

# Democracy



# Democracy

## 1

### Introduction

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On the front page of newspapers daily, at the heart of foreign policy agendas, at the center of debates, democracy is a central theme of our times. And in its international salience, in the confidence with which it is parlayed across the globe, it is often taken as a truth held to be self-evident, easily defined by its most prominent features: free and fair elections, a multi-party system, and freedoms of expression and the press.

Yet as recent events have highlighted and as long-standing debates have underscored, democracy is not nearly so clear-cut. Indeed, its complexity requires new forms of understanding. With that in mind, I invited a set of prominent political anthropologists to participate in an advanced seminar on democracy at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe in 2005, and that seminar became the basis for this book.<sup>1</sup> Like the article “Toward an Anthropology of Democracy” published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Paley 2002), the seminar aimed to explore how anthropological perspectives might take understandings of democracy in new and unanticipated directions. While the article offered lenses for viewing the array of anthropological interventions on democracy available at the time,<sup>2</sup> the SAR advanced seminar provided a forum for interactive conversation about democracy, with particular attention to theoretical directions, methodological approaches, and reinterpretations of political events. It invited anthropologists to share their work investigating local understandings,

official discourses, transnational processes, and transformative possibilities in relation to democracy. Collectively, we had a sense that we were working “toward” something—that is, contributing to a still emerging field.

From the start, the intellectual approach at the seminar involved relinquishing preconceived notions of what democracy is or should be. Throughout the week, we moved further and further away from seeking a core definition of democracy and closer, instead, to an awareness of democracy’s open-ended construction. Through a heightened alertness to what we saw emerging in our ethnographic work, we engaged in a constant process of opening up new questions. It became evident that our dialogues with people in our field sites, beyond illuminating different understandings of democracy (which they did as well), continually generated new ways of framing our inquiries. This analytic openness is what we see as the contribution of anthropological approaches to democracy.

As input into this ongoing exploration and as a way of offering pathways into the chapters of the book, this introduction brings together ideas circulating within the collective discussion and interactive dialogue during that week in Santa Fe. In the introduction, my own synthesis and analysis interweaves with a set of thoughts that emerged, inextricably, through engaged conversation and animated debate. To give a window into these interactions, at moments I quote not only from the volume’s chapters but also from the participants’ verbal comments at the seminar and their earlier written texts. The introduction, moreover, is arranged in thematic sections that connect chapters by various authors to one another: multiplicities; political language; institutions and practices; the people’s will; conversation and discourse; mediation and textualization; markets and commodification; transnationalism; methods, ethics, and transformations.

## **MULTIPLICITIES**

Foreign policy makers and those engaged in promoting democracy internationally identify characteristics needed for a political system to be labeled a democracy and apply those criteria to countries worldwide. They maintain that programs and political systems can be replicated in vastly varying circumstances, for example, by implementing democracy promotion projects in one region and then using the knowledge gained to expand them to others. In activities such as these, a common vocabulary becomes available to everyone from policy makers, to researchers, to non-governmental actors, to media. Explicit in setting forth criteria, it gains effectiveness by exerting a commonsensical grip on the social and political imagination.

An anthropological approach is not about developing a somehow more precise set of mechanisms for determining whether a country is or is not a democracy. That would cordon off definitions of democracy precisely at the moment we seek to open them up. Instead of developing new criteria, in this volume the authors are interested in two main things: first, detecting the many variations associated with the term *democracy* in a broad array of contexts and, second, understanding the way democracy has been conceptualized in public discourse and practice—both the *logic* underlying the idea that democracy is definable by discrete features and infinitely replicable and the *process* through which this notion of democracy has been generated and has come to predominate.

Notions of democracy prevailing at present are but one manifestation of a broader phenomenon that David Nugent (chapter 2) has called “normative democracy,” a term he uses to describe the dominant status bestowed upon a particular form of liberal democracy. Nugent urges us to take note of the particularities of Western liberal democracy by understanding it to be one project among many, its distinguished status residing primarily in its having been generalized as a norm.

What becomes crucial for analysis is not just the observation that one form of democracy is normative, but also that any dominant form emanates from and is reconfigured in particular places and times and through particular nexuses of institutions and power relations. Instead of a single trans-historical norm, there are ongoing processes of making or maintaining assertions of normativity amid a field of contestants. Moreover, even those forms with dominant status experience a range of variations and disputes internally. The studies in this volume are attuned, therefore, to the temporality, agency, and processual nature of normativity; rather than take it as a given, they trace its historical emergence and its trajectory in specific situations.

