democracy as amenable to the same kind of 'foundational' analysis undertaken as a part of deconstruction, but in fact suggests that democratic practice facilitates a 'deconstructive' relationship to foundational ideas. Scholars of Derrida's political thought who emphasize only its critical or negative elements thus not only risk misevaluating Derrida's potential contribution to the field, but, more importantly, risk misunderstanding something about the relationship of democracy to foundational ideas. Derrida, in the last analysis, not only provides us with compelling reasons why he is consistent in his desire to maintain 'the old name' of democracy, but also suggests that this 'old name' contains within it the radical call to deconstruction.

Doubting Derrida

Many prominent scholars of political theory view Derrida's contributions to the field unfavourably. Critics can, in general, be divided into two groups: those who conclude that deconstruction neutralizes the impetus for political action,[4] and those who view Derrida's political interventions as covertly or inconsistently introducing new 'Derridean' foundations to replace the old metaphysical ones he

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deconstructs.[5] Indeed, even those who evaluate Derrida's contributions to the field favourably hesitate to attribute to him a positive commitment to democracy.[6]

Catherine Zuckert expresses the position of the first group in her article, 'The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction', and her subsequent book, *Postmodern Platos,* which includes two chapters on Derrida. Zuckert argues that, while Derrida's notion that there is no 'outside-the-text' (*il n'y a hors-texte*) means that even his most textual interventions implicate themselves in politics, '[Derrida's] work has an anti-activist, if not strictly speaking conservative thrust'.[7] However delicious the irony of a conservative Derrida, Zuckert concludes that he is not ultimately conservative because deconstruction cannot be employed to preserve extant systems, only to clear the way for the always-contingent emergence of new ones. The politics of deconstruction nevertheless remains profoundly anti-revolutionary, Zuckert argues, because deconstruction can never replace the systems it unravels with new ones. In *Postmodern Platos,* she further claims, 'Derridean analyses can only be critical, they cannot generate positive principles or a picture of a desirable way of life, because of the denial of the existence of any identity – personal, intelligible, or political – involved in the discovery of *différance*.'[8] François Cusset similarly notes that Derrida's thought involves 'the risk of a withdrawal from the political, a neutralization of positions, or even an endless metatheoretical regression that can no longer be brought to a stop by any practical decision or effective political engagement'.[9] David C. Durst and Richard Bernstein raise similar concerns at the level of individual decision. Recalling Zuckert, Durst observes that '[b]ereft of any sure footing, the practical use of theory opens onto the undecidablity of *différance*', while in an otherwise sympathetic evaluation of the ethical-political 'horizons' of Derrida's work, Bernstein concludes that Derrida ultimately does not provide an answer to the question: 'how can we ''warrant''... the ethical-political positions we take?'[10]

The second group of critics I have identified argues Derrida *does* believe we can 'warrant' or justify the ethical-political positions we take – and that is the problem. This position, advanced by Richard Wolin, maintains that there exists a 'lethal self-contradiction at the heart of the deconstructionist enterprise'.[11] Derrida's attempts to 'out-philosophize the history of philosophy' must end in the assertion that '*his* concepts... possess a status more primordial (and hence more ''true'') than those that have been proposed by his predecessors'.[12] Wolin's Derrida attempts to discredit philosophical realism, but cannot then argue in favour of democracy without implicitly claiming 'that his account is *more verisimilar* vis-à-vis the way things really are than the leading competing accounts', and ending in self-contradiction.[13] Brendan Sweetman makes a similar claim, arguing that Derrida replaces foundational Being with 'originary difference'. Derrida does not truly undermine the 'metaphysics of presence', but substitutes 'difference' for presence, forcing it into the same structural role.[14] The argument is similar to that of Gregory Bruce Smith, who views Derrida's political arguments as an instance of the inevitable manner in which 'the good' sneaks back into even the most radical analyses of political life.[15] Paul Ludwig's recent article on 'postmodern foundations' and political theory echoes this claim, arguing that although Derrida conceives of his work as

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'the very antithesis of foundations', the account of enmity in *Politics of Friendship* in fact 'take[s] on the [function] of new, negative foundations, replacing the old positive ones'.[16] Ludwig approvingly cites Thomas McCarthy, who advises that, if Derrida wants to arrive at a 'postmetaphysical politics', he should do so by 'stopping' his pursuit of a kind of 'negative' metaphysics.[17] Derrida, in Ludwig's view, plays fast and loose with ontological categories, so deconstruction becomes a 'blanket procedure' applying 'the same foundational analyses to any and all problems'.[18] All of this leads Ludwig to observe that in retaining a foundational or 'ontological' analysis of politics, Derridean deconstruction must engage in a 'stretching' of foundational categories that is of dubious utility to political theory.[19]

All of these approaches miss something crucial to Derrida's understanding of the aims of deconstruction, its relationship to politics in general, and democracy in particular. The first group assumes that logical consistency requires Derrida to abstain from generating or making use of positive principles to justify an orientation towards political life. The second group effectively agrees with the first, but tries to show that Derrida's interventions in politics rely upon the creation of new, 'deconstructive' foundations. Underlying both criticisms is the mistaken notion that Derridean analyses are necessarily critical or negative, and that Derrida's thought is naïvely 'anti-foundationalist'. The alternative understanding of deconstruction and politics that I will offer departs from both of these camps by maintaining that Derridean deconstruction is consistent with a specifically democratic account of politics. Although Derrida's writings involve a more complicated account of foundations than that to which we are accustomed, this does not mean that foundations can be tossed aside, or that he is inconsistent in defending democracy through his idea of the democracy to come. Rather, Derridean deconstruction furnishes what can be called a structurally 'democratic' relation to foundations; a relation, Derrida argues, which arises from democratic politics itself. In the next section I briefly sketch Derrida's understanding of foundations in his early essay, 'Plato's Pharmacy', before showing why such an approach is not only consistent with, but indeed immanent in, the practice of democratic politics in *Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues*.

