

Democracy in a Provisional Key

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INTRODUCTION

To start answering questions about the challenges facing democracy today and about its futures, one must first ask “what is democracy?” I want to argue that this means treating democracy in a provisional key. There are several keys here. There is, first, the fact that, because democracy is so crucial to our political imaginaries, it is crucial to understand the challenges we face also as challenges to democracy. Second, there is the fact that when we ask what democracy is – or, as I will argue, what it means to make the question “what is democracy?” part of the answer to the very same question – then we are taking a particular perspective, one that will open some doors and not others. And, third, while this perspective helps us think about how to act, I will also argue for a conception of democracy as aporetic, where aporia means nonpassage, but a nonpassage that must nonetheless be navigated and, therefore, negotiated.

With a taxonomy offered by Thomas J. Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, the key – the crucial task *and* the way forward – becomes to treat democracy as a question not to be solved, dissolved or resolved, but to be pressed. Democracy becomes a question, or a problem, not to be resolved by “offering an answer to the problem’s question while providing reasons for thinking that the answer is correct.”¹ Nor is it a problem to be resolved as if we could “reconcile ourselves to the problem’s eternal presence” despite all solutions to it turning out to be unsatisfactory.² Nor is it a problem that can be dissolved by arguing that it “is not a genuine problem [but] rather a pseudo-problem, resting on a false

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¹ Thomas J. Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “The Analytical-Continental Divide: Styles of Dealing with Problems,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 15, no. 2 (2016): 144.

² Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, “The Analytical-Continental Divide,” 146.

presupposition.”³ Instead, democracy is a question to be pressed, which is to say “that it can never be solved [but] will press itself upon us and haunt us until the end of time.”⁴ Not only that, but the question of democracy is pressing: it is not one that we can postpone, given the importance of democracy for our political imaginaries. This aporetic character of democracy is what makes it both solution and experiment, in line with the etymological roots of “key” in the Old English *cæġ*.

While there is an urgency to the question of democracy, such that we cannot postpone an answer, I also argue that democracy should be treated as provisional. By provisional, I do not mean that we do not yet have the answer to the question “what is democracy?,” as if it were a difficult question that we might one day, and with skill and luck, be able to answer. Rather, I mean provisional in the sense of Jacques Derrida’s “to-come”: democracy not as a horizon or critical ideal, but as a question that will “haunt us until the end of time,” in Donahue and Ochoa Espejo’s words.⁵ And yet we must face the question. To say that democracy is provisional in this sense also means that we must speak of the futures of democracy in the plural: all we are left with are provisional answers to the question “what is democracy?,” and because there is no ultimate answer to the question, all we have are a plurality of answers.

PROVISIONAL DEMOCRACY

Democracy is aporetic. The etymology of aporia is nonpassage, and this is also how it should be understood. It is a nonpassage that we are forced to navigate, but one where we cannot simply proceed on the basis of, for instance, an essential concept of democracy. We are forced to proceed without “some superordinate master language, absolute foundation, or final arbiter.”⁶ Aporia therefore requires negotiation and decision.⁷ We navigate it without banisters,

³ Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, “The Analytical-Continental Divide,” 147.

⁴ Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, “The Analytical-Continental Divide,” 146. Donahue and Ochoa Espejo’s example of a theorist who presses problems is Jacques Derrida, whom I will draw upon later in the chapter.

⁵ Giovanna Borradori and Jacques Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 120; Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 8–9; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 64–65; Alan Keenan, *Democracy in Question: Democratic Openness in a Time of Political Closure* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 10, 13, 141–42; Lasse Thomassen, “Deliberative Democracy and Provisionality,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 10, no. 4 (2011): 423–43, <https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2010.39>; and Lasse Thomassen, “Political Theory in a Provisional Mode,” *Critical Review of Social and Political Philosophy* 13, no. 4 (2010): 453–73.

⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 62.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 8, 12–17.

but we must be careful here. Any individual negotiation of the aporia of democracy happens by specific subjects in specific circumstances shaped by inherited conceptions of democracy. Our negotiation of democracy is rooted in these inheritances, but not in some firm root; nor is it rooted in the soil of a nation, a common image today when invoking democracy as the rule of a natural national people. Rather, the provisional democracy that emerges from the aporia of democracy is a radical democracy in the sense of the etymological root of radical: *radix*, meaning root. Navigating the aporia means going to the root of democracy, not in search of an ultimate foundation or to dissolve the aporia, but in the postfoundational sense that there is no ultimate foundation or root. Yet, our negotiations of democracy are always rooted in particular, partial and overlapping conceptions of democracy or political imaginaries.⁸

If we are dealing with a postfoundational conception of democracy, it is because it is a nonessentialist one. In Derrida's words: "What is lacking in democracy is proper meaning . . . Democracy is defined, as is the very ideal of democracy, by this lack of the proper . . . there is no absolute paradigm, whether constitutive or constitutional, no absolutely intelligible idea, no *eidōs*, no *idea* of democracy."⁹ The question "what is democracy?" – as in "what *is* democracy?" – therefore becomes part of democracy as a concept and as a practice. This opens up a discussion of democracy and what it involves: rights, social equality, the role of the people, who belongs to the demos and so forth. The yardstick ("democracy") against which we decide upon these questions is itself in question, and this extends to the discussion itself, because we can ask whether the discussion itself is democratic.

If we say that democracy means rule by the people, then democracy is defined by the two questions "what is the demos?" and "what is rule?," which is another way of saying that it is defined by the question "what is democracy?" Any democratic discourse would have to answer those two questions, and there would be a host of different answers to them. Democracy then consists of these questions and the answers given to them. Democracy opens an argument about those two questions, and this means that democracy is a peculiar practice that puts itself into question – that puts itself at stake – because there would be no way of deciding a priori what the people, what rule and what democracy are – in short, what democracy is.¹⁰ And so a major problem facing democracy is how to negotiate this, especially how to negotiate limits to democracy while treating democracy as provisional.

Brexit is a good example that connects the two questions about democracy. If we think about the demos as a silo, so that sovereignty is siloed, then the rule of this demos must also be siloed, and something like the EU can only be seen as

⁸ Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), chap. 1.

⁹ Derrida, *Rogues*, 37. ¹⁰ Keenan, *Democracy in Question*.

a betrayal of the British demos. But if we see the demos as internally fractured and as overlapping with other demoi (and so view sovereignty more in terms of a network), then it makes much more sense to pool sovereignty. This can be done in the name of a common demos (the European people, although this is itself a potentially problematic entity), but it can also be done by stressing interconnectedness. In neither case can we say that “*this* is democracy” because we cannot say that “*this is* democracy.” Or, to be precise, there can be provisional answers that take democracy to be this or that, but no ultimate answer; there are *only* provisional answers *because* there is no ultimate answer.

Democracy is provisional because it is aporetic. Derrida makes the connection thus: “*aporia*: the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent [*événement de venue ou d’avenir*].”¹¹ Here, provisional does not mean “not yet,” as if we will, or could, someday arrive at a final answer to the question “what is democracy?” Rather, provisional means to-come in Derrida’s sense of *à venir* (to come) and *avenir* (a future advent): “‘Democracy to come’ does not mean a future democracy that will one day be ‘present.’ Democracy will never exist in the present.”¹² Democracy is not everything, while at the same time it is nothing. It cannot be just anything because it will always consist of particular articulations of democracy, differentiating it from what it is not (for example, populism, in some discourses on democracy). At the same time, it *is* nothing because it has no essence. Democracy is extended between these two: between the need to rearticulate it again and again and the ultimate lack of essence, foundation or root; and that tension is expressed by making the question “what is democracy?” part of democracy. Put differently, democracy is extended between conditional democracy (because it is always articulated in particular ways) and unconditional democracy (because any particular articulation of democracy can be put into question with reference to the democracy to-come, which always exceeds our particular articulations of democracy).¹³

DEMOCRACY AT RISK

If the question “what is democracy?” is part and parcel of democracy, then we have no yardstick independent of particular answers to that question. We have no independent yardstick with which to judge if a particular answer to the question is democratic or not; all we have are different answers. As a result, we do not have a bedrock definition of democracy that we can use in the defense of democracy

¹¹ Derrida, *Aporias*, 8.