This processual approach applies as well to what Nugent calls “alternative” democracies. He draws an example from Peru a century ago, when leaders of the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (Popular American Revolutionary Alliance, known as APRA) redefined democracy to entail equality and unity and maintained that economic decisions should be made by organized communities.

In these instances, alternative democracies should not be viewed as an array of bounded systems mapped onto places or groups, each distinguished by its own unique configuration and placed in a relativistic frame. Such a construct would logically lead to categorization and the creation of typologies, a project in which we do not seek to be engaged. The emphasis

on discrete, contrasting systems would also tend toward positing alternative democracies as both atemporal (or unchanging in time) and mutually isolated. Moreover, it would risk reducing complex phenomena to “distinctive features”—decontextualized elements that stand for and highlight difference. Instead, the point of analysis should be to trace the history through which alternative democratic forms came to be, as well as the directions in which they are headed.

Because distinct democratic forms continually contest one another for dominance, a valuable analytic approach is to situate powerful and non-powerful actors within the same frame, by examining how they selectively choose and resignify elements of a globally circulating discourse. APRA’s leaders chose to call their project “functional democracy,” despite the fact that they could have called it (and also did call it) something else, “Latin American socialism.” Their selecting the term *democracy* indicates that they considered using a globally circulating discourse and reworking it with another set of meanings to have strategic benefit at their time.

The potential effectiveness of that kind of politics varies with circumstances. In contrast to the case of APRA, grassroots shantytown health promoters in my study of Chile (Paley 2004) found the term *democracy* to be so captured by a post-dictatorship politics of neoliberal accommodation in the 1990s, that the term emerged in health promoters’ discourse mainly as critique (“This is not democracy!”). Instead, the language of human rights, equally a globally circulating discourse and one that had also predominated during the period of military dictatorship, became more useful for their purposes at a time of formal political democracy. Here, we are analyzing the ebb and flow of a discourse—fluctuations in moments, places, and historical circumstances when the term *democracy* seems either particularly apt or not useful at all. In so doing, we are analyzing the outer edges of discourse, the shifting borderline between the instances in which democracy discourse is picked up and used and those in which it is cast aside in favor of other possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Anthropologists gain analytic leverage in this project from ethnography enriched through historical inquiry. The unique conceptions of democracy emerging among subaltern peoples enable a contrast with prevailing norms that allows us to think outside of dominant assumptions. That analytic perspective, in turn, permits a denaturalization of actions of major international powers themselves—the internationals doing election monitoring in Bosnia-Herzegovina in Kimberley Coles’s chapter 5, the Bush administration’s discourse on the Iraq war in Carol Greenhouse’s chapter 8, or the Colombian military officers in Jennifer Schirmer’s chap-

ter 9. Such anthropological projects take with utmost seriousness the injunction to “study up” (Nader 1972; also, Gusterson 1997) among powerful groups, while studying “down” and “across” as well. In fact, the juxtaposition—at times a face-to-face encounter, at times an evasion—of Ford Foundation staff with Mozambiquan Muedans in Harry West’s chapter 4 or ex-guerrillas and military personnel in Jennifer Schirmer’s chapter 9 shows the interface in these various conceptions of democracy. Moreover, the contemporary world reveals examples of thoroughgoing, mutual imbrication in which subaltern and dominant groups construct forms of democracy in conjunction with each other—evidenced, for example, in the interwoven strategies of the World Bank and the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement in the development projects explored in my own research (chapter 6).

### POLITICAL LANGUAGE

Because groups siphon vocabulary from internationally circulating discourses and enact distinctive meanings and practices, one goal is to understand the resulting variations. A key entry point for this inquiry is linguistic: an analysis of the vocabulary people use to describe political processes in which they are engaged. Mukulika Banerjee (chapter 3), calling her broader project “popular perceptions of democracy,” recommends taking common political terms such as *state*, *power*, *administration*, and *bureaucracy* and examining how people interpret and use them. Conversely, one might listen for the colloquial terms people use to describe the state, bureaucracy, political parties, and other political institutions, to see where the overlap occurs.