'Neither foundationalist nor anti-foundationalist'

From virtually the beginning of his career Derrida vigorously resisted interpretations of his work as an attempt to destroy the foundations of the western metaphysical tradition. He instead emphasized the inescapability of the horizon of western metaphysics, and the futility of attempting to transcend this history:

> There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language . . . which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single deconstructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulation of precisely what it seeks to contest.[20]

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Derrida thus recognizes the inevitability of the 'old', and the necessity of remaining within the language, concepts and logic of the western tradition; this is, indeed, why Derrida's oeuvre is largely constituted of commentaries on the history of philosophy. And while Derrida's work has always been controversial, it has been nowhere more controversial than with respect to its implications for politics.[21] In 'Force of Law', originally delivered as an address to the Cardozo Law School in New York, Derrida confronts this controversy head on, clarifying that the deconstructive questioning of foundations with respect to politics is 'neither foundationalist nor anti-foundationalist'; one questions foundations not because one either wishes to endorse or discredit them, but for the old Aristotelian reason that one wonders about them.[22]

Of course we need not take Derrida's word for it. Since part of the aim of this article is to contest the view that Derrida's approach to foundations is simply critical, it will be useful to briefly survey the issue as explored in an early essay which is justly considered a 'deconstructive classic', 'Plato's Pharmacy'.[23] 'Plato's Pharmacy' is, on its face, an analysis of Plato's use of the polysemous Greek word *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere in the Platonic dialogues. Derrida notes Plato's systematic suppression of the ambiguities of the *pharmakon*, which can mean both cure and poison, commenting especially on the evaluation of writing as a *pharmakon* in the myth Socrates tells about the origins of writing. By probing the issue of Plato's supposed prioritization of speech over writing, however, Derrida approaches the question of how *anything* can be said to 'be prior to' or 'found' something else. Writing is said to be an imitation of speech, and speech is prior to writing because it always carries with it an active intelligence – the speaker – who is the 'father of the *logos*' or speech.[24] Speech is the father's 'responsible presence', while writing connotes 'absence' and 'patricidal subversion'.[25] That which is prior has more essence, is 'truer' and can consequently underwrite the claims of that which is posterior to it. Foundations or origins have normative significance because they exist to 'justify', or to 'vouch for', something else. Thus the value of a phenomenon emanates from its origin: good writing is that which most closely imitates speech, which is in turn preferred because *its* origin is present. Derrida suggests that the use of foundations or origins, understood as occupying the space of the 'paternal position', is not limited to the Platonic text but constitutes a persistent 'generalized structure' throughout the history of western thought.[26]

Derrida points out that the use of the logic of the 'paternal position' to privilege speech over writing is problematic in part because of the nature of the phenomenon in question; that is, speech cannot itself function as the paternal position because 'it is precisely *logos* that enables us to perceive and investigate something like paternity'.[27] The category 'father' is intelligible only through speech itself, so the locution 'father of the *logos*' conceals the 'father', because it refers to 'his' relationship to *logos* or speech, and tells us nothing about the nature of the 'father' as foundation. We prefer speech because of its present father, but such logic is ambiguous because the father is defined only with reference to the thing to which he is supposedly logically prior: there is no 'father' without speech. As Michael Naas puts it: 'The son is the father of the father, the father already an effect of the son.'[28]

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The criterion for preferring speech to writing is thus called into question because, in attempting to assert one as a foundation of the other, we find that that speech is as thoroughly shot-through with absence as writing. In other words, when the foundation (speech) is asked how it actually founds its subordinate term (writing), it first defers to *its* 'father', but then is forced to demonstrate that in its essence as speech it founds the father as well. The distinction between foundation and subordinate, between original and image, is less stable than we might wish it to be.[29]