¹² Borradori and Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” 120.

¹³ I leave aside the question of the status of this provisional democracy: is it a general and inherent aspect of democracy as such, or is it a particular discourse of democracy? It seems to me that neither of these options is attractive.

against those who will use democracy for undemocratic ends. The distinction between democratic and undemocratic is itself at stake within democracy, and to the extent that we cannot say whether we are on one or the other side of the distinction when struggling over how to define it. Indeed, it is not clear that we can struggle democratically over the meaning of democracy when this struggle also pertains to what it means to be “democratic.”¹⁴ There is an inherent rogueness to democracy as what happens in its name cannot simply stay within a norm of democracy.

These are the aporias that Derrida tries to capture with the notion of autoimmunity.¹⁵ By autoimmunity, Derrida means a situation where an organism destroys its own immune system, which was supposed to protect the organism against external threats: “an autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in a quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity.”¹⁶ Democracy is autoimmunitary in that it is caught between a closure to protect democracy against the undemocratic and an openness to what is to-come and cannot be predicted (which could be any answer to the question of what democracy is, to the extent that it would no longer be recognizable as democratic). Whatever we do, democracy is at risk.

To illustrate this, consider contemporary debates about democracy and populism and the relationship between them. Some discourses on populism oppose democracy and populism and treat populism as an existential threat to democracy. Other discourses take populism as a correction to a form of liberal democracy that has become more liberal and less democratic. Yet other discourses take populism to be an essential part of democracy.

Jan-Werner Müller’s work is an example of the first kind of discourse opposing populism to democracy.¹⁷ According to Müller, populism is defined by its antipluralism. Populism is a discourse that imposes a particular image of the people on the pluralism of society, thus branding those who are different as illegitimate. It is a discourse of closure: “This is the core claim of populism: only some of the people are really the people.”¹⁸ Müller gives as an example Nigel Farage’s claim that Brexit was a victory for the real British people;¹⁹ his other examples include the governments of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. However, when it comes to defending democracy against populism, things are murkier. On the one hand, Müller says that only populists who cease to be

¹⁴ Derrida, *Rogues*, 71–73.

¹⁵ Borradori and Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” 94–102; Derrida, *Rogues*, 33–35.

¹⁶ Borradori and Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” 94.

¹⁷ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (London: Penguin, 2017).

¹⁸ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 21. ¹⁹ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 21–22.

populists can be included within liberal democracy because you cannot be both a democrat and a populist at the same time.²⁰ That makes sense if you see populism as an existential threat to pluralism and democracy. On the other hand, he does not want to ban populist parties, and he writes that “as long as populists stay within the law – and don’t incite violence, for instance – other political actors (and members of the media) are under some obligation to engage them.”²¹ That makes sense if you associate democracy with pluralism. Müller seems to equivocate because he thinks of pluralism as a zero-sum game: if we exclude populists (because they want to limit pluralism), we limit pluralism.²² If we accept the autoimmunitary character of democracy, however, the relationship between exclusion and pluralism is much more difficult and unpredictable.

Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s works on populism are examples of the kind of discourse that takes populism to be an essential part of democracy.²³ They link populism to popular sovereignty and argue that popular sovereignty is an essential part of democracy. There is no democracy – liberal or otherwise – without the construction of a people, or a demos. There is no natural people, only discourses that performatively bring peoples into being; in Mouffe’s words, “the ‘people’ is not an empirical referent but a discursive political construction.”²⁴ Populist discourses provide answers to the question “what is the demos?” Laclau argues that populist discourses can move in different directions, some more totalitarian and some more democratic. He suggests that Mouffe’s conception of agonistic democracy is a fruitful way to think about democratic forms of the construction of a people.²⁵

Mouffe thinks of agonistic democracy as providing a “conflictual consensus.” Agonistic democratic adversaries all subscribe to the defining values of liberal democracy – liberty and equality for all – but they interpret them differently.²⁶ The consensus among adversaries makes it possible to draw a line and defend democracy: “A line should therefore be drawn between those who reject those values [‘the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all’] outright and those who, while accepting them, fight for conflicting interpretations.”²⁷ At the same time, any consensus is the result of hegemonic struggles. Mouffe writes that “every consensus exists as a temporary result of

²⁰ Niels Boel, Carsten Jensen and André Sonnichsen, “Populism and the Claim to a Moral Monopoly: An Interview with Jan-Werner Müller,” *Politik* 20, no. 4 (2017): 77.

²¹ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 84. See also Boel, Jensen, and Sonnichsen, “Populism and the Claim,” 85.

²² Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 83.

²³ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

²⁴ Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 62. ²⁵ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 166–69.

²⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

²⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 121.

a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion.” She adds that “any political order is the expression of a hegemony, of a specific pattern of power relations.”²⁸

With Mouffe’s agonistic democracy, we are back to provisional democracy.²⁹ The conflictual consensus is conflictual all the way down. This is so despite the consensus around the values of liberty and equality for all. That consensus should be understood as a provisional placeholder for the hegemonic struggles over the interpretation of the values, where the interpretations performatively constitute the consensus. It is a “dimension of performative interpretation, that is, of an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets.”³⁰ Put differently, the values of liberal democracy are values we have inherited – not in the passive sense that they have already been defined and we now just need to accept them and put them into practice, but in the active sense of appropriating them through a process of interpretation that should be understood as a process of performative articulation.³¹ This appropriation of the values of liberal democracy is not the reappropriation of an original meaning of the values, whether understood as an essence or as a historical origin. Rather, since there is no proper meaning to the values of liberal democracy, the interpretation of them consists of tropological – or, more precisely, catachrestical – displacements that are constitutive of the values.³²

If there is a totalitarian populist threat to democracy, Laclau and Mouffe provide us with no guarantees. In their terms, populism is an inherent part of democracy, and, as such, it may also be a threat to democracy. To paraphrase Mouffe, the question becomes how we can articulate forms of closure more compatible with democratic values.³³

MAJOR CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

What are the major challenges facing democracy today, especially if understood as provisional democracy? The first thing to note is that there are no objectively major challenges to democracy, above all because there is no objective essence to democracy. Challenges must be articulated as challenges, and major challenges must be articulated as major challenges, and the link to democracy must also be articulated (why are they challenges *for democracy*?). This is just what has happened to what we call “the environment” and, especially “the climate crisis.” It is not that these challenges are new, but that they have entered mainstream political discussions as major challenges, including as challenges to

²⁸ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 104, 99.

²⁹ Note that, in the case of Derrida, he identifies an aporia of democracy; in the case of Mouffe, she identifies a tension between the two parts of liberal democracy (individual liberty from the liberal tradition and equality/popular sovereignty from the democratic tradition).

³⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 51.

³¹ For this notion of inheritance, see Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 16. ³² Derrida, *Rogues*, 37.

³³ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 100.

how we think about democracy. To take just one obvious example, we must ask ourselves how we take future generations into consideration while at the same time acting with urgency here and now. Indeed, there seems to be a general tension between the futures of democracy – futures that are not simply “ours,” but also “theirs” – and the urgent need for “us” to make decisions in the present, and where it is difficult to say who “we” and “they” are.