One way to grasp internal diversity and transformation is to follow situations in which people are frustrated by the categories available to them. We might pay attention to moments when someone is actively trying to articulate a political distinction but finds herself without the vocabulary to do so, or occasions in which an opposition party makes headway in a political campaign by drawing on otherwise unheard-of vocabulary. We should be sensitive, too, to the mechanisms through which people change their political language. These issues resonate with phenomena in post-socialist Eastern Europe, where continuities in meanings seem to predominate because vocabulary remains the same, even though words are used to describe very different phenomena (Burawoy and Verdery 1999), or the reverse, as when the adoption of a new glossary obscures entrenched continuities in meaning systems.

Whereas some groups bestow unique meanings upon internationally circulating political vocabulary, others express themselves in a language all their own. Harry West (chapter 4) finds value in Cameroonian intellectual

Achille Mbembe's notion of "languages of power," by which he means forms of political expression that "emerge from the daily life of the people" (Geschiere 1997:7). This concept, instead of identifying an enduring mode of expression, highlights the openness and transformative nature of political thought, in that a language of power is "constantly sought and never arrived at," in Harry West's words during the seminar. The talk that captures people's attention in this part of Mozambique is not of elections, but rather of lions, and experiences of sorcery infuse Muedans' subjectivity. Ironically, this was a form of engagement with international politics, for it "afforded [Muedans] profound insights and allowed them to formulate a nuanced critique of democracy as they experienced it" and, moreover, to articulate "their own vision of, and for, the working of power in the world they inhabit."

The notion "languages of power" and the multiplicity that West perceives can be applied not just to subaltern groups but also to the democracy promoters themselves—the Ford Foundation, USAID, and other agencies operating in Mozambique. The overt language and logic the practitioners use may or may not intersect with their own experiences. As Greenhouse's chapter 8 suggests, discourses may be shifting and tactically oriented toward any number of audiences, some of them internal to the organizations themselves. Coles's chapter 5, too, portrays internationals working in Bosnia-Herzegovina as enacting one official set of activities but having a significance and self-understanding that transcend or circumvent those explicit tasks. As ethnographers of democracy who are placing many disparate and intersecting actors into the same analytical frame, we might productively ask, How do we describe the cosmology or cultural idioms of people who are doing international democracy promotion work? What assumptions about democracy—such as the idea that it can be transplanted from one locale to another—are embedded in particular formulations?

### **STUDYING POLITICS: INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES**

Although meaning-centered analysis is crucial, it does not suffice for the study of democracy. Instead, drawing on a history of practice theory in anthropology (Ortner 1984), an analysis of democracy benefits from attention to the intersection of meaning and practice—what is *done* with meaning, how politics operate. Therefore, it is essential to examine the day-to-day activities people engage in and the consequences, both intended and unintended, of their actions with regard to such topics as election monitoring, governmental offices, and democracy promotion programs.

Mukulika Banerjee's work (chapter 3) forwards a hybrid methodology



that takes up where survey research leaves off, forging an anthropological intervention in the most large-scale and central of questions about democracy. Banerjee starts with a puzzle that she derives directly from questions at the heart of the electoral scenario: why are illiterate rural villagers among the most avid voters in India? Her ethnography of West Bengal brings us immediately to the electoral scene—the polling machines, the lines of voters waiting in the sun, the publicity promoting candidacies. In the best anthropological fashion, Banerjee reveals to us the meaning systems for these villagers. Yet as Banerjee inhabits the village in many different seasons, she finds that talk of politics recedes outside the electoral moment and that its silent operation infuses daily interpersonal encounters that cannot audibly be commented upon. She is thereby led to explore how politics is constituted in these non-electoral scenarios—something that would be invisible to a researcher appearing only at the time of the vote or asking questions only about institutional politics.

Banerjee's chapter 3 complements Kimberley Coles's chapter 5 on Bosnia-Herzegovina, where it is not silence but presence that provides the analytic subject with regard to recent elections. For Coles, just as for Banerjee, passive presence has ramifications far beyond explicit activity: silence speaks louder than a proliferation of words. In Bosnia, election monitors officially have jobs to do, and Coles shows them implementing a dizzying array of procedures. But it is the internationals' non-activity that may be their most significant work. Coles explores what might be termed the "agency of passivity"—the experienced utility and strategic intent of "just being there." She holds that "being there" operates in three registers: sheer (vast in numbers), mere (pure existence), and peer (or pedagogical, that is, teaching democratic values and behavior by example). These assessments are shared. They are explicit intentions of the countries and agencies providing the monitors, as well as the experiences of Bosnian recipients of assistance.

Together, Banerjee and Coles's entry point for studying democracy is elections, yet each reveals that politics occurs in the most imperceptible of ways—unspoken in one case, unacted in the other. Because of their anthropological approach and their ethnographic method, they identify phenomena that standard studies of politics would be unlikely to discern. Because of their closeness to the scene, they ask questions that would otherwise not be asked. But equally important is that neither author shirks from studying politics in its most widely recognizable forms, using commonly accepted vocabulary, cooperating with colleagues in political science, and asking questions that derive from the most pressing public questions of our time.

My own chapter (6) reveals that, in contemporary Ecuador, the impact of electoral politics on the strength of the indigenous movement is the subject of continual internal debate. Through an electoral strategy beginning in 1996, the national indigenous confederation and its allies have placed in office numerous congressional representatives, governors, mayors, and council people. At face value, this is a victory for the movement and enables a greater influence of indigenous peoples over public policy. But questions linger for indigenous organizations, in both the national and the local arenas. Has landing officials in elected office fortified the movement and advanced broader goals? Does gaining elected office result in the absorption of the indigenous organizations' major leaders into established structures that undercut their commitment to and connection with the "communities" that constitute the movement's base? Although elections have classically been seen as a defining element of democracy, questions remain for social movements about whether an electoral strategy may actually weaken democratic representation.

#### **POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY AND THE PEOPLE'S WILL**

In democracy, the government's authority (in theory) derives from the people's will. The famous statement that democracy is "of the people, by the people, and for the people" explicitly postulates the existence of a *people*. But so does APRA (Nugent, chapter 2), which perceives its program as a counterweight to liberal democracy. By the same token, socialist systems (for example, those present historically in Mozambique) also claim to be speaking on the people's behalf (West, chapter 4). Such invocations take strategy and effort on the part of political leaders, but the idea of "the people" may, in other circumstances, be taken for granted.

Invocations of "the people" and its will do not refer to a people that actually preexists; rather, the act of constituting a people happens within political action and public rhetoric on an ongoing basis. This leads to ethnographic inquiry about how "a people" comes into being in particular situations labeled democracy. We might ask, what are the range of conditions in which this occurs, the situations in which it does not, and the complex and often contested processes through which it happens? A number of chapters in this volume investigate the complex processes involved in asserting the representation of the people's will.

In Ecuador and Peru, constructions of identity work explicitly through ethnic categories, precisely because stigma and exclusion have been embedded in racial constructs. Commonly, democracies put forth universalist

claims about peoplehood, despite the fact that they are situated in systems that denigrate subordinated groups. Because racial hierarchies are at the foundation of many political democracies, the explicit invocation of ethnicity is often used on the part of social movements to redress general power imbalances. Social movements' discourses may also be framed in terms of inter-ethnic relations and cross-cultural dialogue or may find ways of articulating commonalities that otherwise would not occur. Centrally, social movements have used these mechanisms to shape a different form of peoplehood and democracy.

At times, social movements create identities and demands; in other instances, there is neither clear articulation of a platform nor organizational membership. The degree to which peoplehood and its expressed interests solidify and cohere varies widely. Mukulika Banerjee, in reflecting on her field site in West Bengal (chapter 3) during the seminar, noted that an articulation of the "people's will" is relatively straightforward and consistent. The catch is, what people are communicating is "so simple that it's not worth the politicians' while." Harry West (chapter 4) highlighted, instead, an abiding fluctuation: a "will" that is hard to pin down precisely because of people's own mixed feelings, morphing desires, and multiple responses to systems and events.

Not only might the people's will be ambivalent, but it might also be unarticulated. Drawing on Veena Das's observation, West said, "People often don't express suffering in the kinds of confessional modes that truth and reconciliation commissions call for." West postulates that a people's will might not be expressed in clearly spoken or plainly written forms (of the kinds social movements often produce), but instead in subtle, unvocalized practices.