Derrida's engagement with the speech/writing distinction allows him to approach the question of foundations or origins as such. What makes this transit between original and image possible? How can speech be both a foundation and an effect? Writing or 'the *pharmakon*' – like another famous Derridean coinage, *différance* – facilitates the 'spacing' in which something like speech can appear to be a foundation, but also finds itself implicated in the series of things it founds.[30] For our purposes, it is important to note that it is in attempting to affirm a foundation as such that the distinction between the dominant and subordinate term falters. It is only by attempting to be purely foundational that the foundation's integrity is comprised. Derrida thus argues that implicit in Plato's text – and in the western tradition that follows him – is a preference for hierarchical order. Our desire for stable foundations is inextricably bound to a desire, conscious or unconscious, for political stability, political hierarchy.[31] Crucially, Derrida does not expect us to jettison speech *or* writing; rather, he uses his 'deconstruction' of the distinction to point out the difficulties in expecting metaphysical foundations to provide us with certainty and stability. Deconstruction does not then attempt to provide a kind of 'negative' stability by taking refuge in detached critique, or in producing ersatz foundations that fulfil the same structural role as do the foundations of the western metaphysical tradition, as his critics allege. Derrida's goal is the far subtler attempt to 'shake' or to 'change' the expectations arising from an identification of foundations, and what normative role they should play in thought and practice. Deconstruction does not work against the idea of a foundation per se, but against the expectation that foundations should be stable and produce certainty. Derrida acknowledges the ineluctable necessity of foundations is able to abide with the knowledge that such foundations are liable to buckle under the weight of the logic inscribed upon them. If for much of the West uncovering a foundation is an 'answer', a telic goal which closes off questioning, deconstruction's contribution is the attempt to pry such questions open afresh, to allow our use of foundations to serve as the basis for a more radical questioning still, always with a view towards the implications of deconstruction for how we might live. This is the view of foundations which, according to Derrida, is not only compatible with democracy, but which democracy itself facilitates through its political practice. To examine this claim more fully we now turn to Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues*.

Countable singularities

The previous section showed that Derridean deconstruction has a more nuanced understanding of 'foundations' than is generally acknowledged by scholars of

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political theory. This section examines Derrida's development of *la démocratie à venir*, or 'democracy to come', and endeavours to show its consistency with the account of foundations explained in this article so far. Derrida's account of democracy foregrounds its peculiar stance towards foundations. Derrida particularly notes democracy's affirmation of its incommensurable dual foundations of freedom and equality. Derrida argues that democracy resembles deconstruction because its dual foundations exist in tension with one another: neither freedom nor democracy becomes reified because each critiques the other. Democracy exists, therefore, only 'in turn', modelling the understanding of foundations Derrida describes in 'Plato's Pharmacy'. We begin our explication of democracy to come with *Politics of Friendship* in which Derrida examines the democratic paradox of citizens as 'countable singularities': each citizen in a democracy must at once be viewed as irreducibly singular, thus possessing a certain integrity and freedom, but also as 'countable', and thus in a sense equal and interchangeable. It is because of this unlikely conjunction that arises out of democracy that Derrida provocatively names democracy the '*autos* of deconstructive self-delimitation'; in other words, the apparent tensions of democracy perennially draw our attention to its foundations.[32]

Alex Thomson rightly identifies 'the problem of number' as central to Derrida's engagement with democracy in *Politics of Friendship*.[33] Early in *Politics of Friendship* Derrida draws attention to the way in which traditional philosophical accounts of friendship neutralize the alterity of others in the act of naming them 'friend'.[34] Democracy, like friendship, is characterized by an attempt to recognize both singularity and community, or incalculable alterity with calculable community; democratic citizens are therefore described – paradoxically – as 'countable singularities'.[35] Derrida terms this paradox the 'problem of number': 'number is a problem for democracy because democracy emerges from the notion that each individual is incalculably singular, but also equal to all others, thus introducing an element of calculation'.[36] There is no democracy, Derrida says, without respect for the 'irreducible singularity or alterity' of the individual, but there is similarly no democracy without the 'community of friends, without the calculation of majorities'.[37] Whereas democracy demands the complete integrity of each citizen – that the citizen be irreducibly other, and thus incommensurable with the whole – it *also* requires the abrogation of this integrity in the very act forming a whole, in 'counting'.[38] Democracy marshals forces which at once recognize singularity and thus irreducible difference, but also a kind of solidarity through the democratic principle of equality and practices issuing from this principle, like the formation of democratic majorities. Derrida's move recalls Rorty's 'liberal utopia', which combines public solidarity with private self-creation, and, like Rorty, Derrida views these two 'laws' of democracy as '[t]ragically irreconcilable'.[39] But whereas this irreconcilability leads Rorty to despair of the possibility of reaching a theoretically satisfying account of a desirable political order, Derrida, contrariwise, concludes that the situation 'bears the chance and the future of a democracy whose ruin it constantly threatens but whose life, however, it sustains'.[40] Thus even though 'ruin' remains a very real possibility for democracy, Derrida does not conclude that it is

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theoretically indefensible, or that we are in need of an altogether new paradigm for politics. A recognition of the tensions inherent in democracy is not tantamount to a rejection of democracy; rather, Derrida sees fruitful possibilities precisely in the interstices created by democratic commitments to singularity and solidarity, of freedom and equality.[41]

The democratic openness to alterity, in particular, produces such possibilities. The 'problem of number' is, in Derrida's view, closely related to what he calls the 'logic of fraternization.' The logic of fraternization is the tendency to neutralize the alterity of the other by naturalizing bonds that would otherwise differentiate. Derrida consequently observes in his deconstruction of friendship in *Politics of Friendship* that the figure of the friend always appears 'with the features of the brother' – the 'other' who most resembles the 'self'. The 'deconstructive' collision of commensurability with incommensurable perpetually raises and reraises the issue of origins or foundations, and leads the call for a deconstruction of the genealogical as such. Thus democracy's radical solicitude to alterity exposes more generally our theoretical reliance on the 'genealogical' to stabilize relations that are inherently unstable by muting alterity. Working out from the notion of the citizen as a countable singularity, then, Derrida shows that the specific way in which democracy deconstructs itself is through a 'deconstruction of the genealogical' as such; that is, by confronting how origins or foundations are deployed in political theory.[42]

Derrida's 'deconstruction' of democracy thus leverages forces within democracy itself, and in this way he balances the critical operations of deconstruction with the exemplarity of the 'old', of democracy. To 'deconstruct' democracy through the genealogical is consequently not to 'wage war on [these things]' nor to 'see evil therein' but represents an attempt to think and live

> . . . a politics, a friendship, a justice which *begin* by breaking with their naturalness or their homogeneity, with their alleged place of origin. Hence, [a politics] which begins where the beginning divides (itself) and differs, begin by marking an 'originary' heterogeneity that has already come and that alone can come, in the future, to open them up.[43]

An appeal to origins or foundations is an attempt to anchor political life to a reified location or concept; when we put such weight on an origin we attempt implicitly to neutralize incommensurable alterity, harming the fragile balance of commensurability with incommensurability characteristic of democracy. Democracy to come is therefore an attempt to *begin* by thinking of heterogeneity rather than clinging to the homogeneity implied in a focus on a single foundation. This move leads some scholars to conclude that Derrida establishes negative, 'deconstructive' foundations for democratic politics.[44] Such a reading distorts Derrida's attempts to avoid both the Scylla of demonizing foundations and the Charybdis of creating new ones. Derrida rather aims to sketch a 'non-genealogical' relation to foundations – the familial language, perhaps intentionally, recalls his earlier attempt to shake the notion of a foundation as the 'paternal position'. Such a non-genealogical relation

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acknowledges the inevitable failure of foundations but affirms them nonetheless. Derrida's surprising conclusion is that such a 'non-genealogical' relation dwells within democracy, which, he reminds us in 'Plato's Pharmacy', has long been thought to arise precisely out of a bad relationship between father and son.[45] But Derrida's penchant for metaphysical parricide does not translate into independence from the 'old name' of democracy, and so his motto for democracy to come is: 'no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction'.[46] Deconstruction and democracy are intimately linked because the 'limit between the conditional . . . and the unconditional' is inscribed as a 'self-deconstructive force' within democracy.[47] Since democracy can never be reduced to either simple commensurability or simple incommensurability, it is always on the verge of 'delimiting' itself, of questioning its own relation to its foundations. Such interventions are not exerted by some exogenous force or agent, but arise from within democracy's own logic: thus the 'problem of number' – the paradoxical requirement that citizens be considered 'countable singularities' – is a productive tension. In this way democracy resembles deconstruction, which affirms metaphysical foundations while unveiling limitations and ways to dwell within the space created by these limitations. In *Rogues* Derrida intensifies this analysis of democracy, showing that a deconstructive relationship to foundations is nothing less than the heart of democracy itself.

The 'old name' of democracy

Derrida admits that *Politics of Friendship* is more 'a lengthy preface' than a comprehensive treatment of democracy to come, so *Rogues* can be seen as the implied sequel to that work.[48] In *Rogues* Derrida once again draws our attention to his loyalty to the 'old name' of democracy, because even though its precise meaning is 'obscured, obfuscated, [and] reserved', its 'heritage is undeniable'.[49] As evidence of the ambiguity of the 'old Greek name' of democracy, Derrida examines the etymology of the word: 'democracy' is indeed literally the concatenation of the *demos*, 'the people' and thus 'equality', with *kratos*, 'power' and thus 'freedom'.[50] When rigorously affirmed, the two elements of the 'diabolical couple of democracy', freedom and equality, are exclusive of one another: '[t]he absolute freedom of a finite being . . . can be equitably shared only in the space-time of a "by turns"'.[51] As Hobbes famously observed, my freedom, if utterly unchecked, inevitably conflicts with the absolute freedom of any other. Freedom, moreover, ceases to be itself as soon as it is subject to restraint, and so is incommensurable.[52] But democracy also requires equality, which is in itself commensurability as such. So freedom and equality, democracy's twin foundations, are incompatible, but democracy cannot be enacted or thought in the absence of either one.

Taken together freedom and equality represent a tension that cannot be resolved without compromising something critical to democracy. Freedom without equality leads to the rule of the strong, while equality without freedom risks the integrity of individuals. Derrida thus proposes that democracy negotiates its antinomian foundations 'in turn', preventing either foundation from becoming reified: 'Democracy

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could not gather itself around the presence of an axial and univocal meaning that does not destroy itself and get carried away with itself.'[53] Derrida accordingly argues that democracy does not exist as a stable presence. Since 'turnings' are constitutive of democracy, it can never be fully present in space or time. Democracy does not consist in a particular principle, but in the *process* or 'turning' of principles and rule. No single 'moment' of democracy comprehends it as self-same presence; democracy exists only in the active interplay of *both* moments in ongoing circulation. Derrida thus does not attempt to establish deconstructive politics on novel Derridean anti-foundations, as some critics allege; rather, by affirming democracy he discovers that its relationship to its own foundations is *prima facie* problematic.[54] The founding tension of democratic life means that democracy allows its foundations to be affirmed in turn. In any given affirmation or assertion democracy will thereby show the extent to which one of its foundations must be supplemented by the other to remain democratic: 'Democracy is what it is only in the *différance* by which it defers itself and differs from itself.'[55] In democracy, then, any kind of *absolute* recourse to either foundation fails, suggesting the need for a more limited understanding of the purpose and possibilities inherent in foundations – an understanding of foundations notably found in deconstruction.

Democracy is consequently characterized by '[t]he absence of a proper form, of an *eidos*, of an appropriate paradigm, of a definitive turn, of a proper meaning or essence and, at the same time, the obligation to have *only* turns, rounds, tropes, strophes of itself: that is what makes democracy unpresentable in existence'.[56] So the lack of a stable foundation makes democracy radically receptive to the future, but for Derrida this must be a future understood as the 'to come' as opposed to the 'future-present', which always bears with it the chance of repeating the present.[57] Matthias Fritsch describes the 'to come' as 'a perspective that takes us beyond present identity and the homogenous chain of presents', arguing that the 'to come' 'names the blind spot in any [historical] horizon whereby it gives way to other horizons'.[58] Democracy, Derrida concludes, is historical because it lacks presence: it is *always* looking toward the 'to come' or the future, to its next turn, and is consequently bound to the experience of time and thus history.

Democracy can never moreover meet the demands of perfect democratic justice because such justice would require the impossible conjunction of calculation (i.e. equality) with the incalculable (i.e. freedom) – it is not only impracticable, but also impossible in concept.[59] In both 'theory' and 'practice', democracy thereby asks us to recognize the failure of foundations to meet the demands we make on them in terms of stability.[60] In political practice this facilitates the ongoing affirmation and eventual critique of democracy's foundations (freedom/incommensurability vs equality/commensurability).[61] These possibilities alternate: 'they can be addressed to you by turns, or else they can haunt one another, parasite one another in the same instant, each becoming by turns the alibi of the other'.[62] Deconstruction is in the last analysis consistent with democratic politics because it is the only philosophical discourse that explains democracy's need to critique and, in turn, affirm its foundations; it departs from the tradition of western political philosophy because in so doing it allows us to speak

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democratically of democracy. That is, Derrida insists on the identification of deconstruction and democracy because the deconstruction of foundations is structurally democratic in its openness to multiple foundations, while democratic practice produces the kind of stance towards foundations that Derrida calls deconstructive. Deconstruction provides us a paradigm through which we can understand democracy's capacity to negotiate its twin foundations in turn; deconstruction as an analytical practice models the same stance towards foundations as democracy, while democratic political practice occasions the confrontation of foundational ideas characteristic of deconstruction. The reappearance or reassertion of a principle (i.e. equality or freedom) which was previously considered derivative of the other thus reprises the basic deconstructive account of foundations from 'Plato's Pharmacy'. By focusing too narrowly on the critical elements of deconstruction at the expense of a nuanced understanding of Derrida's treatment of foundations, scholars of political theory have failed to appreciate what motivates Derrida's loyalty to the 'old name' of democracy. Indeed, by suggesting that deconstruction is necessarily critical, they reproduce precisely the attitude towards foundations that Derrida views not only as incorrect, but as undemocratic. Speaking 'democratically' of democracy would seem to require more than the use of accessible language, it requires an awareness of the disruptive theoretical implications of democracy.

Conclusion

An over-emphasis on the negative elements of Derridean deconstruction leads scholars of political theory to miss the crucial ways in which Derrida's thought is democratic, and thus to a critical misevaluation of 'democracy to come'. The deconstructive approach to foundations modelled in 'Plato's Pharmacy' finds its expression in democracy's assertion of its mutually exclusive foundations of freedom and equality in turn. Derrida does show that the idea of a foundation is unable to bear its own conceptual weight, but in doing so, he does not mean to suggest the need to move beyond the concept of the foundation. Rather, he enjoins us to change our relationship with foundations, to embrace them tentatively, rather than in a totalizing manner, and locates precisely such an understanding of foundations within democracy, which in its essentially historical practice requires its coupled origins of freedom and equality to be embraced *in turns*. Rather than attempting to force democracy against itself to resolve the conflict, Derrida celebrates the extent to which democracy exists in precisely the space it creates, and reveals that a thorough affirmation of one democratic foundation creates a theoretical-political space for the reassertion of democracy's other foundation. Derrida thus argues that there is an almost symbiotic relationship between democracy and deconstruction, and that this is a democratic defence of democracy.

