



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

A Radical Democratic Style? Tradition, Hybridity, and Intersectionality

Darrel Enck-Wanzer

Rhetoric & Public Affairs, Volume 11, Number 3, Fall 2008, pp. 459-465 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: [10.1353/rap.0.0055](https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.0.0055)



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rap/summary/v011/11.3.enck-wanzer.html>

A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC STYLE? TRADITION, HYBRIDITY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

DARREL ENCK-WANZER

Considering the question “What constitutes a democratic style?” is a tricky proposal. Although Robert Hariman has done well to categorize various political styles—realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic—it is unclear that “democracy” operates in an analogous fashion.¹ What if democracy cannot be delineated in much the same way as realism, monarchism, republicanism, or bureaucratism? What if democracy is understood as empty or devoid of positive political content? In such a case, democracy may be more comparable to “the law” in that it is a conceptual or ideographic label that encompasses varied sets of political and aesthetic commitments. Just as Hariman turns to various styles of politics and Pierre Schlag turns to various “aesthetics of American law,” so too must we be careful to articulate not a single democratic style but multiple, intersecting, and sometimes competing democratic aesthetics.² As such, we should be attentive to deliberative, pluralist, liberal, republican, progressive, and other styles that function as particular instantiations of the aesthetics of American democracy.

Approaching the question of democratic style from the perspective of radical democratic theory, I argue in this essay that a radical democratic style is best defined in the negative. If political style is, according to Hariman, “a coherent repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic reactions for political effect,” then the marker of a radical democratic style is anticonventional conventions.³ Put differently, a radical democratic style’s rhetorical repertoire is contingent to such an extent that, once it is nailed down as a concrete set of practices, it ceases to be radically democratic—which is, itself, a particular kind of aesthetic marked by tradition, hybridity, and intersectionality. In what follows, I explore these dimensions by first expanding on my initial analogy with the law, then explaining three features of a radical democratic perspective that confounds stylistic analysis, and finally turning to the Young Lords Organization as one possible example of a radical democratic aesthetic in practice.

“DEMOCRACY” AND “THE LAW”: AN ANALOGY

In a provocative legal commentary published in the *Harvard Law Review* in 2002, Schlag begins with the observation, “Law is an aesthetic enterprise.”⁴ The different ways in which we come to understand, discuss, and perform the law

Darrel Enck-Wanzer is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Latina/Latino Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

each constitutes competing aesthetics made up of the “the forms, images, tropes, perceptions, and sensibilities that help shape the creation, apprehension, and even identity of human endeavors.”⁵ In this sense, Schlag’s argument is similar to Hariman’s about political style. Rather than constituting one style of politics, there are several, each representing specific sets of forms, images, tropes, and so forth—repertoires of rhetorical conventions, in Hariman’s terms—informing and reflecting particular political commitments.

Although one could very well treat democracy as a particular stylization of politics, it may be tempting to represent only one type of democracy in such a formulation. It may be more productive for theorist-critics to conceptualize democracy as a higher-order abstraction, more similar to politics or the law than to republicanism, realism, or the like. Just as there are multiple legal aesthetics or political styles, so too are there multiple, competing democratic styles. Tropes such as deliberation, representation, consensus, and contestation all mark potentially different stylizations of democracy in the same way that the grid aesthetic, the energy aesthetic, the perspectivist aesthetic, and the dissociative aesthetic represent different stylizations of the law for Schlag. Argues Schlag, “Legal aesthetics are important because they help constitute law and its possibilities in different ways.”⁶ Similarly, different aesthetics are central to constituting the possibilities of democratic politics; therefore, delineating a single democratic style risks foreclosing rhetorical possibilities and misunderstanding democracy as it is theorized and practiced.

