

# Form of Life, Democracy and Habit: The Contours of a Possible Dialogue Between Habit and Democracy

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## Abstract

In this paper I will be tracing the argument according to which the (re)current discussion about the “death” or “end” of democracy” is a sign that democracy within its abstract procedural form and without being embedded in people’s interaction cannot survive. Consistent with this insight many scholars in critical tradition try to reflect on democracy with a peculiar phrase: form of life. Primarily, along with this notion democracy is conceptualized as a process of the embodied and unpredictable encounters in which collective wills and desires are formed. Based upon this understanding, firstly, I follow the arguments within the contemporary critical theory which address democracy as a process of dynamic and embodied interactions with the notion of form of life. Subsequently, I will try to argue that in order to achieve this goal, the notion of habit might offer a broader understanding. Here, by deploying habit as a coincidental interference or an ongoing negotiation between one’s surroundings and oneself in which one is being transformed while one is transforming her surroundings, my concern is to try to deepen our understanding of democracy as an embodied process that also might pave the way to address the issues from a different angle.

**Keywords:** Embodied Democracy, Form of life, Habit, Critical Theory, Reflexivity

# Yaşam Biçimi, Demokrasi ve Alışkanlık: Alışkanlık ve Demokrasi Arasında Olası Bir Diyaloğun Hatları

## Özet

Bu çalışmada, demokrasinin “ölümü” veya “sonu”na ilişkin (tekrar tekrar) gündeme gelen tartışmayı, demokrasinin soyut bir biçiminde ve insanlar arası etkileşimde tecessüm etmediği sürece ayakta kalamayacağına bir işaret olarak ele alan argümanın izi sürülecektir. Bu görüşe uygun olarak, eleştirel teori geleneği içinde yer alan birçok düşünür, demokrasiyi özgün bir kavramla ele almaktadır: yaşam biçimi. Bu kavramla demokrasi, kolektif irade ve arzuların biçimlendiği, tecessümsel ve öngörülemez karşılaşmaların alanı olarak kavramsallaştırılır. Bu anlayışa dayanarak, öncelikle ve kısaca, demokrasiyi yaşam biçimi kavramı ile tecessümsel ve dinamik bir etkileşim süreci olarak ele alan eleştirel teori içindeki argümanlar takip edilmiştir. Daha sonra, alışkanlık kavramının tecessümsel bir demokrasi için daha geniş bir anlayış sunabileceğini savunulmaya çalışılmıştır. Burada alışkanlık, kişinin çevresini dönüştürdüğü kendisinin de dönüştüğü, kişinin çevresiyle olan tesadüfi etkileşimini işaret eden bir süreç olarak, başka bir ifadeyle, sürekli devam eden bir müzakere süreci olarak tanımlanmış ve tecessümsel bir süreç olarak demokrasiye ilişkin anlayış derinleştirilmek istenmiştir. Böylelikle demokrasiye ilişkin sorunların, farklı bir açıdan ele alınmasının mümkün olabileceği savunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tecessümsel Demokrasi, Yaşam Biçimi, Alışkanlık, Eleştirel Teori, Düşünümsellik

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## Form of Life, Democracy and Habit: The Contours of a Possible Dialogue Between Habit and Democracy\*