## CONVERSATION AND DISCOURSE

US politicians frequently make assertions about what "the American People" want. In claiming to know the people's will, officials marshal opinion polls, conversations with constituents, or common sense. The degree to which such claims convince listeners varies, but convincing might not be the primary goal.

In chapter 8, on the Bush administration's arguments in favor of military intervention in Iraq, articulated prior to the war, Carol Greenhouse cautions against reading politicians' speeches and government documents as if they reflect anyone's actual views, as if state discourse could somehow express the will of the people in a way similar to ordinary conversation. In the seminar, she commented, "Such taken for granted ideas about the

embeddedness of official texts in culture, legal consciousness, and everyday storytelling...encourage the tendency to assume a collective subject, as if such texts were extracts of normal conversation.” The problem here is not just the construction of a singular collective subject that may or may not exist, but also the notion that state discourse follows normal conversational patterns. Conversation, an interactive and dialogic process in which people exchange views, is “constrained by the conventions of grammar, syntax, narrative, and logic” that make it resonate and cohere. Embedded in interaction, it involves moral and ethical dimensions.

Greenhouse proposes that, although officials may echo key terms and logics from everyday speech in their public pronouncements, high political discourse operates through a different mode of power in some circumstances. It may, at times, succeed precisely because of its malleability or lack of coherence. Not bound by the rules of conversation, it sometimes functions by way of “discursive fracture,” a negative form of intertextuality that functions by controlling the oppositional force of competing framings. Discourse becomes fractured as politicians make different arguments to different audiences such that no single argument can effectively counter the politicians’ position. This creates the appearance that agreement exists within the public, thereby giving the impression that the absence of opposition equals the presence of consensus.

Greenhouse argues that under some circumstances, high public officials maintain an institutional control (for example, through protocol) that enables them to limit their accountability, if only temporarily. She commented at the seminar that in such cases, “discourse is so outside the political order that there is not immediately obvious within the political order a place to answer back and say, ‘No, not that.’” It is important to note that discursive fracture is not limited to the realm of government; nor does Greenhouse claim it as a defining feature of government. Still, the notion that high officials in democratic states can in some circumstances block dissent by selectively reconfiguring the oppositional force of their constituents’ language signals an aspect of power and representation not classically associated with democracy. The further notion that the people do not speak through the state means that high official discourse in some circumstances replaces or even precludes the very articulation of will that liberal theory imagines it to internalize and convey.

## **MEDIATION AND TEXTUALIZATION**

The discussion of discourse in Greenhouse’s chapter 8 invites us into a broader consideration of political language, in its spoken and written

forms. What kinds of de facto rules guide communication, and how are they interdigitated with relations of power? How might the “will of the people”—and the actions of the state—be mediated and textualized?

Whereas, in Greenhouse’s chapter 8, high-level officials evade accountability to constituents by way of discursive maneuver, in Akhil Gupta’s chapter 7, on literacy, low-level bureaucrats prevent rural residents from registering complaints and voicing demands—and thus making their will known—by insisting that all claims be made in writing. In a context in which a majority is unable to write, this calls into question the idea of a state representing a people. In fact, not unlike Greenhouse, Gupta shows how officials manipulate the form language must take in order to produce evasion and inaccessibility.

In Gupta’s chapter 7, rural villagers and bureaucrats talk past each other. The villagers’ oral complaints fall on deaf ears when they remain unscribed in official registries, and the villagers’ presumptive representatives meet surreptitiously, at times and places unknown to constituents. Gupta contends that the supposed binary between oral and written—present among his informants and in the literature—misses the degree to which these intermingle. More common historically have been conditions of “restricted literacy,” in which people have *some* experience with the written word (ways of dealing with documents, encounters with texts). Instead of reflecting an essential distinction between written and oral, the bureaucrats’ insistence on writing is an exercise in power—one complicated by strategies available to subaltern actors, including mimicry, forgery, and counterfeiting. In all cases, textualization is a mediating mechanism through which state power is brought into relation with citizens.

## MARKETS AND COMMODIFICATION

Democracy is now so deeply embedded in a prolonged moment of economic and philosophical liberalism that democracy (as ideology, as experience, as expectation, as policy) is co-produced with market economics, a phenomenon neatly captured by the phrase “free market democracies.” Parallel to expectations about the former Soviet Union, where socialism was to be replaced by the twin “freedoms” of market opportunity and political voice, elsewhere this entanglement has been an explicit effort of international agencies’ democracy promotion programs, in which electoral politics are paired with a contraction of public services and an export-oriented economic model. Ironically, the undoing of the welfare state drives the stakes for democracy higher: where the population’s necessities are intensified and unmet, the need for political representation to resolve their problems

is all the more acute. The process of marketization, however, has undermined safeguards of political expression.

Because free market reforms intensify inequality, they must be justified publicly in some cases. Here, democracy can become a legitimating mechanism to facilitate structural adjustment. In some cases, nondemocratic political systems have been breeding grounds in which market reforms are implemented, then continued by subsequent elected governments or exported to long-standing political democracies. In others, economic success stories are used to legitimate the authoritarian systems that spawned them.

This overpowering sense of the present moment creates a need to historicize—to trace how these conditions came to be and where they might be headed. We are especially alert to the ways that neoliberalism itself has specific histories in each of these locales. We note that neoliberalism is not a single, universalized project but rather a set of processes that have arisen in very particular contexts and therefore have taken on different configurations in the settings in which we work. Similarly, acts of racialization construct distinct categories of people and possibilities for identity, as is evident in my own work on Ecuador (chapter 6). Situated in regional particularities, these histories are not bound by national borders.

Notably, market-inflected democracies are often experienced in relation to what came before them, be it socialism, communism, or right-wing authoritarianism. To take just one example, the Mozambiquan state has virtually exited from the countryside: schools are now without books, medical clinics without supplies. In the Mozambiquan context, democracy is associated with the end of socialism and the retraction of state services, as noted in Harry West's chapter 4. In this case, as in others, democracy is defined locally in relation to what preceded it and what accompanies its arrival.

At the center of debates about economic restructuring is the question of whether "the state" is *withdrawing* from interference in the economy or is *maintaining and reasserting* its strength but in other forms. In places such as Mozambique, where public services have simply disappeared, the state can be characterized as withdrawing. In other places, state functions are not absent, but rather transformed; the state ventures into areas of persuasion, selective subsidization, or cooptation that reinforce export economics. In Ecuador, the country's participation in the international economy hinges on exporting oil. To further this project, the government co-opts indigenous groups resisting oil extraction, by offering them places within government. There, they bring into cooperation a whole set of social organizations whose resistance to oil extraction thereby diminishes. In this

instance, activity by the state facilitates the country's insertion into the international economy.

What we also see is a reconfiguration of the mix of provision of services, with nongovernmental organizations, bilateral donors and multilateral lenders, and volunteers stepping in where government-provided public services once stood. Carol Greenhouse's chapter 8, in particular, reveals the commingling of public entities and private interests, what she calls "the hybrid zone," in which "the government operates through the private sector." That these mixes of public and private occur has huge ramifications for democracy, for it means, in Greenhouse's spoken words, that "there are...anti-democratic currents even at the core of broadly democratic institutions" and that "there is a way in which state government now is thoroughly imbricated with the private sector," which "has its own modes of governance that are *not* democratic." This has important ramifications for democratic theory. It reminds us that democracy is not a single whole, but an array of institutions and power relations, not all of which are controlled by the public.

## TRANSNATIONALISM

If conditions in our field sites hold in common an economic backdrop, they are also interwoven, highlighting the transnationality of political processes. Although elections remain largely national affairs, the processes orchestrating them, as well as the ramifications of these processes, far transcend countries' limits, as do aid agencies' democracy promotion programs, world courts, international conventions, indigenous movements' coordinating bodies, and more. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, Ecuador, India, and Mozambique, and amid the texts produced in Washington DC, we catch sight of connected forces: election monitoring, the Ford Foundation, the World Bank. Manifestations of these institutions and discourses vary across our studies, depending on the geographic site of our research and on the training of our lens, yet they are interconnected.

The extranational nature of democracy promotion becomes evident in chapter 5, by Kimberley Coles. Her essay opens by introducing "Charles," a man who comes to Bosnia-Herzegovina to engage in election monitoring. Coursing through his story are innumerable transnational dynamics, from the diverse set of places to which he has traveled to the organizations that have employed him and the work he is engaged in. The very term used to describe his position—an "international"—highlights the arrival of individuals from a range of countries, sponsored by not only national governments but also supranational institutions and both non- and intergovernmental

organizations. And the phrase “international aid circuit” underscores the rhythm of maneuvers, patterns of travel, and creation of opportunities for people from a wide variety of professional backgrounds to move across locales, staying any one place for only a relatively short period of time. Coles emphasizes that the significance of the “presence” of these internationals goes beyond the aims of the sponsoring organizations to take on unanticipated meanings for both Bosnians and the “internationals” themselves.