What, then, are the major challenges facing democracy today, especially if understood as provisional democracy? I will venture two major challenges: the environment and inequality. The environmental crisis is a challenge for democracy because it raises questions about who “the people” of democracy is: how do you include those affected in the future and those affected elsewhere? Inequality – within states and on a global scale – is a challenge because, even if everyone is included in the people that rules, they will not be so equally; some will rule more than others, for instance because they have better access to representation in national and international institutions. The two challenges are linked because the effects of the environmental crisis are not evenly distributed across inequalities of class, geography, gender and so many other things. It thus matters not only *who* is included in the demos, but also *how* they are included. The latter is not only a matter of inequality, but of what it means to be part of a demos that rules – for instance, the relative role of popular participation and formal institutions. Here, too, the two challenges are linked: we need to ask what forms of politics best promote urgent and lasting solutions to the environmental crisis – for instance, popular participation in the form of climate strikes or intergovernmental negotiations in international institutions. And with regard to that question, inequality also matters, because inequalities are distributed differently across different forms of politics.

Both the environmental crisis and inequality are challenges for any regime, democratic or not. The question is whether there is anything specific about democracy – and democracy in a provisional key – in the face of these challenges. The twin challenges of the environmental crisis and inequality take on a particular importance and inflection in democracy in a provisional key. This is so because in provisional democracy, the people – or the demos, the “who” of democracy – is representational.³⁴ By that I mean that the people is brought into being by performative invocations of it – that is, by representative claims about the people. The people does not exist, and therefore it must be represented. There is no essential or natural people that is then represented in political institutions or in representative claims about the people. That is why it must be represented in order to be brought into existence. The people “is” what it is represented “as.” While there is no natural nation, people or humankind waiting to be represented (or misrepresented), the performative conception of representation does not imply that, for instance, “the people” is created with

³⁴ Lasse Thomassen, “Representing the People: Laclau as a Theorist of Representation,” *New Political Science* 41, no. 2 (2019): 331–34.

a single representative claim. Rather, representative claims draw on existing representations of the people for their authority, and they must be taken up by others – politicians, institutions, subjects – who are themselves shaped by existing representations of the people.

If the people – the *demos* of democracy – is representational, democracy is provisional. This is so because the people cannot simply be given as a fact prior to the rule of the people, because it is also at stake *in* the rule of the people. Yet, the rule of the people assumes the people: it assumes that once the people starts ruling itself, it is already constituted. This is the *aporia* that makes democracy provisional: the people is at once prior to and a result of the rule of the people, and so we never arrive at a final answer to the questions “what is the *demos*?” and “what is rule?”

The performative conception of representation sheds new light on current debates about the crisis of democracy and of representative institutions. This is so in particular when the climate crisis is articulated together with a crisis of representative democracy: Extinction Rebellion, protests against airport expansions, and so on all challenge the representativity of representative institutions. Likewise, school children striking against climate change challenge our preconceptions of what it means to have an equal voice in the making of political decisions, because children can claim a strong stake in the future of the polity, but do not have full political rights in the present.

Usually, when we talk about representation it goes something like this: someone (a representative) represents someone else (the represented). The represented may be a person, a group or an interest, but we start from the represented, and the question is then whether the representative really represents the represented. We would think that there is representation, and not misrepresentation, if the representative reflects the interests of the represented. In this model of representation, we move from the represented to the representative. If we think of representation in this way, we can imagine a crisis of democracy when elected representatives do not represent the interests of those who elected them, but instead represent the interests of big business. The crisis arises from a mismatch between the represented and the representatives.

There is another way of thinking about representation. We can think of representation as not simply reflecting a state of affairs, but performatively constituting that state of affairs. This is what is referred to as a constructivist conception of representation.³⁵ Take, for instance, the French Yellow Vests (*Gilets jaunes*) movement. The French political system and especially the established parties are embroiled in a crisis – a crisis we could call a crisis of representative institutions (parliament, media, police, etc.). We can think of the right-wing populism of the Front National and the left-wing populism of Jean-

³⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 84; Lisa Disch, Mathijs van de Sande, and Nadia Urbinati, *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); and Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 61.

Luc Mélenchon as reactions to this crisis of representation: these parties claim to speak for – that is, represent – a people that is not otherwise represented by political parties. Then comes along the Yellow Vests movement, which rejects representative politics outright.

How can we understand this claim by the Yellow Vests that they are not represented by the political system, let alone the political parties? If we think of representation in the usual sense, the claim of the Yellow Vests makes immediate sense: there is no one in the political system who speaks for the Yellow Vests; or, if they do, they misrepresent them. However, what if we think of representation in a different way: as moving in the other direction, so that the interests of the represented are not given, but are constructed through the very act of representation? In that case, we have to think differently about the crisis of representative institutions. We cannot simply say that French democracy is in crisis because the political parties do not reflect the true interests of the French people and the diversity of interests and identities within French society. Put differently, if “the people” is an effect of representative claims about the people, then we cannot claim that, say, Emmanuel Macron does not represent the true or real interests of the people, because the latter do not exist independently of the claim to represent them. If we think of representation as not limited to formal representative institutions, we can then think of, for instance, the Yellow Vests as engaged in (democratic) representative politics even when they refuse to engage directly with representative institutions. What we have are representative claims about the people – some from elected politicians, some from activists in movements, some in popular culture, some from your colleagues, neighbors and friends. We end up with a struggle between different representative claims – without any way of adjudicating between them by pointing to the “true” or “real” interests of the people.

Returning to the question of the climate crisis and of how to respond to the problem of future generations in the context of the climate crisis, thinking of democracy as provisional and of the people as representational gives us a new angle on the question. One of the problems with future generations is that they are indeterminate; the same applies to the problem of how to include those affected by decisions but not included within the polity. We do not know who and how many generations to include, what their interests are, and so on. With the conception of the people as representational and democracy as provisional, we can now see that this is a *general* feature of democracy. Democracy should not be conceived as a transparent medium for the will or the interests of a people, but as one way of constructing the people.

This conception of democracy in a provisional key does not solve, resolve or dissolve the problem of future generations. It presses the problem because it forces us to see that, with democracy, we are (also) in the business of constructing answers to the questions “what is the demos?” and “what is rule?,” here in the context of the environmental crisis. The same goes for inequality and how to think about that in a provisional key. For instance,

what do “the demos” and “rule” mean in the context of a New International (Derrida) or a Green New Deal (Mouffe)?³⁶ What kind of subjects, sovereignty and representation can be articulated for a New International or a Green New Deal?

Gross and systematic inequalities exist across the world. They are a challenge and a threat to democracy (among other things) because they put into question the character of the demos, whether the demos of the nation-state or a global demos. From a postfoundational perspective, there is nothing essential about equality and no natural subject of equality. From this perspective, equality is an open question. It is this lack of essence which means that all we have are particular answers to the question “what is equality?” – that is, particular discourses of equality, or particular images of the subject of equality. Since there is nothing natural about equality, it must be represented and, thus, brought into being in a performative fashion. In the context of democracy, we therefore have to ask how the demos and those making up the demos are represented: what kind of (equal) subjects are they? What kind of image connects particular subjects to a demos? Historically, this image has often been that of a nation, with everything that comes with that in terms of religion, language, ethnicity, and so on. But there is no image of the demos and no image of the subject of equality without some exclusion, without a limit. An image of European democracy also carries exclusions, and even images of humankind rely on particular images of what it means to be a human being, and some are, if not excluded, at least marginalized vis-à-vis that image. There is no equality without subjects of equality, subjects that can be counted as equals. Equality is suspended between conditionality and unconditionality. The bottom line is that because equality is provisional like democracy – because there is no ultimate answer to the question “what is equality?” – there are no guarantees that equality will be articulated in a progressive direction.

CONCLUSION

There is nothing new about democracy being challenged. The challenges may be new, or at least relatively new in the case of the environmental crisis. What is new is that democracy is a universal language. Thinking of democracy in a provisional key – democracy as provisional democracy – invites us to press the problem of democracy: to take democracy not as a problem to be solved, resolved or dissolved, but as a question. To do so is also to proceed without guarantees that a better or more progressive result will follow.

³⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 84; Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 61.