Democratic Inheritance and the Problem of Normativity:
A Review Essay of Samir Haddad's Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy

In *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy*, Samir Haddad advances two closely related theses concerning the idea of democracy to come (*démocratie à venir*), which Jacques Derrida developed in a number of different works, including most prominently *Specters of Marx*, *The Politics of Friendship*, and *Rogues*. Haddad's first thesis is descriptive: he argues that we miss what is most important and original in the idea of democracy to come if we understand it primarily with reference to the future. Of course given the name of the idea—*à venir*, to come, is very closely related to *l'avenir*, the future—it is not difficult to understand why the "dominant tendency" in the literature has been to favor the future-oriented interpretation. But Haddad believes that this interpretation is "quickly reduced to a simple passivity or utopianism in the face of what happens" (3). We can understand the idea in a more theoretically and practically fruitful way, he thinks, if we emphasize the relation of democracy to the past that it cannot avoid having to inherit. Haddad's second thesis is explicitly normative: inheritance is not only factually unavoidable for democracies, but it is also obligatory. Democracy to come, he thinks, entails an "injunction to inherit from the past in a very particular way" (3). I believe Haddad makes a strongly compelling case for his first, descriptive thesis. Indeed, his reinterpretation of the idea of democracy to come in terms of inheritance is enough by itself to make this book necessary reading for anyone with an interest in Derrida's political philosophy. Haddad's argument for the second, normative thesis is less convincing in my opinion. In what follows, I will begin by summarizing the argument for the descriptive thesis. This, it should be said, is the thesis that Haddad seems most concerned to defend in *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy*; all of the chapters but one are devoted primarily to it. Next, I will focus specifically on the argument for the normative thesis, which is developed explicitly in the fourth chapter. Finally, given the thematic focus of *SCTIW Review*, and in order to illustrate both the importance and the practical difficulties

of democratic inheritance, I will examine Haddad's conception with reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Haddad devotes the first chapter to describing the structure of Derridean aporias. This chapter will be extremely valuable for readers who are not well versed in Derrida's thought, or for readers who are only familiar with his earlier work. Readers who already have a firm grasp of Derrida's later work will find it less essential, but nonetheless valuable as a clear, nicely organized summary of the key points. The basic structure of aporia is common to most of the ethical and political concepts whose logic Derrida articulates in his later work, including hospitality, responsibility, forgiveness, the gift, and of course democracy. In each of these cases the ethical term, in order to be what it is, must be understood as unconditional. Hospitality, which is the example Haddad uses to illustrate the structure of aporia in general, must be understood as "an absolute openness, a welcome that allows for the coming of any other, without question or imposed limitations" (12). If hospitality were not unconditional in this way—if it were reducible to a set of rules setting out the conditions under which persons were to be welcomed—then it would not be hospitality. We do not consider the restaurant owner who chooses to serve an African American, for example, as exercising the virtue of hospitality, since the law requires him to do so. But on the other hand, the unconditionality that is the condition of possibility for hospitality is also the condition of its impossibility: to be absolutely welcoming of the other, without questions or limitations, would be to undermine the conditions under which one could be hospitable at all, since the gesture of welcoming presupposes a *chez-soi*, a place of one's own. In order for hospitality to be more than a utopian ideal, then, it must be regulated by conditional rules. The aporia, or impassability, consists in the fact that the mutually dependent necessary conditions are also mutually contradictory.

The first chapter on the structure of aporias prepares the way for the key insight that gets Haddad's own argument underway, which is that all engagements with aporias take the form of inheritance (22). This is a bold interpretive claim. It is not at all obvious that the idea of inheritance plays a major role in Derrida's understanding of political action, and of democracy in particular. In defending his interpretation, Haddad relies heavily on two texts: *Specters of Marx* and *For What Tomorrow*. I have to admit that when I first read Haddad's book, I thought he had placed entirely too much interpretive weight on scattered, inessential passages from these texts. His argument made me curious enough to go back and reread *Specters*, though, and what I found was abundant confirmation of his interpretation. What Derrida shows, and what Haddad makes central to his own argument, is that the legacies within which we are situated are heterogeneous. As finite beings, we find ourselves responsive to them always already; we cannot not take them up in some way. But since "there are multiple voices" in every legacy, and since "these cannot be combined into a single, stable, unified whole," the act of taking up can never be a simple repetition (24). To inherit in this sense is to choose which elements of the tradition to carry forward and which to de-emphasize. And this means that we cannot inherit without introducing a difference, without relaunching the tradition otherwise (29). The condition of a legacy's being what it is, in sum, is its openness to being taken up in ways that will render it different from what it is.