Jennifer Schirmer’s chapter (9) explores cross-national activities by describing a project designed to draw Colombian armed actors into peace processes. The project, called “Skilling the Armed Actors for Peace in Colombia,” operates through confidence-building dialogues, or *Conversatorios*, in which officers, ex-guerrillas, and others, such as politicians, human rights lawyers, business people, and representatives of international organizations, gather to talk. Funding comes from the foreign ministry of Norway, a country that has engaged in conflict resolution efforts in many regions of the world. The approach is noteworthy for engaging armed actors at an early stage in peace-building on the premise that transforming conflict into politics requires including those who have the most capacity to wage war. The aim is to create a neutral space in which dialogues between armed actors and civil society can be sustained even if formal peace processes take longer than expected. In this context, Norway’s presence in Colombia is not so much direct and proactive as indirect and low profile.

My own essay on indigenous movement strategy in Ecuador (chapter 6) takes up the question of why social movement organizations remain important after local governments have established participatory democracies. I argue that the organizations are, among other things, crucial for creating ties with groups distant from the locale, such that the broader networks and organizations might have the agility to confront supralocal issues raised by the global circulation of capital and the operation of international financial institutions. Because indigenous movements and development agencies each transcend nation-state boundaries and constitute transnational entities, my broader project is thoroughly multisited. Traveling between Quito and Cotacachi in Ecuador, Washington, DC, and beyond, I seek to follow discourses, logics, and pressures from different interest groups between locales of policy construction, places of policy implementation, and spaces of publicity where organizations seek to reap symbolic and monetary rewards for work done. Such work requires placing seemingly disparate events and entities into the same analytic frame.

As these capsule descriptions suggest, processes generating democracy exceed the limits of any country; therefore, studying democracy ethno-



graphically calls for fieldwork that can trace people and events beyond pre-set borders. The projects require not only linking agendas and institutions across regions but also taking as objects of study transnational agencies and networks themselves. Studying democracy may therefore involve engaging with an eclectic array of situations, including international regulatory systems, virtual communities, coalition politics, and international finance, among others. To that end, the studies need to transcend the divide commonly established between the categories “domestic” and “international” to set phenomena of different orders and scales into relation with each other and make evident their connections.

### **METHODS, ETHICS, TRANSFORMATIONS**

In anthropology, democracy is not a unique site for these reflections, but because of its encounters with dispersion, dialogue, violence, and social mobilization, it is an excellent location from which to explore the potentials of ethnographic inquiry and expression that could have wider implications for the field. The transnational dynamics researched in these chapters produce intriguing challenges: how to untangle the web of complicities in state department pronouncements and relate foreign policy justifications to events in the Middle East (Greenhouse, chapter 8), how to relate the “presence” of internationals in Bosnia to the other locations of their work and lives (Coles, chapter 5), what to make of the cynical advice that the best place to find an Ecuadorian indigenous leader is in the airport (Paley, chapter 6).

And then there is the issue of temporalities: how to capture situations of rapid change in which government regulations undergo revisions repeatedly, electronic messages make but a momentary appearance before being erased forever, and conversations, scraps of paper, and logics are fleeting, changing as they are at a quickened pace. And how to reconcile the incongruous “time frames” of the different actors involved: the short-, medium-, and long-term strategies of an international coalition pressing for change and coordinating across time zones with the “time-space” of a national bureaucracy implementing regulations.

In this array of circumstances, our information is often mediated. Researching in these transnational arenas, we cannot always be participant-observers (although many of the authors in this volume are). Instead, we at times deal with “brokered data” acquired from third parties such as non-governmental organizations or from governmental archives. For Jennifer Schirmer (chapter 9), the issue is “brokered working conditions” in which nongovernmental organizations are the access points to relationships.

Dealing with NGOs means working at first through their *modus operandi*—“learning how to use different strategies at certain moments and not pushing the limits too much at certain points.” For Carol Greenhouse (chapter 8), the tension is around using composite documents that are highly negotiated and highly pre-tested, as opposed to conversational speech.

What do these new conditions of research mean for writing? The possibilities for generating written forms that embody the content of analysis are intriguing. Given that there are moments in research, as in life, when it is appropriate to talk politics and moments when it most definitely is not, how can our genres similarly create and defer to these pressures, generating variegated texts that tread deftly through protocol in one moment, try out oblique references to politics in another, and speak truth to power in a third? Writing about Mozambique might involve generating a stylistic surrealism to convey the experience of sorcery or a nondeclarative writing style to communicate the ambivalence in Muedans’ political desire. Prose about Bosnia-Herzegovina might include textualized “presences,” a literary manifestation of *just being there*. In all cases, the authors struggle to find forms to convey the intangible: the ironies, the co-presence of seemingly contradictory emotions, fluctuation and instability, incongruous temporalities—phenomena that escape, unruly and unkempt, from standardized argument.

Considering these possibilities entails grappling with the elasticity of ethnography as a genre. There is no immediate resolution to the quandaries presented here, but there is the ability to shine a spotlight on the dilemmas themselves—methodological, ethical, interpersonal—in the text. Because the theme of democracy has such acute political salience, ethnographies of democracy often exceed the boundaries of writing. Here, methods and ethics are tightly wed. Engaged anthropologists set up arenas, ranging from the very public to the more discreet, in which to be in conversation with the subjects and interlocutors of our studies. At times, it is possible to contribute ethically by transferring crucial information from one place and one set of people to another. In these instances, the ethnographer herself becomes part of the multi-sidedness.

Jennifer Schirmer (chapter 9) takes on the ethical challenges by engaging in potentially transformative work in Colombia. There, she has created a program of *Conversatorios* between otherwise antagonistic parties in the armed conflict. In contrast to the bureaucrats in Gupta’s chapter 7, who evade dialogue by refusing to receive villagers’ oral complaints, in Schirmer’s program military officers and ex-guerrillas sit in the same

room to listen to each other's experiences. Taking in a new direction anthropology's classic mission to grasp the "native's point of view," the Conversatorios ask each party to "respect and listen to one another's opinions." Schirmer notes in chapter 9, "Conversatorios work anthropologically by framing the dialogue in terms of the multiple mindsets present in the room." That is, each participant tries to grasp the others' mental frameworks—their experiences, their histories, their logics and ideas. In doing this, Schirmer aims for what she called, in our discussion, "the original idea of democratic pluralism, of opening yourself up to listening and to dialoguing." The goal is consciously to generate new political possibilities by cultivating an awareness that making purposeful choices about society is possible.

## CONCLUSION

For many interlocutors—academic, policy oriented, in the media, or in the broader public—a starting point for discussions of democracy is one of definitions: how is democracy defined? In this volume, we take a different approach, one that engages in a continuing process of exploring a wide variety of lived meanings and practices. The precise phenomenon we are studying is not predetermined but rather emerges within the various field sites in which we do our research. Our process of inquiry allows the very questions we are investigating to develop through a dialogic engagement with people in the places we study. Such an analytic openness is at the very heart of anthropological approaches to democracy.

## Notes

1. At the time, SAR was known as the School of American Research. Mukulika Banerjee, Carol Greenhouse, David Nugent, Julia Paley, Jennifer Schirmer, Kay Warren, and Harry West were present at the seminar. We discussed Akhil Gupta's paper in his absence; Kimberley Coles's paper was later added to the collection. At the seminar, we read and commented on an early rendition of Kay Warren's paper, but her work was at too early a stage to become part of the book.

2. For a recent compendium of essays on "cultures of democracy," see *Public Culture* 19(1), winter 2007.

3. This approach provides challenges for the analyst of democracy because it demands vigilance: our vocabulary and categories often operate within existing naturalized conceptions, and much writing on democracy functions within frameworks deriving from Western liberal thought. Adoption of such language is, at times, due to

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moral commitments to social change and the impulse to cooperate with agencies promoting the establishment and strengthening of political democracies. Alternatively, it may be a result of political institutions and processes' appropriation of widely circulating discourses for their own ends, such that words are imbued with meanings from contradictory political stands. When the vocabulary available to us has already been claimed, we struggle to find words and conceptual frameworks that are not overdetermined by prevailing understandings and pragmatic uses.