THE AESTHETICS OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY

It is important to note the incomplete and contingent status of democracy from a radical perspective. If we attempt to concretize and operationalize a definition or particular institutionalization of democracy, if we attempt to fix its meaning and enactment, it loses what makes it strong: its ability to change, adapt, and move with “the people.” In drawing attention to the contingency of democratic style as opposed to asking what it *is*, I begin by aligning myself with Ernesto Laclau in citing a “democracy to come” (*democratie à venir*) that “does not involve any teleological assertion—not even the limited one of a regulative idea—but simply the continual commitment to keep open the relation to the other, an opening which is always *à venir*, for the other to which one opens oneself is never already given in any aprioristic calculation.”⁷ This dimension of openness makes concretizing a particular style challenging, to say the least. Even so, there are three dimensions to a radical democratic aesthetic that we can identify; significantly, these dimensions are better thought of as broad markers or conditions rather than specific or sufficient elements of the style.

At the heart of a radical democratic aesthetic is, first, an appreciation of tradition. Tradition is not convention: it is a living, moving ensemble that requires reevaluation before slipping into fixity.⁸ This is why liberal democracy is problematic at present. Chantal Mouffe explains, “What we understand by ‘liberal democracy’ is constituted by sedimented forms of power relations resulting from an ensemble of contingent hegemonic interventions. The fact that their contingent character is not recognized today is due to the absence of counter-hegemonic projects.”⁹ In suggesting the importance of counter-hegemonic projects, Mouffe is not mandating that an opposition intervene from outside liberal democracy as a replacement. To the contrary, intervention should be rooted in the flexibility of liberal and democratic traditions, and in the plurality of varied political traditions that constitute the democratic imaginary. At the heart of these traditions is a commitment to a “conflictual consensus,” which is a “consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, [with] dissent about their interpretation.”¹⁰ A tropological commitment to liberty and equality (whatever those are contingently articulated to mean) is key.¹¹

Second, more than the deployment of multiple traditions separately, a radical democratic aesthetic demands a hybridization of those traditions and the identities they coproduce. “There is democracy only if there is the recognition of the positive value of a dislocated identity,” Laclau writes. “The term *hybridization* . . . is fully applicable here. But in that case, the condition of a democratic society is constitutive incompleteness—which involves, of course, the impossibility of an ultimate grounding.”¹² A radical democratic aesthetic grounds its rhetoric and ideology not only in particular discourses from multiple traditions but also in the intersections of those traditions. Radical democratic aesthetics are enacted by *bricoleurs* who assemble fragments of political discourse and practices rooted (sometimes paradoxically so) in varied sociohistorical and political traditions. Furthermore, hybridity means that a radical democratic aesthetic practices an antiessentialist identity politics that problematizes race, sex, and gender, and advances (sometimes explicitly, but at least implicitly) an intersectional analysis of such identity categories.

Finally, and emerging out of both tradition and hybridization, a radical democratic aesthetic is marked by intersectional rhetoric. By “intersectional,” I mean to consider the ways in which diverse discursive forms interact to create something different than the sum of their parts. Similar to W. J. T. Mitchell’s “*imagetext*,” which he uses to designate “composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text,” my explication of intersectional rhetoric adds embodied performance and a sociohistorical dimension that is central to a rhetoric’s emergence.¹³ I define intersectional rhetoric as a rhetoric that places multiple discursive forms—speech, embodiment, and/or image—on relatively equal footing, is not leader-centered, draws from a number of diverse discursive

political and rhetorical conventions, and is constitutive rather than instrumental.¹⁴ Because intersectional rhetoric places discursive forms on equal footing, we should look for those different forms working in tandem, remaining open to the possibility that one is not disciplining another.

THE YOUNG LORDS: A CASE IN POINT

Having sketched out three apparent conditions of a radical democratic aesthetic, I now turn attention to the New York Young Lords as one example of that aesthetic in practice. During their brief tenure (1969–1972), the Young Lords was a revolutionary nationalist, antiracist, antisexist group who advanced a 13-point political program featuring support for the liberation of all Puerto Ricans (on the Island and in the United States), the broader liberation of all “Third World people,” equality for women, U.S. demilitarization, leftist political education, socialist redistribution, and other programs as they fit into their ideology.¹⁵ Their activism took many forms: They gave speeches, held rallies, taught political education courses out of their community offices, and produced a newspaper called *Palante* that articulated their vision of democratic egalitarianism and socialist redistribution. They started numerous community initiatives such as lead poisoning and tuberculosis testing programs, childcare for single mothers, and meal programs for poor children. They also engaged in acts of civil disobedience such as the July 1969 “garbage offensive” (in which the Young Lords and community members piled garbage in intersections and lit them on fire to block traffic—all in protest of poor sanitation conditions), two separate takeovers of an East Harlem church (which they renamed the “People’s Church” each time), sit-ins and disruptions at a local hospital, and support of other groups’ acts of civil unrest. In all, they engaged in what they believed were strategically and tactically sound actions to advance their cause. Sometimes they worked within established systems, enacting a trickster or *jaibería* sensibility.¹⁶ At other times, they worked to establish new systems. At still other times, in their most Marcusean moments, they worked to overthrow “the system.”¹⁷ In all moments, their demand for self-rule and equality place them squarely within a democratic politics.

As a particular exemplar of a radical democratic aesthetic, the Young Lords demonstrated the power and relevance of constructing a symbolic repertoire out of diverse political and sociohistorical traditions. Working within the democratic tradition—advancing claims for equality and freedom from state oppression, and citing political figures like Thomas Jefferson—the Young Lords also drew creatively from Marxist theory, religious doctrine, and folk traditions. Influenced by what might be described as guerrilla tactics, the Young Lords did not articulate themselves as part of a Manichean struggle.

Speaking on the tendency for contemporaneous organizations simply to reject “the system,” Felipe Luciano said in a speech preceding the People’s Church takeover, “And we’re not only reacting. There’s a way now in the movement that any way the ‘system’ pushes you, you react in the opposite direction—you never think, you’re never creative. And so you end up in a suicidal path where you can’t move out. No, we’re going to be creative, you see.”¹⁸ Recognizing the danger of political and conceptual rigidity, the Young Lords eschewed political orthodoxy in favor of an assemblage built from various traditions and discursive formations to remain flexible and adapt their struggle to their specific rhetorical scene. In this way, they played the role of *bricoleurs* by assembling fragments of political discourse and practices rooted in U.S. democracy, liberal rights, socialist redistribution, Latin American guerrilla radicalism, Puerto Rican nationalism, Black consciousness, and anticolonialism.

The Young Lords developed their political imaginary further through politics based in intersectional rhetorical demands. Just as they challenged the content of politics through a hybridization of traditions and identities, so too did the Young Lords challenge the form politics took. By embracing the full intersectionality of discourse in a tactical, counter-hegemonic manner, the Young Lords provided innovative means to advance social movement, articulate political spaces, challenge fixed identities, and seek the promise of a democracy to come.¹⁹ Even when, or perhaps especially because so many of their isolated actions and offensives were ultimately failures (in an instrumental sense), the intersectional form of their discourse remained a constant that pushed the boundaries of what counts in politics.

In other ways, though, the Young Lords fell quite short of occupying the space of radical democratic practice and embodying a radical democratic aesthetic. For as progressive as the Young Lords’ form of identity and coalition politics was (especially for the time), theirs was ultimately a modernist project. As they matured as an organization, their modernist tendencies solidified and their ideology rigidified. By 1971, the central committee voted to open offices in Puerto Rico and to center their program on the struggle for Puerto Rican national independence—a move that nearly all Young Lords today view as a mistake.²⁰ Between 1971 and 1972, the structure of the organization (by that time renamed the “Young Lords Party”) became more rigid, compartmentalized, and specialized: the “women’s union” handled women’s issues, the “health ministry” managed health care, the “defense ministry” defense, and so forth. And by the summer of 1972, the Young Lords underwent one last transformation in their move away from radical democracy by changing name, traditions, and purpose when they became, finally, the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization. With this decisive shift, the Young Lords closed down community offices, replaced their ideological and rhetorical flexibility with a

piety toward international Marxist-Leninist-Maoist politics, and lost touch (literally and figuratively) with “the people.” If there is a prominent marker of the antithesis to a radical democratic aesthetic, it is theoretical and practical rigidity. A democratic style ceases to be radical when it is closed to the possibility for contestation and change.

CONTINGENT CONCLUSIONS

Democracy is a broad category of inquiry, to be sure; as such, any consideration of a democratic style should be no less broad. The point at which we treat democratic style as a single repertoire of rhetorical conventions—as we possibly can with the realist style or a particular legal aesthetic—we restrict unduly the boundaries of democracy and, from a radical democratic perspective, risk leaving the terrain of democracy altogether. As Sheldon Wolin argues, “Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being which is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives.”²¹ Using the Young Lords as a brief case study, this essay offers one example of a radical democratic aesthetic in practice and attempts to identify some broad dimensions of that aesthetic, which include operation within democratic and other traditions, hybridization of those traditions and relations between Others, and intersectional rhetoric. Uniting all three dimensions is a critical openness and a refusal to fix the content of democracy or the forms of its enactment. In the end, it may well be that the style of radical democracy is a nonstyle best identified by the specificity and conventions it lacks and its commitment to always being *à venir*.

NOTES

1. Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
2. Pierre Schlag, “The Aesthetics of American Law,” *Harvard Law Review* 115 (2002): 1049–118.
3. Hariman, *Political Style*, 4.
4. Schlag, “Aesthetics,” 1049.
5. Schlag, “Aesthetics,” 1050. Schlag identifies and explains four aesthetics: the grid aesthetic, the energy aesthetic, the perspectivist aesthetic, and the dissociative aesthetic.
6. Schlag, “Aesthetics,” 1117.
7. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 74.
8. Reevaluation is a complex notion that the space afforded this essay does not allow me to develop fully. Reevaluation is something akin to Sheldon Wolin’s concept of political vision. For Wolin, “Vision is commonly used to mean an act of perception. Thus we say that we see

- the speaker addressing a political rally. In this sense, 'vision' is a descriptive report about an object or an event. But 'vision' is also used in another sense, as when one talks about an aesthetic vision or a religious vision. In this second meaning, it is the imaginative, not the descriptive, element that is uppermost" (18). Concomitantly, politics is "both a source of conflict and a mode of activity that seeks to resolve conflicts and promote readjustment" (12). Taken together, this "imaginative, not descriptive" form of "readjustment" underscores the dynamism of a radical democratic practice. It is not enough to talk about radical democracy in terms of "openness" and "contingency." Instead, we must also talk about the aesthetic of radical democracy as action/practice that must have an imaginative/visionary component—democratic style. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
9. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political, Thinking in Action* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 33.
 10. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.
 11. Of course, contingent articulation does not mean that something like equality can be articulated any old way. As Michael Calvin McGee has argued, ideographs (like equality) are structured diachronically and come to have specific meaning through a history of usage. If someone were to attempt articulation wholly outside that history of usage or draw from defunct assemblages, such as by arguing that slavery supports equality, then they would surely face some recalcitrance. On the diachronic structure of ideographs, see Michael Calvin McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 10–11. For further reading on recalcitrance, see Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (1935; rpt., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 255–58.
 12. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 100.
 13. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 89n.
 14. Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization's Garbage Offensive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006): 177.
 15. Young Lords Party and Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 150.
 16. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel, *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
 17. The Marcusean sensibility comes from Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964). On the influence of Marcuse and critiques of "the system" for 1960s and 1970s radicals, see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002), 15–40.
 18. Felipe Luciano and Graciela M. Smith, "Speech by Felipe Luciano, New York State Chrmn., Young Lords Organization, at the First Spanish Methodist Church in El Barrio (11th St. & Lexington) on Sunday December 21, 1969," in *Young Lords Organization*, ed. National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America (New York: NCC Communication Center, 1970), 5.
 19. For an extended example, see Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System," 174–201.
 20. This judgment comes from the numerous interviews conducted by the author. When asked what the biggest mistake of the Young Lords was, almost all subjects responded that it was the move to the Island.
 21. Sheldon S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations* 1 (1994): 23.