The political tradition that is most explicitly open to forms of inheritance that will relaunch it otherwise—and indeed perhaps radically otherwise—is democracy. This, in part, is why Derrida speaks of democracy to come. The openness of democracy has its basis in the value that democratic societies place on freedom: "Insofar as each person in this democracy can lead the life (*bion*) he chooses, we find in this regime, this *politeia*—which, as we will see, is not quite a regime, neither a constitution nor an authentic *politeia*—all sorts of

people, a greater variety than anywhere else."[1] There is no Platonic Form of democratic society, then; what a particular democracy is is what its citizens freely decide it will be. This formlessness opens democratic societies to an extraordinary range of possibilities of inheritance, including the possibility of the rejection of democracy itself. The legacy of democracy can be inherited, i.e., relaunched, in ways that maintain the necessity for continued inheritance or in ways that reduce its scope, rendering inheritance as close as possible to mere repetition.

One of the points that Haddad is most concerned to establish in the book is that Derrida endorses a very specific manner of inheriting, one that heightens the tensions between the mutually conditioning and mutually contradictory terms of the aporias he inherits rather than trying to work out a kind of compromise between them. Indeed Haddad argues that deconstruction is synonymous with inheritance understood in this way (37). The fifth chapter, devoted to Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, serves as a case study. In that book, Derrida follows an influential strand of Western philosophical reflection that conceives the political bond in terms of friendship. Each major thinker who advances this tradition of thought makes use of an aporetic conception of friendship. On the one hand, friendship is necessarily between equals who stand in relations of symmetry and reciprocity, but on the other hand there is an ineliminable asymmetry in all of these relations. Aristotle, for example, argues that true friendships of virtue must be between equals; it is this kind of friendship that holds states together and that serves as the model for justice.[2] But on the other hand, Aristotle insists on a certain asymmetry between the active and passive roles within the relation: it is better, he thinks, to love than to be loved. The tension between equality and inequality, symmetry and asymmetry, has consistently been covered over in Western political thought by the compromise notion of fraternity: brothers are bound together as equals in a quasi-natural way within the family, but also stand in relations of rivalry and asymmetry. Haddad argues convincingly that Derrida inherits this political tradition precisely by refusing the compromise of fraternity and by heightening the tensions within the concept of friendship in such a way as to render democracy as open and as welcoming as possible. The notion of fraternity functions to exclude people unnecessarily from the political space, namely foreigners, who do not belong to the quasi-natural community, and women. In heightening the tensions within the inherited notion of friendship, Derrida attempts to relaunch democracy in such a way as to emphasize the universalism and the openness that are also important strands within the tradition (113).

Up to this point, I have been discussing Haddad's argument for what I have called his descriptive thesis. This argument, as I have suggested, is original, philosophically fruitful, and most importantly, convincing. But Haddad wants to do more than to *describe* democracy to come as oriented toward a past that must be inherited: he wants to argue as well that deconstructive analysis justifies our inheriting democracy in ways that heighten its tensions and that emphasize the value of openness to transformation. It is not merely the case, in other words, that Derrida in fact prefers to inherit democracy in this way; it is also the case that Derrida has compelling normative reasons grounding that preference. Haddad advances his argument for this position in the fourth chapter, taking as his foil the argument that Martin Hägglund makes against the normative dimension of deconstruction in his *Radical*

---

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 26. Quoted in Haddad, 53.
[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Revised Oxford Translation*, Vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1155a.21-28.

Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life.[3] Hägglund's argument can be represented straightforwardly: deconstruction reveals irreducible undecidability, and this undermines the possibility of any fixed ideals in terms of which normative claims could receive their ultimate justifications: "to look for such justifications in Derrida's work is to misunderstand the level on which his analyses operate. Derrida does not offer solutions to political problems or normative guidelines for how to approach them."[4] If democracy occupies a privileged position in Derrida's political philosophy, it is because it is more descriptively accurate than its rivals, bringing to light most explicitly the openness that no political system can eliminate (78).

Haddad, of course, is unconvinced by this argument. He believes he can locate a ground for normative commitments in the simple fact that the languages in which we carry out acts of inheritance are irreducibly value laden. Language "remains not as a neutral medium, but as one that comes already differentially infused with contours of value, formed from the particular sedimented history that precedes it. This terrain exerts forces structuring processes of evaluation…" (95). "Democracy," as it happens, is a term that carries a positive value in our political tradition, and so Derrida cannot take it up in a merely constative, value-neutral way. To argue otherwise, as Hägglund does, is to exhibit an indefensible "indifference to language" (96).