In the last analysis, Derrida's democracy to come is a better answer to the question 'why democracy?' than it is a tool for grounding specific policy

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recommendations.[63] It allows us to understand the necessity of asserting and reasserting the principles of freedom and equality, and can help explain the uncanny or unsettling experience of being on the side of freedom at one juncture and equality at another, of recognizing that democracy is not reducible to a simple reified moment, but that it exists historically, by turns, and is always radically incomplete, and radically receptive of human energies. One need not look very far in contemporary politics to adduce examples of the democratic turnings of freedom and equality that Derrida describes. In recent months the two decentralized popular groundswells in American politics – the so-called 'Tea Party' and 'Occupy' movements – put Derrida's understanding of democracy in dramatic evidence. To paint in broad strokes, the Tea Party activists affirm freedom in their calls for limitations to government power, while the Occupy protests in Wall Street and elsewhere affirm equality in their calls for a more egalitarian distribution of economic resources. Neither movement would be thinkable, or indeed possible, outside of democracy, and both are identifiably 'democratic' in their origins and stated aims. And yet neither movement fully represents 'democracy', and democracy would not be represented by even the unlikely synthesis or dialectical sublation of the two. That both movements can be legitimately described as democratic, despite their evidently mutually exclusive policy prescriptions, points to democracy's lack of a stable and certain foundation, and indicates that this might, as Derrida suggests, be the source of its vitality.

Democracy would seem to emerge through the affirmations and critiques offered by competing groups, competing principles or foundations, *in turn*. And such a turning, and the decentring experience it generates, opens possibilities for a new democratic future or 'to come'. That the excesses of each of these movements are also troubling serves only to support Derrida's warning of the risks or danger inherent in the openness of the 'perhaps' inherent in democracy.[64] Deconstruction, Derrida might point out, is the only philosophic discourse that encourages us to loosen our grasps on foundations, to recognize the necessity of negotiating with foundations when they inevitably disclose their limitations. Deconstruction, moreover, allows us to dwell with the reality that democracy has no stable identity of its own, but remains forever to come. If we do so, we can come to terms with the need for each of democracy's origins to be affirmed and critiqued in turn, which will lead to a democratic stance of openness in the face of the unknown and incalculable future.

If Derrida is correct in his account of the contradictory foundations of democracy, then he challenges those of us working in the political theory of democracy to expose the ways in which our work implicitly relies upon an undemocratic understanding of the relationship between foundations and the things we justify through them. Such a challenge is of obvious relevance to political theory as in recent decades democratic theorists have attempted to construct new foundations for democracy[65] or to altogether eschew such foundational analyses with respect to politics.[66] Derrida would be critical of both the attempt to construct new foundations as well as the attempt to avoid them, as *both* a purely positive or simply critical approach would reproduce the problematic logic of the foundation

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as ‘paternal position’ that Derrida aims to delimit, and which he identifies as undemocratic. Inasmuch as political theory seeks to maintain the structure of justifying political life through recourse to a set of reified philosophical principles posing as democracy’s foundations, it can never, Derrida avers, defend a specifically democratic politics in a philosophically satisfying way. The failure of democratic origins is already inscribed upon democracy itself – but this is not bad news. The ‘solution’ is not that democracy be left behind or cast away, but that democracy should be affirmed all the more. Derrida would thus in some ways be a natural ally to those democratic theorists who emphasize the need to keep democratic politics ‘agonistic’,[67] or the way that democracy is in a state of perpetual becoming.[68] To such analyses Derrida contributes an account of why of our structural or strategic use of metaphysical foundations must remain democratic, and suggests that the logic for this kind of foundational openness inheres in democracy itself.

The very experience of democracy, Derrida thus argues, teaches us a *philosophic* lesson, a lesson of how one may live with the intellectual ambiguities and uncertainties of foundations that occasionally ‘shake’. Derrida’s startling claim is that, even though scholars worry about the effects of deconstruction on democratic politics, democracy itself persistently facilitates the ‘deconstruction’ of its own foundational ideas. Far from an inconsistent or insincere philosophical defender of democracy, then, Derrida offers us the startling suggestion that to be consistently democratic we need a renovation of the underlying structural ways in which we think about political life. Perhaps more radically still, such a reconfiguration already haunts our democratic words and deeds. Deconstruction is consequently not alien, but arises precisely out of that which seems most safe or domesticated: democracy. Or, to repeat: ‘no deconstruction without democracy; no democracy without deconstruction’.[69]

Notes

1. In *Rogues* Derrida denies that there was a ‘political turn’ in deconstruction in the 1980s and 1990s, but the shift in focus from works like *Writing and Difference* (1978) to works like *Politics of Friendship* (1997) is undeniable. See Jacques Derrida (2005) *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
2. Jacques Derrida (1997) *Politics of Friendship*, tr. George Collins. New York: Verso Books; see also Derrida (2005, in n. 1). As Derrida points out in *Rogues*, ‘democracy to come’ is discussed elliptically in ‘Force of Law’, *The Other Heading, Specters of Marx* and *On the Name*. See Jacques Derrida (1992) ‘Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority’, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, pp. 3–67. New York: Routledge. (1992) *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. (1994) *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge. (1995) *On the Name*, tr. David Wood, John P. Leavey and Ian McLeod. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
3. Derrida (2005) (n. 1), p. 83.

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4. Allan Megill (1987) *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press. Catherine Zuckert (1991) 'The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction', *Polity* 23(3): 335–56, and Zuckert (1998) *Postmodern Platos*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Richard Bernstein (1992) 'Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Derrida', in Richard Bernstein (ed.) *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, pp. 172–98. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Simon Critchley (1999) *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press. Mark Lilla (2001) *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*. New York: New York Review of Books Press. David C. Durst (2000) 'The Place of the Political in Derrida and Foucault', *Political Theory* 28(5): 675–89. François Cusset (2008) *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, tr. Jeff Fort. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
5. Richard Wolin (2004) *The Seduction of Unreason*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Thomas McCarthy (1988) 'On the Margins of Politics', *Journal of Philosophy* 85(11): 645–8. Brendan Sweetman (1999) 'Postmodernism, Derrida, and *Différance*: A Critique', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 39(1): 5–18. Yoav Rinon (1992) 'The Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida I: "Plato's Pharmacy"', *Review of Metaphysics* 46: 369–86, and (1993) 'The Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida II: *Phaedrus*', *Review of Metaphysics* 46: 537–58. Gregory Bruce Smith (2008) *Between Eternities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. Paul W. Ludwig (2010) 'Without Foundations: Plato's *Lysis* and Postmodern Friendship', *American Political Science Review* 104(1): 134–50.
6. See esp. Richard Beardsworth's (1996) groundbreaking study *Derrida and the Political*, conclusion. New York: Routledge. A. J. P. Thomson (2005) *Deconstruction and Democracy: Derrida's Politics of Friendship*, chs 9–12. New York: Continuum Publishing. There are, however, some notable exceptions. Most prominent among these are Wendy Brown's (2009) 'Sovereign Hesitations' in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (eds) *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, pp. 114–32. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Jacques Rancière (2009) 'Should Democracy Come? Ethics and Politics in Derrida', ibid. pp. 274–88. Both essays base their critiques on Derrida's account of sovereignty in *Rogues*; whereas Brown objects to Derrida's over-emphasis on individual sovereignty at the expense of recognizing the democratic potential of sharing power, Rancière suggests that Derrida's critique of sovereignty substitutes a new, heretical theology in order to displace the old Judaeo-Christian onto-theological account of sovereignty. See also Bonnie Honig (1993) *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. John P. McCormick's (2001) excellent article 'Derrida on Law; or, Poststructuralism gets Serious', *Political Theory* 29: 395–423. Geoffrey Bennington (2007) 'Demo', in Martin McQuillan (ed.) *The Politics of Deconstruction*, pp. 17–42. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press. William Sokoloff (2005), 'Between Justice and Legality: Derrida on Decision,' *Political Research Quarterly* 58(2): 341–53.
7. Zuckert (1991, in n. 4), p. 355.
8. Zuckert (1998, in n. 4), p. 269.
9. Cusset (n. 4), p. 126.
10. Bernstein (n. 4), p. 191. William Sokoloff uses 'Force of Law' to mount a persuasive defence of Derrida on decision. Sokoloff demonstrates how Derrida's attention to undecidability in fact makes possible decisions that are more thoroughly purged of originary violence by creating consciousness of the arbitrary character of such foundations. By emphasizing the precise nature of the decision as an event, Derrida

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exposes the extent to which identities and laws compromise the integrity of the moment of decision through a programmatic neutralization of the undecidable. See Sokoloff (n. 6), pp. 344–5.

11. Wolin (n. 5), p. 222. Wolin's critique of Derrida is wide-ranging and includes some of the critiques I have identified as 'first group' arguments as well.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Sweetman (n. 5), p. 14.
15. Smith (n. 5), p. 135.
16. Ludwig (n. 5), p. 135.
17. Contrary to McCarthy's comment, Derrida never in fact says that he attempts to arrive at a 'post-metaphysical' politics, because Derrida does not believe that there is such a thing as a 'post-metaphysical' world. Ibid. p. 145 and see McCarthy (n. 5), p. 648.
18. Ludwig (n. 5), p. 146.
19. Ibid. p. 149.
20. Jacques Derrida (1978) *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass, p. 280. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
21. Cusset (n. 4), pp. 131–92.
22. Derrida (1992, in n. 2), p. 8. John McCormick's 'Derrida on Law' persuasively reads 'Force of Law' as an 'apology of Jacques Derrida', where Derrida, playing the role of Socrates, defends himself against charges of injustice and undermining the integrity of the political community. McCormick (n. 6) thus demonstrates Derrida's sensitivity to the question of deconstruction's relationship to politics, and shows how Derrida configures his political thought as a response to nihilism.
23. Michael Naas (2003) *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction*, p. 4. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
24. Jacques Derrida (1983) 'Plato's Pharmacy' in Jacques Derrida (ed.) *Dissemination*, tr. Barbara Johnson, p. 77. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. p. 80.
28. Naas (n. 23), pp. 12–13.
29. For a broad and rich account of Derrida (and Heidegger) on 'origins', see Edward S. Casey (1984), 'Origin(s) in (of) Heidegger/Derrida', *Journal of Philosophy,* 81(10), 601–10.
30. Derrida (1983, in n. 24), p. 103.
31. Ibid. p. 143.
32. Derrida (1997, in n. 2), p. 105.
33. Thomson (n. 6), pp. 23–4.
34. Derrida (1997, in n. 2), pp. 26–48. Thomson's study of *Politics of Friendship* provides an able reconstruction of Derrida's linkage of the problem of alterity in friendship to the problem of alterity in democracy and democracy to come (Thomson (n. 6), pp. 12–16).
35. Derrida (1997, n. 2), p. 22.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid. See Richard Rorty (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 68–9. New York: Cambridge University Press.
40. Derrida (1997, in n. 2), p. 22.

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41. Derrida does acknowledge the possibility of one day leaving behind the 'old name', but in both *Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues*, he provides more compelling evidence for its ongoing theoretical and strategic relevance than he does for the conditions under which we might consider moving on to something else. It is consistent with Derrida's understanding of the radically open shape of the 'to come' that the old name of democracy may one day need to be retired, but too much emphasis on this element of the democracy to come runs the risk of unduly downplaying the specifically democratic character of Derrida's political thought.
42. Ibid. p. 105.
43. Ibid.
44. See Ludwig (n. 5), p. 144.
45. Derrida (1983, in n. 24), p. 145. Cf. Plato (1998) *Phaedrus* 572C–573D, tr. James Nichols. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
46. Derrida (1997, in n. 2), p. 105.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid. p. vii.
49. Derrida (2005, in n. 1), p. 9.
50. For an ingenious reconstruction of the logic of democracy to come working directly from the treatments of democracy in the texts of Plato and Aristotle, see Bennington (n. 6), pp. 17–42.
51. Derrida (2005, in n. 1), p. 24.
52. Of course for Derrida a distinction like theory/practice must ultimately be considered to be an artificial one as Thomson suggests ((n. 6), pp. 5–6).
53. Derrida (2005, in n. 1), p. 40. Derrida observes that this quality has been present since the formulations of Plato and Aristotle. In Plato we see that democracy is aneidetic – without an *eidos* or 'form' – whereas Aristotle emphasizes the extent to which democratic rule occurs 'in turn' or 'in part' (*en merei*). See Plato (1991) *Republic of Plato*, tr. Allan Bloom, book 8. New York: Basic Books. Aristotle (1985) *The Politics*, tr. Carnes Lord, book 6. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See also Bennington (n. 6) who makes many good arguments using Plato and Aristotle to reconstruct democracy to come, but oddly does not note that Derrida himself makes many similar points in 'Plato's Pharmacy' and *Rogues*.
54. A good comparison can be drawn to the work of Bonnie Honig, whose *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* indeed draws on Derrida. Honig calls a comparable operation a politics of 'augmentation'. Derrida, like Honig, responds to attempts to 'displace' politics, as she concludes: 'politics never gets things right, over, and done with', a conclusion she, like Derrida, calls not nihilistic, 'but radically democratic' (Honig, n. 6), p. 210.
55. Derrida (2005, in n. 1), p. 38.
56. Ibid. p. 74.
57. While there is not space in this essay for an extended meditation on Derrida's notion of futurity as it relates to the democracy to come, this work has been most ably done by Matthias Fritsch (2002) 'Derrida's Democracy to Come', *Constellations* 9(4): 574–93.
58. Ibid. p. 577.
59. This 'impossibility' aligns democracy with Derrida's account of justice in 'Force of Law,' where he argues that justice involves an 'experience of the impossible' (Derrida (1992, in n. 2), p. 16).
60. By way of contrast we see that appealing to either freedom or equality as a reified principle, deconstruction facilitates the same active interplay between them that

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democracy requires in democratic theory and practice. But insofar as the foundation of this deconstructive structure of democracy cannot be pinned to *either* 'theory' or 'practice', democracy blurs the line between the two activities in a way that is recognizably Derridean: there is no 'outside-the-text' after all. The relevance of this characteristic of deconstruction to political theory has been thoroughly investigated by Catherine Zuckert ((n. 2), p. 336).

61. As Pheng Cheah argues, for Derrida even the 'very compromises, suspensions, and destructions of democratic freedom indicate a democracy to come because they derive from democracy's structural noncoincidence or inadequation to itself'. Pheng Cheah (2009) 'Democracy's Untimely Secret', in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (eds) *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, p. 79. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
62. Derrida (2005, in n. 1), p. 91.
63. Although Derrida certainly is not hesitant to make such recommendations, especially in *The Other Heading* (1994, n. 2) and (2004), *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Giovanna Borradori (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
64. See Derrida (1997, in n. 2), pp. 39–42.
65. The most impressive attempt along these lines is, of course, John Rawls (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. But see also Jurgen Habermas (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action*, tr. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press Books.
66. See esp. Rorty (n. 41). Although Ludwig (n. 5) claims that Derrida's notions of foundations is so broad ranging as to be problematic for political theory, the account offered clarifies that Derrida in fact provides precisely the kind of 'ontological flexibility' which Ludwig suggests emerges only in Plato's Socrates.
67. See Honig (n. 6).
68. See H. Mark Roelofs (1998) 'Democratic Dialectics', *Review of Politics* 60(1): 5–30. Derrida would agree with Roelofs that democracy is in a state of becoming, but would be decidedly less comfortable with the use of Hegelian dialectic to arrive at a synthetic account of social democracy. Derrida's critiques of Hegelian logic would lead him to say that democracy is a 'third term' or a 'sovereign operation' which would forever evade the type of synthesis sketched by Roelofs. For Derrida's critique of Hegelian dialectic see (1978) 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve', in *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass, pp. 251–76. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
69. Derrida (1997, in n. 2), p. 105.

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