### Introduction

In this paper I will try to discuss democracy alongside habit which may sound a little bit odd when democracy faces many (maybe recurrent) threats, just recall the election of Donald Trump as a president in USA, Brexit in UK and the coming to power of many authoritarian leaders within the supposedly democratic countries (Hungary, Poland, Turkey etc.). Moreover, reflecting on this political landscape, the books which speak of the death or end of democracy adorn the bookshelves, such as David Runciman's "How Democracy Ends" or Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's collective work "How Democracies Die".<sup>i</sup> Besides, it is claimed that this is a sign that democracy within its abstract procedural form and without being embedded in people's interaction cannot survive or it is going to face the same treats over and over again. As well, it is a sign that we need new concepts to challenge these threats. Consistent with this insight many scholars within the critical theory try to reflect on democracy with a peculiar phrase: form of life. Primarily, along with this notion democracy is conceptualized as a process "of the dynamic, embodied and unpredictable interactions in which collective wills and desires are formed, experimented with" (2014, p. 20), as Martin Saar puts. Based upon this understanding, firstly, I would like to follow the arguments within the contemporary critical theory<sup>ii</sup> which address democracy as a process of dynamic and embodied interactions with the notion of form of life in this paper. I have to concede that this is an arbitrary choice, one should address the discussions within the critical tradition which led several scholars to deploy the notion of form of life to conceptualize an embodied democracy in the first place. However, in this article instead of engaging with such a task, I will limit myself to a review of the mentioned literature. Therefore, my aim in this paper is moderate, since rather than a critical manner, here, I will point to the contours of the discussion. However, I will not abstain from raising my concerns in due course. Subsequently, I will try to argue that in order to conceptualize an embodied democracy, namely democracy as a process "of the dynamic, embodied and unpredictable interactions in which collective wills and desires are formed, experimented with", the notion of habit might offer a broader understanding. With habit I hope it is possible

to experience the “paths that have not yet been trodden” (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 77) within the given discussion. Here, by deploying habit as a coincidental interference or an ongoing negotiation between one’s surroundings and oneself in which one is being transformed while one is transforming her surroundings, my concern is to try to deepen our understanding of democracy as an embodied process. In this part I will proceed as a bricoleur and I won’t be claiming that miraculously habit can solve all the obstacles and problems that democracy faces, but it may pave the way to address the issues from a different angle.

### **Form of life and Contours of an Embodied Democracy**

What does conceptualizing democracy alongside the notion form of life offer and what is the reason behind this gesture? The motive behind the deployment of form of life, as I have mentioned, is the belief that democracy cannot fulfil its promises if it merely remains as an abstract normative framework. As Roberto Esposito rightly remarks: “Democracy is always directed to a totality of equal subjects ... as pure logical atoms endowed with rational will” (2008, p. 643). The political bond between these atoms, in turn, becomes a matter of abstract rights and the politics is assigned to secure the conditions in which the atoms, that is, citizens can somehow solve their problem without having recourse to violence, since as a political institution state has the monopoly of violence which can only be exerted by state on citizens as a third person who is not involved in the conflict. But as Axel Honneth puts: “‘Democracy’ does not merely signify free and equal participation in political will-formation; understood as an entire way of life, it means that individuals can participate equally at every central point in the mediation between the individual and society, such that each functionally differentiated sphere reflects the general structure of democratic participation” (2017, p. 92). From this angle democracy has to be actualized not only in political sphere but in every domain of the given association, such as family and civil society. Therefore, democracy can be only spoken of as long as it is rooted in every aspects of human life. In Honneth’s account, form of life allows the author to flesh out his understanding of “democracy as a reflexive form of community cooperation” (ibid. p. 92), which is based on social freedom that is possible only with the existing practices of mutual recognition.

Honneth claims that democracy cannot be delimited only with the political sphere that is associated to will formation. Since will-formation does not merely originate from a concept

that an individual is free as long as she participates public realm where an agreement based on communication takes place, but it is already engrained in social life. And Honneth tries to bring to the surface these engrained interactions that reveal the possibility of social freedom. Simultaneously, taking the orientation from this perspective a democratic will formation, in turn, presupposes a form of life that is anchored “in the consciousness of social cooperation” (ibid. p. 90) that is deeply associated to mutual recognition. Here, political sphere is endowed with a capacity of rational problem solving which mediates the endeavours of society to process and solve its problems. Following Honneth’s insight and giving it a much more accentuated political tint, Thomas Khurana acclaims the political sphere as a realm in which reflexivity is embodied. For him, politics is not related to a game in which what matters is gaining or losing the power, or it is not merely a struggle of being recognized as a holder of a status. As Khurana puts: “The political sphere must therefore facilitate our becoming aware of the socio-historical character, the contingent decisions, and the asymmetries that underlie our second nature and thereby give us the capacity to question our inner and outer social nature” (2018, p. 433). Furthermore, politics is as about to struggle against given forms of life which have been naturalized as it is about to strive for the liberation into the new forms of life. That is, politics is pertinent to being aware of the contingency of our social world and critical appropriation and questioning of forms of life that we acquire in family life or in civil society. Therefore, it is claimed that political sphere is not a realm in which will-formation arbitrarily decides about ethical life, rather it is a realm in which the givenness of forms of life have been reflected upon, questioned and liberation for the new forms of life is put to work so that the political institutions, such as state, become “organs of reflexivity” (Khurana, 2018).

In his discussion about the possibility of a democratic biopolitics Sergei Prozorov draws attention to a similar point as Khurana. Starting with Rousseau’s discussion of the paradoxical relation between the sovereignty and government, Prozorov by deploying the notion form of life tries to tackle with the question of a democratic governmentality that has cut its tie with sovereign logic. Here, the promise is “how to democratize biopolitics itself and thereby also ‘biopoliticize’ democracy in the sense of making it plural and embodied, a space of coexistence of forms of life rather than a normative framework” (2019, p. 9). Prozorov argues that democracy renders possible for different forms of life to dwell together without claiming to be more virtuous than the others on the base of Claude Lefort’s ontological principle of radical contingency at the heart of democracy which means that the locus of power is empty and the

social world is indeterminate. According to his account, democratic politics points to a coexistence of forms of life that are incommensurable but are legitimate so long as they are aware of and reveal their contingency, hence democracy in this perspective stands for a pluralistic coexistence and “not an attribute of a particular form of life” (ibid). Therefore, given that the place of power is empty, the forms of life by putting at work and manifesting their contingency compete with each other for the policies that they wanted to be enacted. Thus, the intention is not to appropriate the void but to put it at work, to expose it. Here, as Prozorov claims, forms of life including “the most minor, insignificant and even ‘slightly disgusting’ forms, from speed- dating to food porn” (2019, p. 130), can become appropriate for democracy only if they question how their form of life has become what it is. With this reflexive capacity it is claimed that so long as contingency is embodied, or forms of life problematize how they became what they are, then, democracy will flourish. Accordingly, democracy is associated to “letting these incommensurable lives live themselves in accordance with their senses and ends without dominating or suppressing other such senses and ends. Democratic biopolitics lets every bios pursue its fitness in whatever way it sees fit” (ibid. p. 130). Nevertheless, I believe, both Khurana and now Prozorov presuppose a distinction between forms of life according to their reflexive faculties, if only they can put reflexivity at work, they can be part of democratic politics. This, as Tony Bennett puts, might generate “a distinction between ‘reflexivity winners’ and ‘reflexivity losers’ (2016, p. 43).<sup>iii</sup> Reflexivity winners fit democracy since they can contemplate on their ways of life, and since the losers simply lack this capacity, they cannot be a part of the game. While they deploy the notion of form of life to overcome a concept of democracy understood as a normative framework and try to conceptualize an embodied democracy, however, it seems that this gesture carries within itself a sharp dividing line. I believe that habit might help us to overcome such dividing lines, but before concluding this part, I would like to address lastly and briefly Rahel Jaeggi’s discussion of forms of life.

Jaeggi highlights that forms of life have four core elements: first of all they are interrelated clusters of practices, secondly they are collective formations thus it should be noted that there is no individual form of life and they are passive and active simultaneously, that is they have habitual character, lastly they have a normative aspect. Forms of life are intertwined with normative claims:

[F]orms of life are nexuses of practices, orientations, and orders of social behaviour. They include attitudes and habitualized modes of conduct with a normative character that concern the collective conduct of life, although at the same time they are not strictly codified or institutionally binding (2018, p. 76).

Accordingly, Jaeggi claims that forms of life are problem solving entities that they are essentially associated to norms and good functioning: They constitute the best possible solution to the specific problems they both face and pose. Consequently, the critique of forms of life emerges from this moment, they can be judged whether they carry out their promises as problem solving entities or they can contribute to social learning process, in turn, according to Jaeggi, they become a political matter. From this, democracy can be discerned as a process which enables further learning and deepening of experience through the critique of forms of life according to their solution to problems that they face and pose (Jaeggi, 2018). To open forms of life, which are regarded as exempt from critique, to collective decision-making, renders democracy as an embodied process in which collective forms of life are formed, experimented with. Hence, beyond its assumed structural, institutional and abstract features democracy implies a specific form of life that “means living a certain ethos, sharing certain experiences of cooperation and equal social relations” (Saar, 2014, p. 24) which have to be realized in “work, family, and other civil but [also] non-state-related spheres” (ibid).

The argument that I have, briefly, touched on undoubtedly widens our understanding of democracy as an embodied process, but I would like to introduce the concept of habit to this discussion. Actually, habit plays an important role in this line of thought, it is situated at the junction point, for instance, Honneth speaks of “conceptualizing the habitualized attitudes of the democratic citizen as political virtues in the sense that they constitute the normative epitome of a desirable culture of democracy” (2014, p. 219). Moreover, as we have seen, for Jaeggi forms of life are clustered, habitual interactions. Habit is an important aspect of forms of life, nevertheless Jaeggi does not focus on habit since according to her habit implies a repetitive action, such as behaviour. In some sense, this is congruent with the modern philosophy’s approach to habit. One might argue that, as Lapworth aptly remarks, modern philosophy’s opening gesture, among many others, was to open up a space for thinking which should be freed from habits that are mechanistic and occur unintentionally, instinctively. Such as, for Kant habit is “pure mechanism, routine process ... the disease of repetition that

threatens the freshness of thought and stifles the voice of the categorical imperative” (quoted in Lapworth, 2013, p. 88).<sup>iv</sup> However, habit tells us a slightly different story which, I believe, helps us to consider democracy from another angle and which can deepen and broaden our comprehension of democracy as an embodied process.

### **Habit: “Knowledge in the Hands”**

Habit, first of all, refers to a way of being and ‘not merely a state’ but a disposition as its etymology suggests<sup>v</sup>. Habit, as it is well known, is derived from Greek word *hexis* (from the Greek verb *echein*, “to have”) or Latin *habere* (from the Latin verb for “to have,” namely *habeo*) which means to have or to hold which implies possession or belonging. “The way in which one has or holds oneself is at once a rather vague and most precise definition of habit” (Carlisle, 2006, p. 22). In this perspective, *hexis* was defined as an enduring quality in contrast to an evanescent state. For instance, Aristotle states that the honesty of a person, the brightness of sun, the hardness of stone or the courage of a soldier are examples for *hexis*, whereas an evanescent state, *diathesis*, is related to the transient qualities for example coolness or fatigue (Aristotle, 1938, p. 63-64; see also Carlisle, 2014, p. 19). In addition to its meaning as a way of being, a disposition, there is also a connection between habit and uniform, a mode of dressing. This is evident in Latin noun *consuetudo* which means “a custom, habit, use, usage, association and repeated practice” and is translated in English as ‘custom’ and ‘costume’. A habit is thus, one might say, almost like a garment, an outfit. Therefore, what these two meanings have in common is the idea of form. In this regard a habit is, thus, a form that is particular to a given individual (Carlisle, 2014, p. 13).

In this respect we can recall Hegel and his peculiar notion of the second nature. For Hegel, habit is located in the passage from nature to spirit and enables the subject to pull itself out from various sensory states and “preserves those sensory states as the content of sensory consciousness” (Forman, 2010, p. 325) such as retaining its upright posture or developing a skill. As he puts:

[H]abit has quite rightly been said to be second nature, for it is nature in that it is an immediate being of the soul, and a second nature in that the soul posits it as an immediacy, in that it consists of inner formulation and transforming of corporeity pertaining to both the determinations of feeling as such and to embodied presentations and volitions (Hegel, 1971, p. 141).



Thus, one might argue in a Hegelian manner that habit is what allows the spirit to maintain and control its sensation and actions and it is an important factor in the transition for the spirit to achieve autonomy (Lumsden, 2012, p. 225). Therefore, by recalling Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it can be claimed that habit is some sort of rearrangement of the general body schema. It is an individual's style which is a singular manner of accessing the surroundings or negotiating its rhythms. Habit is an ongoing negotiation in which one is being transformed while she is transforming her surroundings. In this regard habit can be understood as "the work of constructing an embodiment, a sensuality, and an orientation to the larger sensual world as well as the world of material objects, systems, and actors that surrounds us" (Breu, 2016, p. 67). Therefore, it is about to learn how to embody a sensuous rationality that is about to orient oneself with a disposition to the world in which one carries on. This rationality is not detached from the body but is inscribed in it, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty elegantly states, habit is 'knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort' (2002, p. 166). Additionally, habit is the result of accidents, even errors that bring about a form which is subjective and simultaneously they are claimed to be universal and necessary. Habit is the outcome of one's negotiation with surroundings in which one finds herself contingently and from this contingent negotiation one can find her garment, outfit. For habit points to a coincidental interference between one's surroundings and oneself which "is always moving, and which advances by an imperceptible progress from one extremity to the other" (Ravassio, 2009, p. 59).

From this insight one can understand Catherine Malabou's peculiar concept, *plasticity* of which she discusses with habit as an instrument or emblem. According to her, plasticity stands for a capacity to receive form and capacity to give form. As she quotes from William James, plasticity "means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once. Each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits" (James, 2007, p. 105). Seen from this perspective habit characterizes a capacity of an organism with which the organism integrates the modifications that it experiences and in turn modifies them (Malabou, 2010, p. 61). Here, habit invites thought to consider individuality not "as pure logical atom" but as a composition, or one might say an assemblage which is not elusive but also it is not immune to change. From this point, it is possible to see the individuality through patterns of its encounters, practices and gestures (Lapworth, 2013, p. 89), or through its habits. As Gilles Deleuze elegantly

puts it: “We start with atomic parts, but these atomic parts have transitions, passages, ‘tendencies,’ which circulate from one to another. These tendencies give rise to habits”, and thus, “[w]e are habits, nothing but habits—the habit of saying ‘I’” (1991, p. x). But, how this concise account of habit, which echoes vitalism, may help us to deepen and widen our understanding of democracy as an embodied democracy? I shall remark three points.

### **Remarks on a Possibility of a Dialogue between Habit and Democracy**

To begin with, one of the important points that the form of life literature underlines is the role of social learning, but if we look at closely, this process is already taking place in habit. Habits are not merely result of the genetic changes or mutations which in way take part in constituting habits but mostly and importantly they are products of social learning process (Gronow, 2011, p. 33). As John Dewey states: “Habits are dispositions that are activated due to environmental cues. The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response” (1922, p. 42). The way we touch our world the outfit, or the garment which is already a product of social world becomes ours and we learn how to move in it with ease. From this perspective, it may be possible to put aside the presumed distinction between the actors and their knowledge about their social context, for habit implies the suspension of this distinction; actors cannot be understood who are unaware of their social context but this knowledge is always already accessible for them.

Also, habit points to an ethical-political principle which underlines the people’s capacity to change the given political-ethical frame within their everyday life and simultaneously hints at the importance of engagement (Wormald, 2014, p. 82). To change given form of life, to live it differently is already taking place in our mundane life through habit and it is at this point possible to consider our engagement with the world not with categories such as appropriation or ownership but with use. Use implies an engagement in which the members, matter or living organisms which are involved in this relationship are cared about. The surrounding which we are connected via our habits, can not to be consumed or appropriated once for all since in order to be spoken of habit, this relationship of use has to be endured sensibly not only here and now but also in the future. And this process consists of changes, alternations through the knowledge that has been inscribed in, so to speak, our hands.

Seen from the lenses of habit the relation between the subject and object also comes to halt. Here subject cannot be understood as that entity who is detached from world and is a pure logical atom “endowed with rational will” (Esposito, 2008, p. 643). The subject who is constituted via habit is nothing other than the relation itself (Agamben, 2016, p. 60) that ties her to her surroundings. The subject of habit is not a master, but as she carries on, so she is carried away. Subjects, here, cannot be separated from their habits or, as Tom Sparrow puts, from their scaffolding that supports them: Subjects “are extended throughout, and in a real sense emerge out of or are the scaffolding of their environment” (Sparrow, 2015, p. 185).

Therefore, habit as a concept encourages us to take into account that which cannot demand by itself to be recognized. As habit oscillates between self and its surrounding, so to speak, and undermines this duality so that recognition cannot be limited to human beings. Our surrounding which we touch with our habits also has to take part in this process. Besides, habit urges us to reflect on democracy by starting not with logical atoms but with relational beings who have “a working agreement about basics that are involved in this process” (Kilpinen, 2009, p. 113). Since democracy as an embodied process, in a sense, is traceable in this agreement.

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The author declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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## Sonnotlar

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<sup>i</sup> While both books account for the so-called “death of democracy” from different angles they, at least, agree on one point: the importance of vigilant citizenship. By this, it is claimed that citizens should not merely be spectators, but they should judge what is taking place in political sphere and they have to be always vigilant. Nevertheless, the insight that is tried to put forward in this article with the notions of form of life and habit, which may give way to an understanding of democracy that is not merely a formal association but an embodied process, is missing in both accounts. They still conceptualize democracy within an abstract, procedural framework.

<sup>ii</sup> The scope of critical theory cannot be strictly defined, however in this paper the term is referred to the authors who have affiliations with the Institute for Social Research. The only exception is Sergei Prozorov, nevertheless his work, which is addressed here, engages a critical discussion with Axel Honneth, the former director of the Institute.

<sup>iii</sup> Tony Bennett (2016) remarks this point in his work where he discusses how at the beginning of modernity habit as a concept was deployed in order to create certain boundaries between human beings: the ones who can able to reflect and the ones who are trapped in their bestiality. According to him this was the continuation of the well-known duality, mind and body, which was at the time, redeployed with the help of habit to set up discontinuity between human beings. While Bennett rightly argues how habit was, and in certain sense is, considered as a repetitive, mechanic action which remarks our “animal nature”, I believe that habit cannot be discussed within this scope only. And I shall try to show the other side of the habit’s story. But, here, I would like to highlight that when certain divisions introduced without a middle term, this, then, may give way to certain political distinctions.

<sup>iv</sup> One might argue that the only exception where Kant considers habit not merely as a repetitive action is his discussion of “holly will”. Only angels have holly will and they do not know the distinction between action and law. Their acts are immediately activation of law and they do not need to reflect upon the law since they are above the given separation that conditions human beings. They act habitually according to the law. For a detailed discussion, see Callanan (2014).

<sup>v</sup> In this part I try to proceed as a bricoleur, that is, freely drawing from authors who reflect upon habit from a different angle. Moreover, their works are not consistent with one another. As Claude Levi-Strauss reminds: “[B]ricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks. [...]. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. [...]. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are 'operators' but they can be used for any operations of the same type” (1966, p. 17-18).