But this argument, it seems to me, can succeed only by moving the goalposts. In showing how Derrida's analyses must be more than merely constative, Haddad establishes only that Derrida is faced with specifically practical questions. Of course the sedimented values of the tradition recommend some ways of inheriting while discouraging others. But this is not enough to establish that Derrida's choices are justified. It seems to me that Haddad is treating the *problem* of normativity here as if it were the *solution* to the problem. Haddad is certainly right to argue that our having to inherit traditions in value-laden language puts certain normative questions in play for us. But then the whole problem is precisely to discover which way of inheriting we ought to pursue. And the fact that we inherit within value-laden languages cannot solve that problem. As Christine M. Korsgaard has argued, the normative problem arises for us because we can distance ourselves from what purport to be reasons for action; from the perspective that this distance grants, we can ask whether the purported reasons really are good reasons.[5] We solve the normative problem when we discover reasons for action from which we can no longer get a reflective distance. Applying this idea in the Derridean context, we can see that the necessity of inheriting a tradition—as opposed to being determined by it wholly passively—sets us at a distance from values that present themselves as purported reasons for action. That is the *problem* of normativity. But nothing in the discourse of deconstruction gives us the resources to show that the values we inherit really do give us more than purported reasons for action. Haddad seems to acknowledge this point, arguing that deconstructive analyses can provide *provisional* justifications (96). But to have a provisional justification just is to have a normative problem.

In order, finally, to illustrate how valuable the Derridean conception of inheritance is for our understanding of political life, but also how ethically problematic it can be, I would like

---

[3] Haddad also examines in detail the normative argument advanced by Leonard Lawlor in *This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). To examine this argument in detail, though, would take us too far afield.

[4] Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 32. Quoted in Haddad, 77.

[5] Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93-94.

to examine it within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, about which Derrida himself had much to say. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida characterizes the conflict as "the war for the 'appropriation of Jerusalem,'" carried out in the name of different nationalisms competing for the same Promised Land.[6] All nationalisms that are based on claims to a native soil, Derrida thinks, "not only sow hatred, not only commit crimes, they have no future, they promise nothing…."[7] What Derrida seems to be calling for is a different way of inheriting the messianic tradition that informs not only the Jewish religion, but all three of the Abrahamic religions, and indeed all of human experience.[8] To inherit in a way that emphasizes messianicity, in Derrida's sense of the term, and that de-emphasizes nationalism is to become more welcoming to unanticipated possibilities of transformation and thus to "the event *as* justice."[9] This seems entirely salutary. But as Christopher Wise has argued, this way of inheriting can have the effect of obscuring morally salient features of situations and thus of reinforcing processes of closure and exclusion. By framing what is at issue in the conflict in terms of nationalism and hospitality, Derrida treats the wrongs committed by each side as symmetrical, neutralizing differences that are in fact very important. First of all, this way of presenting the issue places in the background all the forms of aggression, including economic aggression, that are not primarily motivated by religious or nationalist concerns.[10] Insofar as the wrongs committed by both sides are all traced back to the same source, it appears as if both sides are guilty of the same wrongs. And second, Derrida's way of inheriting obscures the historical circumstances that produced the conflict of nationalisms in the first place. Although both sides lay claim to Jerusalem, it is misleading to suggest that both sides are struggling to *appropriate* it, since it is the Israelis who have been occupying it in violation of international law. To abstract from this history is to treat the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem as a morally neutral *fait accompli*, and thus to reinforce the very processes of exclusion that deconstructive inheritance is supposed to undermine.[11]

None of this to say that Derrida's preference for relaunching the traditions he inherits in the direction of openness is bad. The point is just that it is not necessarily justifiable. Whether this kind of inheritance is good or bad remains an open question, which can only be decided case by case, based on careful consideration of the circumstances. What I believe the example of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict brings to light is that a deconstructive discourse that emphasizes the value of hospitality can function, in certain circumstances at least, as a support for strongly inhospitable practices.

Despite my reservations about Haddad's explicitly normative argument, I believe that *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* is an excellent book, advancing an original, thought-provoking thesis about one of the most important ideas in the later Derrida's political philosophy. Haddad's argumentation is extraordinarily clear throughout—which is no small feat for a text on Derrida—and grounded in a thorough knowledge of the relevant literature.

---

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 58. Hereafter *Specters*.

[7] Ibid., 169.

[8] John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 22-23. "Every time I open my mouth, I am promising something…. So the promise is not just one speech act among others; every speech act is fundamentally a promise. This universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice—that is what I call the messianic structure."

[9] Derrida, *Specters*, 168.

[10] Christopher Wise, *Derrida, Africa, and the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 52.

[11] Ibid., 54.

This book should be accessible to graduate students, although probably not to most undergraduate students. I would recommend it strongly to anyone interested in the later Derrida or in contemporary political philosophy.

Bryan Lueck
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville