Boekbespreking van: Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture

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Catharine MacKinnon that pornography is bad because it leads to an objectification of women, does not fully survive critical analysis. Nussbaum shows that the term 'objectification' involves seven different notions, and that some of them are morally more problematic than others. Similarly, in 'Whether from Reason or Prejudice: Taking Money for Bodily Services', a chapter on the stigmatization of prostitution, Nussbaum compares the characteristics of prostitution with those of other professions. She shows that the genuinely problematic elements of prostitution are common in several professions typically performed by poor working women. Her comparison and analysis support her claim that the stigma traditionally attached to prostitution is based on beliefs that are mostly indefensible rationally. She also analyses the common arguments made in favour of the criminalization of voluntary adult prostitution.

Other chapters in this part show how knowledge of the ancient Greek norms regarding sexuality can be highly relevant for current debates around sexual norms and morality. For example, the binary distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality was absent in the ancient Greek society. Certain sexual practices that nowadays would be labelled 'homosexual sexual activities' were, generally speaking, a normal and uncontested experience for Greek male citizens. Throughout the chapters dealing with homosexuality and politics in the USA, Nussbaum stresses the ignorance of American judges: "Prejudice, a lack of curiosity, flawed logic: all these are depressingly common when judges confront the complexities of sex" (p. 343).

Sex & Social Justice is an important book for everyone interested in gender and feminism, sexuality or justice. Martha Nussbaum has an exceptional talent for carrying out a thorough and systematic analysis of societal beliefs, politics and judgements. She questions whether these beliefs and judgements are rational and consistent, and whether they are supported by empirical analysis. Nussbaum also uncovers the underlying moral norms of those beliefs. To do this, she uses a variety of techniques, often borrowing from the social sciences, making historical comparisons and taking examples from literature and the arts. In this way, she gives us some of the best of analytical philosophy, while at the same time showing how interdisciplinary thought and reflection can be done at a high quality level.

In this light my two remarks on this book are more questions than critiques. First, in the chapter 'Women and Cultural Universals' Nussbaum defends the capability approach as a concept of the good, used to make normative judgements on justice and equality questions. More and more philosophers and social scientists are convinced of the usefulness of the capability approach to conduct normative analysis regarding material inequalities. But in my opinion, too many scholars are praising the capability approach in an empirical and practical vacuum. I think the discussion around capabilities has come to a point where the way forward is gaining more insights through applications and case studies, as well as figuring out its possibilities and constraints for quantitative analysis. Nussbaum certainly makes an important contribution here, when she specifies her revised list of 'central human functional capabilities' (p. 41-42), which should be central to public policy. However, it might be

interesting to look through a capability lens at the topics discussed in some of the other chapters, especially in the second part of the book. Such an exercise would give more insights into how strong the capability approach is as a framework for normative analysis, not only for the lives of people in poor countries, but also for people in the Western countries who live, at least on average, in material affluence.

My second question concerns Nussbaums attack on postmodernism. In all of her writings, Nussbaum is very firm regarding the things she believes in. For example, she convincingly argues against cultural relativism and defends a qualified kind of universalism. Similarly, she forcefully defends her liberal humanistic account of feminism. I consider this a strong position, and in several chapters she shows how her detailed arguments guide her to a rational and balanced ethical judgement. However, at the same time she dismisses postmodernism on the grounds that it would be 'irrational' (p. 7). Nussbaums position seems to be that rational and well-reflected ethical judgements are necessary (with which I fully agree) and that postmodernism is not able to fulfil this task. This is a strong claim. I wonder whether at this point Nussbaum is not making the same mistake of which she accuses the anti-liberal feminists in her chapter 'The Feminist Critique on Liberalism'. Those anti-liberal feminists narrow down liberalism to one particular version, which is indeed difficult to defend from a feminist perspective. Nussbaum could be seen to be doing something similar with her attack on postmodernism: she narrows down postmodernism to one particular obscure version, incapable of guiding our ethical judgements. Furthermore, she seems to lump postmodern and poststructural theories together without acknowledging their differences. There is enough good work containing ethical judgements by feminists and other scholars who consider themselves postmodernists or poststructuralists to realize that this oversimplification is wrong. It would be interesting to see Nussbaum's strong analytical capacities applied to her claims on postmodernism. As she has done so skillfully for many topics in *Sex & Social Justice*, such an exercise would at least show to what extent her condemnation of postmodernism or poststructuralism is based on moral judgements, and to what extent it is rationally defensible.

On the whole, *Sex & Social Justice* is a very interesting and well-argued book. For readers interested in feminism, sexuality or justice, this book is good reading.

Ingrid Robeyns

Frederic C. Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture*, Wilder House Series in Politics, History and Culture, Cornell University Press, 1998, ISBN 0801433983, $39.95.

A few years ago, I conducted field research in Senegal. When it was raining, it was impossible to visit the NGOs I was studying, as the roads became impassable due to mud. On such a rainy day, the only occupation was to drink tea in a small restaurant.

On one occasion I met another researcher who was studying the local policy of forest planting. She was extremely frustrated because, after months of hard work under the difficult conditions of mosquitos, warm weather and an unfamiliar culture, she had discovered that the word 'forest' has another meaning in Senegalese. For the Senegalese farmers, the concept 'forest' also includes high grass and bushes. Planting forest, therefore, does not mean in the first place 'planting trees', as this researcher had assumed, but mainly the planting of grass. The researcher and the farmers thought they understood each other, but were in fact not speaking the same language. The rude translation of the concept 'forest' turned out to be different from the substantial meaning.

I remembered this, as I was reading Frederic Schaffer's remarkable book *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture*. It is a very well-written book – it almost reads like an exciting novel – and is innovative in the way it is written from an intersectional perspective considering political science, anthropology and linguistics. The author focuses on the meaning of the contested concept 'democracy' within a non-Western setting. Such an attempt is important because

> ... it raises larger issues about the nature and meaning of democracy, about the universality of democratic ideals and practices, and about the advantages and limits of using the concept of democracy for cross-cultural research (p. X).

Schaffer emphasizes that his study is also of practical importance:

> The World Bank and the US government routinely adopt policies to promote competitive elections in developing countries, with hopes of improvement of economic performance. Yet the social science research on which these policies rest tend to ignore local people's understanding and use of electoral institutions. Without examining these topics, no one can easily foresee the political and economic consequences of the transitions to a multiparty system that such policies encourage (p. X).

Hence, Schaffer studies the different meanings of democracy in a society culturally different from the United States. Senegal provides a useful case study for this purpose, as the country has a long history of electoral politics, and its people therefore have some feeling for democratic institutions. At the same time, the Islamic and agrarian traditions set the country apart.

In the first part of the book, the author wonders what *demokaraasi* (the Senegalese word for democracy in the 'Wolof-language') means, where these meanings come from, and how they differ from the meanings of the English language concept of democracy used by American social scientists. The author argues in chapter 1 that American-English scientists ordinarily consider a regime democratic if at least one of the following ideals is present: the availability of meaningful choices and the freedom to decide between these choices, including participation; and a certain amount of economic and social inequality (pp. 83-84). In chapter 2, the author shows that the Wolof concept demokaraas as used by the political elite of Senegalese society differs

from the French term *démocratie*. While démocratie (just like democracy) refers mainly to the electoral process, demokaraasi requires consensus: the harmonization of opinions, not just the counting of votes. This conclusion was made on the basis of an analysis of written source material, the public discussions and debates that take place in newspapers, conferences, and during radio broadcasts. In addition, Schaffer conducted twenty open-ended interviews with goverment and opposition party leaders. Chapter 3 describes the views of the broader, mostly non-French-speaking population. The author conducted over one hundred interviews asking questions such as, "Is there demokaraasi in Senegal today?"; "Is demokaraasi good or bad?"; and, "Is there a place or a country in the world where there is no demokaraasi?" Schaffer discovers that these Wolof-speakers have adapted the word to their own culture and conditions. Demokaraasi has continued to be associated with elections, voting, and a multiparty system, associations that correspond closely to those of its French progenitor démocratie. The word has, however, taken on added meanings of consensus, solidarity and fairness. As one respondent states: "There is demokaraasi in Senegal because everybody agrees, people are content, everybody is talking about unity" (p. 58).

In the second part of the book, the author explores how the study of the concept demokaraasi helps outside observers to understand the political reality in Senegal. Schaffer describes how many Senegalese see voting in a democratic system not so much as a matter of choosing leaders but rather as a means to reinforce community ties that may be called upon in times of crises. The voters see voting as a service provided in return for economic pay-offs (grain silos, irrigation systems, for example), a transaction they see as legitimate and moral. Chapter 5 asks under what conditions demokaraasi might advance the Western ideal of democracy. According to the author such a study is important because "American scholars, policy makers, and citizens are today more interested in advancing democracy than in promoting demokaraasi. For this reason it is important to ask questions about the possible democratization of demokaraasi, though from a perspective that is less normative than descriptive" (p. 117). Schaffer describes how any of five factors could make Senegal more democratic: civic education, French-language education, economic security, the secret ballot, and extensive networking.

At the beginning of the book, the author suggested that the term 'democracy' is not universal. Unfortunately, this interesting question of universality is only treated in the final chapter of less than eight pages. Until this point, the reader is given the strange impression that the Wolof and American-English concepts of democracy share an extensive network of overlapping characteristics; in other words, there are a remarkable amount of 'family resemblances', a metaphor used by Wittgenstein to consider the interrelationships of different meanings of a word. Demokaraasi and democracy as idealistic concepts both share the institutional referent of elections, voting, and multi-partyism. Furthermore, many of the practices of demokaraasi are far from unique: Schaffer himself admits that clientelist voting, for instance, exists throughout Africa as well as in other places like Thailand and Mexico (p. 139).

Despite these clear similarities, Schaffer is strongly inclined to emphasize the differences. He points out that demokaraasi differs from the American-English term in coupling participation in electoral institutions with ideals of social welfare and extending participation to a range of institutions that promote collective economic security. I am not at all convinced that these additional characteristics makes demokaraasi completely unique and totally different from the Western concept. If one studies something in depth, and studies only one case in detail, then differences will always be found. Schaffer should have conducted a broader comparative study in which he should have compared the meanings in several different cultures at greater length. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that the additional characteristics of 'assuring economic security' are mentioned by the Wolof-speakers of the Senegalese population, not by the Senegalese political elite. Schaffer compares this Senegalese concept of demokaraasi as defined by the mass with the American concept of democracy as defined by the elites and political scientists like Dahl and Schumpeter. This may not be a fair comparison. It might be that people in developed countries also refer to economic welfare if they think of a democratic system.

Nevertheless, Schaffer concludes that

> if students of democracy aspire to understand the meaning, social context, and democratic implications of the behaviors they observe, they cannot assume that their own ideals of democracy are universal. It is risky to equate democracy with what Chinese speakers call *minzhu*, what Luganda speakers call *eddembe ery'obuntu*, or what Wolof speakers call demokaraasi, for the ideals and practices that infuse American institutions are not universal (p. 146).

Although, in my opinion, Schaffer's book gives more evidence of the universality of the concept of democracy than Schaffer himself suggests, I agree that it can be important to take the differences seriously. Even when democratic ideas are diffused throughout the world, local communities assimilate those ideas selectively and transform them to fit their own way of life. By emphasizing and investigating the differences, the functioning of democratic institutions in an 'unfamiliar culture' can in this way indeed be better understood. The author has certainly succeeded in achieving this more narrow goal of understanding politics in the Senegalese context. And yet, if just one other researcher would conduct a similar study in another country, serious comparisons could be made and it would be possible to investigate whether 'democracy' is universal or not.

Renske Doorenspleet

Robert Thomson, *The Party Mandate. Election Pledges and Government Actions in the Netherlands, 1986-1998*. Thela-Thesis, Amsterdam 1999, ISBN 90-5170-489-5

The mandate theory of democracy states that the parties that win elections have acquired a mandate to enact their election pledges. This theory has been criticized as being mainly applicable to majoritarian electoral systems that produce winning and losing parties. Systems based on proportional representation provide a much weaker indication of which party should form the government. For this reason, it is argued, the mandate theory is not suited as a general applicable theory of democratic policy-making.

In his dissertation Robert Thomson tests the mandate model for the Netherlands. He compares the Dutch results with the United Kingdom in order to determine to which degree this model applies to a proportional system. Basically, his test examines the party programme to policy linkage: the degree to which election pledges are fulfilled. All pledges on socio-economic policy issues (including welfare benefits, healthcare, housing subsidies, student finance, employment rights, and levels of taxation) made in manifestos for the national parliamentary elections of 1986, 1989 and 1994 were selected for study. These pledges were related to the government agreements that eventually followed these elections. The research is done by means of both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The qualitative part of the study consists of descriptions of election pledges and related government actions in order to ascertain whether or not election pledges were made on specific issues that were societally important. The quantitative part consists of a test of a range of hypotheses regarding: the policy areas in which pledges are made; the relationships between election pledges of political parties; the conditions under which pledges are likely to be enacted; as well as the effects of institutional variables, such as membership of government and the allocation of ministerial posts.

The findings can be divided into three categories: findings concerning the election pledges themselves, those concerning the relationships between election pledges and governments' policy intentions, and those concerning the enactment of election pledges. Elections pledges are often made in the policy areas which parties present as being of the utmost importance. Because of the need to form coalitions, a significantly higher percentage of related pledges made by different parties was found in the Netherlands than in the US and the UK. Dutch parties *do* talk less past each other. Additionally, consensus is the dominant type of relationship between election pledges, especially between parties that are close to each other on the left-right dimension.

Pledges to which parties attach relatively higher levels of saliency are more likely to be supported in the government agreement and this support has a strong, positive effect on pledge enactment. Pledges are more likely to be supported in the government agreement if they are supported by more than one coalition party. Election pledges that are supported in the government agreements are significantly more likely to be enacted than those that are not.

The expectation regarding the effect of coalition governance on pledge fulfilment