Inheriting Democracy to Come

Axiom: no to-come without inheritance and possibility of repeating.

- Jacques Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge.’

1 In the introduction to The Life of the Mind. I: Thinking, discussing the importance of examining metaphysical systems and their fallacies even when they no longer seem plausible to us, Hannah Arendt writes:

2 Hence, the possible advantage of our situation following the demise of metaphysics and philosophy would be twofold. It would permit us to look on the past with new eyes, unburdened and unguided by any traditions, and thus dispose of a tremendous wealth of raw experiences without being bound by any prescriptions as to how to deal with these treasures. “Notre héritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament” (“Our inheritance comes to us by no will-and-testament”). (1978, 12).

3 For Arendt, the demise of metaphysics does not mean that we should forget it, leave it behind and search for something completely new. The break from tradition that she sees is not a break from the past – rather, it is a break from the prescriptions on how to read or use this past. We thus remain the inheritors of a “tremendous wealth,” but it comes to us without any instructions as to how best to dispose of it – we have an inheritance, but no will-and-testament.
In other contexts, Arendt relates this sentiment to the revolutionary situation, again citing this phrase from René Char ("Notre héritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament") (1963, 217; 1968, 3). The “treasure” in times of revolution is not a “metaphysical fallacy,” but has gone by various names – “public happiness” in the American Revolution, “public liberty” in that of France. However, in contrast to the life of the mind, in which this sentiment characterizes our present situation, Arendt argues that this revolutionary treasure is no longer with us. It was felt in the American and French Revolutions, it was felt by Char in the Resistance, but it is not something that is experienced in the day-to-day life of democracies in post-revolutionary times. It is the lost spirit of revolution, now forgotten. It may perhaps be recovered, and Arendt seeks to reawaken us to this possibility. But, as it stands, the freedom contained in the situation of receiving an inheritance, without instructions for its use, is no longer experienced.

What Arendt therefore wants is for us to be able to relate to the past in democracy, without having the nature of this relation determined in advance. She seeks a democracy that has an inheritance, but no will-and-testament. Is this possible, outside of the revolutionary situation? In this paper I argue that the work of Jacques Derrida contains an affirmative answer to this question. By examining the connection between inheritance and democracy in Derrida’s writings, I show that he presents us with a vision that places inheritance as a dimension intrinsic to the realization of democracy’s promise. Further, the nature of inheritance on Derrida’s understanding is such that it precisely lacks instructions for its use. With this reading I am proposing an interpretation that to some extent goes against the dominant emphasis that Derrida places on democracy’s future. Derrida’s speaks most often not of ‘democracy,’ but of ‘democracy to come.’ Such talk suggests that democracy does not yet exist, indeed it will never exist, fully present, and that democracy is an enterprise much more concerned about its future than its inherited past. What I show, by contrast, is that the ‘to
come’ is not just one aspect of democracy independent of another aspect that would be inheritance. Rather, it is through inheritance that democracy relates to its future. This presents us with the challenge of rethinking our understanding of democracy, one that takes into account this dimension of inheritance.

1. Inheritance

6 I will begin by examining Derrida’s understanding of inheritance. This is not a straightforward task, since inheritance is a theme that permeates the entirety of Derrida’s oeuvre. Sometimes, as in his writings on Freud and in Specters of Marx, it is a key term in his reading of another’s work. More often, in the majority of his texts, it operates more subtly, appearing in a discussion at first sight far removed. This diversity of contexts makes it difficult to give a single account of this term in Derrida’s writings. Nonetheless, inheritance does display some characteristics that persistently recur. It is these characteristics that I outline in what follows.

7 In Specters of Marx, Derrida writes:

Let us consider first of all, the radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance, the difference without opposition that has to mark it […] An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the injunction to reaffirm by choosing. It is necessary [il faut] means it is necessary to filter, sift, criticize, it is necessary to sort out several different possibilities that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent,
univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause – natural or genetic. (1996, 16, translation modified).

8 At issue here is what happens when we inherit injunctions – normative laws – and Derrida’s strong claim is that these injunctions are always divided and contradictory. Further, the contradictions that thus characterize an inheritance can never be resolved. This is not to say that everything handed down from the past need be divided in this way, only that if a legacy is not radically heterogeneous then we do not inherit it, on Derrida’s understanding of the term. While Derrida does not use the term here, we can identify such contradictory injunctions with what he elsewhere describes as aporias. These are structures involving two laws that contradict one another at the same time as they are necessary to one another. For example, Derrida argues that our received tradition of hospitality is aporetic because it contains two contradictory regimes of law. On the one hand we are called to be hospitable unconditionally, to welcome anyone regardless of who, when, where, and how they come to us. But this, Derrida argues, is impossible, since we must always impose conditions on a welcome, if only to define a home from within which a welcome can take place. We must therefore simultaneously respond to laws of conditional hospitality – laws that impose limits on welcoming. Importantly, these laws themselves refer us back to the unconditional law, for without such a reference they would be laws of economy and exchange, and as such have little to do with being hospitable. Thus both regimes of laws of hospitality depend on one another (each calls for the other) at the same time as they contradict one another (one commands a welcome without limits, the other a welcome with limits). The mutual dependence entails that neither injunction can be denied, and so there is no way of reconciling the contradiction.²
Returning to the above citation from *Specters*, Derrida states that from the radical heterogeneity in the injunctions we inherit (injunctions that I am describing as aporetic), comes another injunction, namely to reaffirm in choosing. “It is necessary means it is necessary to filter, sift, criticize, it is necessary to sort out several different possibilities that inhabit the same injunction.” Legacies are divided, thus presenting us with the task of filtering this division, of sorting through the possibilities they contain, of choosing among them. Is there not, however, a certain tension in this claim? For if a legacy is necessarily contradictory, if its disunity can never be dispelled, what can choosing here possibly mean? We cannot choose one arm of the aporia over the other, nor can we choose not to inherit at all, since both of these options would be ways of escaping the aporia, which is precisely what Derrida claims we cannot do. More needs to be said, therefore, to see what can be made of the phrase “reaffirm by choosing.” To do so, I will examine two passages from other works by Derrida that also relate to the question of reception in inheritance.

The first comes from *For What Tomorrow*..., where Derrida addresses this issue directly and with more care, stating that

the heir must always respond to a sort of double injunction, a contradictory assignation: it is necessary first of all to know and to know how to reaffirm that which comes “before us,” which we therefore receive before even choosing, and before comporting ourselves in this respect as a free subject [*et que donc nous recevons avant même de le choisir et de nous comporter à cet égard en sujet libre*]. Yes, it is necessary [il faut] (and this it is necessary is inscribed directly on and within the received heritage), it is necessary to do everything to appropriate a past even though we know that it remains fundamentally inappropriable, whether it is a question of
philosophical memory or the precedence of a language, a culture, and of filiation in
general. What does it mean to reaffirm? It means not simply accepting this inheritance
but recasting [relancer] it otherwise and keeping it alive. Not choosing it (since what
characterizes a heritage is first of all that one does not choose it; it is what violently
elects us), but choosing to keep it alive. (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004, 3, translation
modified).

11 In this passage Derrida reiterates the claims made in Specters, citing without quotation marks
the earlier passage through a repetition of the reaffirmation, and of the necessity (the “il faut”
its itself repeated and italicized in each passage) of this reaffirmation. As with all iterations, it is
also a transformation, for Derrida offers two new formulations that contribute to our
understanding of inheritance. First, Derrida remarks that we cannot choose to inherit or not
to inherit, since a legacy comes to us prior to any such action that we might take as free
subjects. This echoes another claim made in Specters: “that we are heirs does not mean that
we have or that we receive this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or
that, but that the being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it
or not” (Derrida 1994, 54). We have no choice, therefore, but to inherit.

12 Second, Derrida describes the choice through reaffirmation as a recasting (relancer) of the
inheritance otherwise that would keep it alive. We can understand much by examining the
rich semantic field of the word ‘relancer.’ It carries the sense of keeping the inheritance in
play, of launching it in one’s turn. This attests to the affirmative and active dimension of
inheritance in which there is a role to be played by some kind of subject. This does not entail,
however, that inheritance is left solely up to the inheritor, for the fact that one inherits in
one’s turn signals that it is situated in a historical chain of actions. Others have inherited
before us, and others still will come to inherit from us. This dimension of alterity is further amplified in another meaning of *relancer*, namely as *renvoyer* – a sending away, sending back (to the source), and/or sending on. The presence here of this important Derridean term implies that to inherit is to hand a legacy over to an other, both in acknowledging it as given from a past other, and leaving it to live on for another to come. And *renvoyer*, with its connotations of banishment and a sending into exile, also suggests a certain competitiveness, even aggression. This is reinforced by a third meaning of *relancer*, which is to begin the chase or pursuit of an other anew (another theme present throughout *Specters*), as well as by a fourth, which is to reprimand or admonish the other for some failure on its part.

The call to recast an inheritance otherwise is thus a demand that the inheritor play an active role in receiving a legacy, while at the same time acknowledging the irreducible dimension of alterity involved, an alterity that is distributed across time. Further, the relation of the heir to this alterity is not necessarily peaceful or benign – it may be competitive, even aggressive. In this way, Derrida suggests, an inheritance is kept alive. These remarks from *For What Tomorrow*... thus refine the claims made in the earlier citation from *Specters*. There is also a subtle shift that takes place between the earlier citation and its development in this more recent passage. Not only is inheritance presented as the inheritance of aporias, but Derrida here suggests that *inheritance itself is aporetic*. The injunction to reaffirm that necessarily follows from the disunity of the inherited injunctions is itself divided, precisely because it is a demand that one does “everything to appropriate a past even though we know that it remains fundamentally innappropriable”. That is, the injunction to reaffirm an inheritance is itself a contradictory task, an aporetic negotiation with the impossible demand to appropriate the inappropriable. It is perhaps not surprising that this be the case, since, as the negotiation with
contradictions that can never be resolved, we might expect that inheritance itself is a process in which we are similarly located in a bind that has no easy resolution.

However, presented in these terms, we may then well question the element of competition or aggression suggested in the call to recast an inheritance otherwise. For with what failure could one possibly charge the other when it is a question of negotiating an aporetic structure? Derrida himself states elsewhere that for aporias “success fails” and “failure succeeds” (1989, 35). Under such conditions, by what standard can the other be admonished? Perhaps the only source of criticism lies in the failure to recognize an aporia, the failure to affirm that an aporia is indeed aporetic. And here we touch on the notion of surenchère, upping the ante as it is translated by Samuel Weber (1994), that so well characterizes Derrida’s method of inheriting. In inheriting aporias through textual analyses, the most common charge Derrida levels against those he reads is that they tend to deny aporias, to resolve them or ignore them so as to do injustice to their structure. By contrast, Derrida attempts to maintain the aporetic tension in the concepts he analyses, demonstrating their points of instability and contradiction without taking a further step towards resolution. In this way Derrida does not inherit simply by repeating the claims of others. He inherits by upping the ante on his predecessors, raising the stakes of an aporia so as to heighten its tension to a point far beyond what might have first appeared reasonable. Of course, this is not to say that an aporia, as such, could be inherited once and for all. As Derrida writes in Aporias, “the aporia can never simply be endured as such. The ultimate aporia is the impossibility of the aporia as such” (1993, 78). This is important, for supposing that Derrida, or anyone else, fully succeeded in inheriting an aporia as such, what then would be left of this legacy for those to come? What more would there be to say? The inheritance would stop at this moment, which is to say it would be put to death, not kept alive as Derrida’s injunction desires. Surenchère cannot therefore be taken to its
limit – we cannot up the ante to a maximal degree, to the point where an other can no longer respond.

15 This passage from *For What Tomorrow*... thus helps us better understand what is involved in Derrida’s notion of reaffirming a legacy. The choice in question is a choice to assume an inheritance in one’s turn, an assumption that at the same time can never do away with the dimension of alterity involved. This is to enter into a negotiation not just with the aporias we inherit, but with the aporia that is itself inheritance. Further, thinking through the implications of this injunction to recast an inheritance otherwise has pointed us in the direction of *sureenchére* as a way in which this impossible attempt at appropriation can be carried out.

Derrida advocates not just the repetition of a legacy, but a repetition that does better justice to the aporetic structure in question. At stake, therefore, is a certain kind of *fidelity* to the legacy, which at the same time involves a certain kind of *infidelity* – a fidelity to the structure of aporia that requires an infidelity to the other from whom we inherit, through raising the stakes of the analysis. It is exactly this vocabulary of fidelity and infidelity that appears in the second passage that I wish to cite, in order to more fully articulate Derrida’s call to reaffirm an inheritance through choosing. In the article ‘As if it were Possible, “within such limits”’, Derrida writes:

> One must always break out of faithfulness—and in the name of a legacy that is fatally contradictory in its injunctions. For example, in what concerns the gift, forgiveness, hospitality, etc., in the name of the Abrahamic legacy that requires of me a certain hyperbolic unconditionality, I must be ready to break with all the economic and conditional reappropriations that constantly compromise the said legacy. But this break itself will still have to conduct transactions and define necessary conditions—in
history, law, politics, economics[...]—to make this legacy of hyperbole as effective as possible. (2002a, 336).

16 Here Derrida again speaks of inheriting contradictory injunctions, this time using the language of conditionality and unconditionality. This returns us to the aporia of hospitality. Recall Derrida’s argument that hospitality always involves two injunctions, one unconditional and the other conditional. The unconditional law on its own is never enough, since it requires the conditional laws in order to be effective. But none of these conditional laws is ever sufficient – each represents a compromise on the injunction to be hospitable. We must therefore break with any single conditional law in an effort to be hospitable. There is a necessary infidelity in the fidelity to the call to hospitality.

17 But there are in fact two breaks required here, two moments of infidelity. For we are also called to be unfaithful to the unconditional law, precisely at that moment when it is inscribed into conditional laws in order to be effective. The fidelity here is thus not to the unconditional law over the conditional laws. Rather, it is a fidelity to the aporetic structure of hospitality, which involves an infidelity to each arm of the aporia. At the same time, however, while we must be unfaithful to both laws, there still remains a certain kind of asymmetry between the two arms of the aporia. For in the claim that we must attempt “to make this legacy of hyperbole as effective as possible,” Derrida privileges the unconditional law in one respect. This law carries with it a normative dimension, providing a sense to the negotiation of the aporia, in that we are called here to attempt to make the conditional laws as unconditional as possible, even if complete unconditionality is impossible. The notion of surenchère is thus further refined. Not only are we asked to do better justice to the structure of aporia through refraining from attempts to resolve the contradiction. We are also asked to do better justice.
That is, in the inevitable conditionality that will arise in our negotiation of the aporia, Derrida demands that these conditions better approximate the dimension of unconditionality called for by the other arm of the aporia.\textsuperscript{5}

18 This path through Derrida’s texts in order to develop a notion of inheritance is, I admit, somewhat oblique. This is a consequence of the way inheritance operates in Derrida’s writings – it is never defined once and for all, leaving us to piece together its different characteristics across texts and contexts. Summarizing therefore the claims I have made, we can say that inheritance for Derrida is always the inheritance of aporias – contradictory injunctions that are necessarily so. While he advocates a reception that consists in filtering and choosing, the necessity of the aporias entails that such a reception can never be one in which the contradiction is resolved. Rather, we are called to recast a legacy otherwise, to keep it alive. This is done by being faithful to the structure of the aporia through breaking with its previous configurations, all the while attempting to better approximate the unconditionality for which one arm of the aporia calls. This process is both without end and beyond the sovereign control of the inheritor.

19 Before leaving this discussion of inheritance, there is one last point to examine that will prove important in our understanding of democracy to come. I have emphasized the fact that inheritance is related to others across time, an aspect crucial to Derrida’s understanding of it as lying outside of the mastery of any single subject. Such talk carries with it a certain danger. For we might thereby understand a legacy as something first of all present in the past, which can be made present again when we inherit it here and now. Future generations would, in their turn, inherit in much the same way what is now present to us. Assumed in this view is a conception of time as linear – “the successive linking of presents identical to themselves
and contemporary with themselves” (Derrida 1994, 70) – and inheritance would fit neatly into this order of succession.

20 Linear time is something that philosophers in a certain tradition, at least since Husserl, unanimously oppose as inadequate to the analyses they perform. Derrida conforms to this trend, and so, not surprisingly, this is not at all the notion of temporality we find at work here. On Derrida’s understanding, inheritance involves a very particular intertwining of the past and the future that cannot be understood according to a simple linearity. Consider, for example, the following citation in which Derrida discusses the legacy left to us under the name “Marx”: “‘since Marx’ continues to designate the place of assignation from which we are pledged. But if there is pledge or assignation, injunction or promise, […] the ‘since’ marks a place and time that doubtless precedes us, but so as to be as much in front of us as before us [devant nous qu’avant nous]. Since the future, then, since the past as absolute future” (1994, 17). Rather than being associated exclusively with the past, Derrida here presents inheritance as having just as much to do with the future. The claim is that, certainly, we inherit from the past, but part of that which we inherit remains still to come. We could say that from the past we inherit a dimension of the future. This claim can also be derived from the short yet precise formula that appear later in Specters: “Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task. It remains before [devant] us” (Derrida 1994, 54). Even while we inherit from the past, the task-like nature of inheritance entails that it lies before us as something to be done, performed, and so still to come.6

21 To pursue all of the implications of this rather particular temporal pattern would take us too far into issues concerning temporality. I want simply to point out that the qualifier “always” – inheritance is “always a task” – is here essential. Without this, we could reduce this
temporality to a linearity. This would be to concede that yes, as a present task, a legacy lies as much in the future as in the past, but to argue nonetheless that when this work is complete, at some future moment, the inheritance will then be properly understood as being received wholly from the past. Derrida’s intertwining of past and future would thus disappear when we finish the job.

22 By contrast, Derrida can here retain the “always” precisely because of the aporetic structure of a legacy. To argue that we can be done with the work of inheritance is to say that the aporia inherited can be resolved, and this would be to deny its status as an aporia. So while it remains that an aporia is inherited from the past, the fact that there will always be a remainder, an excess beyond all mastery, entails that this aporia is also always still to come, given over to the future. That which we inherit is always behind us and before us, for it can never be located fully, once and for all, in a present, be it a present past, present, or future. This explains Derrida’s description in this citation from Specters of the future as “absolute” – it is only ever the future, irreducible to any present. All of this is just another way of reaffirming that inheritance itself has an aporetic structure – it remains always to come.

2. Inheriting democracy to come

23 Bearing in mind the structure of Derridean inheritance, let us now turn to its relation to democracy. Obviously, ‘democracy’ is a notion that we have inherited, in our normal use of the word ‘inherit.’ ‘Democracy’ comes to us from the Greeks, passing through so many mutations across history, both ancient and modern. But, through examining some of the claims that Derrida makes in his recent essay ‘The Reason of the Strongest (Are there Rogue States?)’ (2005), we can also see that ‘democracy’ is inherited in Derrida’s sense of the word.
For democracy is theorized in this text such that it displays the main characteristics needed in order to qualify as a legacy on Derrida’s understanding.

First, one of the dominant themes of ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ is an argument for the aporetic nature of democracy. The central aporia that Derrida argues is at work in democracy arises in the relationship between freedom and equality. Democracy must try to do justice to the double injunction of freedom and equality, yet, for Derrida, these two dimensions cannot be reconciled, since “equality tends to introduce measure and calculation (and thus conditionality) whereas freedom is by essence unconditional, indivisible, heterogeneous to calculation and to measure” (Derrida 2005, 48). In highlighting this tension Derrida is not necessarily presenting anything new – he argues that it is present throughout the history of writings on democracy, in some of its oldest and most modern incarnations, from Aristotle to Jean-Luc Nancy. But this is precisely to say that it is an aporia we inherit, passing through traditions without ever being resolved. And for Derrida this it is not the only aporia at work in democracy. He argues that there are many, and their ‘presence’ is what justifies the attachment of the qualifier ‘to come’ to ‘democracy’:

The “to come” not only points to the promise but suggests that democracy will never exist, in the sense of a present existence: not because it will be deferred but because it will always remain aporetic in its structure (force without force, incalculable singularity and calculable equality, commensurability and incommensurability, heteronomy and autonomy, indivisible sovereignty and divisible or shared sovereignty, an empty name, a despairing messianicity or a messianicity in despair, and so on) (Derrida 2005, 86).
The couples mentioned here in parentheses mark some, but not even all, of the aporias that Derrida argues can be found in democracy.

Now of course, it is one thing to claim that something is aporetic, and altogether another to actually show that this is in fact the case. Indeed, if Derrida is correct in holding, as I cited earlier, that there is no aporia as such, that no aporia can ever be made present, then one could never fully and finally demonstrate that democracy is aporetic. At best, one can provide arguments that are more or less persuasive, while always allowing the possibility that somehow, in ways we perhaps cannot yet imagine, the tension could be resolved. I say this to acknowledge the fact that not everyone accepts the irresolvability, or even contradictory nature, of the couples mentioned above – liberty and equality, heteronomy and autonomy, etc. – and that Derrida has not given a knock-down argument for this being the case. Debating the nature of these couples is what in a large part constitutes the history of political philosophy. (In Derrida’s favor, however, is the fact that these debates continue unabated, suggesting that no-one has yet adequately demonstrated that the couples in question are not aporetic.) For our purposes, what is important to note is that Derrida maintains that they are aporetic (and he does not simply claim this to be the case, he does argue for it, in this work and many others). His position is thus one that holds democracy to be aporetic, thus fulfilling one of the conditions of it being a legacy.

Second, while this receives less attention, Derrida also remarks that democracy exhibits the same temporality I have argued is at work in inheritance. From the fact that there is no concept of democracy, no clear idea that would have a stable identity (precisely because of its aporetic nature), inheriting democracy necessarily involves both a relation to the past and a gesture towards the future:
We do not yet know what we have inherited; we are the legatees of this Greek word and of what it assigns to us, enjoins us, bequeaths or leaves us, indeed delegates or leaves over to us […] The legacy and the allegation, the legibility of the legend or inscription […] only put off until later or send off elsewhere. This sending or putting off [renvoi] gestures toward the past of an inheritance only by remaining to come. (2005, 9).8

29 The same temporal pattern is here present – we inherit from the past of democracy a dimension of its future. We do not yet know what democracy means, what it entails, for we have not yet fully received its legacy. Like all Derridean legacies, democracy is located in both the past and the future.

30 We thus inherit democracy to come, on Derrida’s understanding of inheritance. But in addition, ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ contains an even stronger claim. For we also find in this essay the suggestion that in inheriting democracy in this way we are doing something inherently democratic. This can be derived from Derrida’s claim that democracy is unique in one of its characteristics, a certain right to self-critique and perfectibility:

[T]he expression ‘democracy to come’ takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility. Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name. Including the idea of the
constitutional paradigm and the absolute authority of law. It is thus the only paradigm that is universalizable, whence its chance and its fragility. (Derrida 2005, 86-87).  

31 If democracy is the *only* political system to contain *in principle* the right to self-critique, to interrogate its own history – in short, to inherit – then *inheritance is something essential to democracy*. Inheriting is an action *required* by democracy, and by no other political regime. Now as with his ascription of its aporetic nature, we might again want to question this claim. Why is democracy the *only* regime to exhibit this characteristic? Derrida certainly has not shown this to be the case – he does not demonstrate how other political systems do not share in this trait. However, let us accept for now this claim as it stands, so as to explore some of the possibilities it opens up for our thinking of democracy. If it is true, we receive from Derrida the notion that being democratic essentially involves inheriting. We are thus not only here dealing with inheritance in democracy, but with *democracy as inheritance*.

32 Just what this phrase might mean is not immediately clear. It is a rather odd claim to make, and not only because what Derrida means by inheritance – the endless negotiation with aporetic structures – is not what we normally think of when we use this word. But also because inheritance is not the kind of thing we normally view as integral to democracy. Because of its modern origins in the Enlightenment and in revolutionary action, democracy and democratic action is, I would suggest, more readily associated with the future – with a break from the past, with the creation of something new. Derrida, in his continued insistence on the ‘to come,’ himself tends to privilege a certain futurity in democracy. He develops this futurity most often through emphasizing the passive dimension of democracy to come, of a waiting without anticipation, horizon or projection. This he highlights this because he wants to affirm the incalculability in democracy, and so must argue against any kind of decision
taken in advance that would reduce democracy to a calculation, program or rule. But we have seen that Derrida’s writings also contain the idea that to be democratic we must turn equally towards the past, inherit from this past, and that this turn is intimately connected with the temporality of the ‘to come.’ Seeing this essential link between democracy and inheritance, and the role that the past of democracy thereby plays, thus reminds us that the passive dimension in democracy to come does not entail doing nothing at all. There is a lot to do, for we are called to examine democracy’s history, its historicity, to negotiate this history and all that it produces. In doing this we will not fall into the trap of denying our responsibility and following a calculation or a rule, precisely because the history of democracy is a history of aporias, which can never be resolved once and for all. Clearly defined rules for action, for better or worse, are not there to be found.

Thinking democracy as inheritance thus challenges us to alter our understanding of democracy, to imagine it in ways that involve at least an equal measure of the past that is inherited. But what might such a conception look like? How are we to be democratic, if this means to inherit? One answer that readily presents itself in this context is to deconstruct. For in Derrida’s work inheritance is not just limited to the notion of democracy, or indeed to being just one way among others of relating to philosophical notions. Derrida inherits all the time, with every term he analyzes in the work of others. For if all of these terms – justice, hospitality, the gift, forgiveness, *pharmakon*, supplement, hymen, etc. – are in the end aporetic, and if they are always uncovered in the texts of others, then inheritance becomes a name – another name, there are by now so many – for Derrida’s practice of philosophy, deconstruction. Indeed Derrida says so himself, in another context, writing that “[t]his is one of the possible definitions of deconstruction—precisely as legacy” (2002a, 352).

Deconstruction is a practice by which we relate to what is given to us from the past,
remaining always to come. With these two propositions in place – “democracy as inheritance” and “inheritance as deconstruction” – we can complete the chain and begin to think of democracy as deconstruction. We thus find some justification for the audacious claim made in *Politics of Friendship*, itself cited in ‘The Reason of the Strongest,’ that there is “no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction” (Derrida 1997, 105).¹²

Now simply to claim that to inherit in democracy means to deconstruct is certainly not enough of an explanation. It is a very general claim, and carries the risk of conflating two practices that one might well consider to be rather different. The same might be said for the formula ‘democracy as inheritance.’ Does this not level democratic practice down, in all its diversity, complexity, and confusion? However, in affirming Derrida’s relating of democracy to deconstruction, I do not want to identify the two, but raise the question (again, for it is a question Derrida himself raises) of what deconstruction can bring to our understanding of democracy.¹³ Similarly, in speaking of democracy as inheritance I have no intention of reducing democracy to just this one way of relating to the past. Rather, I want only to bring this dimension of the past into the field of play along with all those other characteristics we more readily associate with democracy, and to ask how this might alter what we think of as democratic practice.

Relating democracy as inheritance to deconstruction is therefore in need of further explanation. By way of conclusion, I wish to briefly flag two possible paths that such an explanation might follow, two possible implications of understanding democracy as a practice of inheritance that fill out the simple response “deconstruct.” Recall from my earlier discussion that Derrida’s understanding and practice of inheritance revolves around a certain
idea of surenchère, or upping the ante. Inheriting involves not just a receiving of aporias from the past, but a reception that heightens the tension of these aporias all the while aiming to opening them up to greater degrees of unconditionality. Following this model, inheritance in democracy would entail returning to the aporias that inhabit our understanding of democracy, yet recasting them in a way that raises their level of openness.

Such a strategy constitutes one of the central concerns of Politics of Friendship (Derrida 1997). There Derrida attempts to demonstrate that one of the aporias of democracy lies in the persistence of a model of citizenship that relies both on a familial model of the nation rooted in soil and blood, and on a universality that aims towards an ever-expanding and more inclusive understanding of the polity. Derrida’s inheritance of this aporia is, in line with the strategy of upping the ante, to raise the stakes of the call to universalization, demanding a citizenship that breaks all ties with familial models to the point where he calls into question even thinkers such as Blanchot and Nancy who reduce conditions of communal belonging to almost zero. The point of this inheritance is not to instantiate such an unconditional citizenship – as aporetic, Derrida thinks that this is impossible – but it does serve, in a powerful way, to highlight certain sexist and heterosexist assumptions that are still at work in general understandings of what it is to belong to a democracy.

A second path that we might pursue in thinking about inheritance as a democratic action is to reflect on the status and functioning of historical archives. This, too, has been a recurring theme in Derrida’s writings. In addition to an extended examination of the concept of the archive in the context of psychoanalysis, Derrida has consistently called for political action and legislation that renders historical archives freely available in the public sphere. For example, speaking in 1993 of the practical possibility of a national audio-visual archive in
France, Derrida states that “the law should grant access to it, as to all patrimony, as to all national property. And it should extend this access to every citizen who wants to consult this archive” (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, 35). In line with his inheritance of democratic citizenship, Derrida immediately questions the assumed nationalism of this statement (“At least to every citizen, for this enormous question of right cannot necessarily be limited to the citizen and to the right or law of a nation-state as such”), suggesting that this opening of the archive tend towards the unlimited. In a similar vein, Derrida recently co-signed a document calling on the French government to grant a digital cable license to the television channel *Histoire*, so as to ensure its future survival. “*Histoire* is a channel that can offer an essential contribution to the collective effort of democratic lucidity, a channel that can occupy a primary place in the life of our nation and in the necessary debate of ideas” (Adler et al. 2004). This points to the fact that “availability in the public sphere” needs to go beyond simple accessibility. It requires active interventions, on the part of governments and citizens (and beyond), to put historical debates on the public agenda and in the public eye. And in arguing that such an intervention is “an essential contribution to the collective effort of democratic lucidity,” this statement attests to the fact that for an understanding of democracy as inheritance, access for all to the traditions that constitute a democratic community is a fundamental condition of being democratic. Again, Derrida does not pretend that the content of these demands are completely achievable, that all archives can be made available to every citizen, to every non-citizen, or that democratic lucidity could be ever fully or finally attained. But in upping the ante of the present debate towards more openness and more lucidity, Derrida and his colleagues seek to take another step on the path of democracy’s perfectibility.
These two suggestions for how to go about inheriting in democracy, how to inherit democratically, tell us a little more about what deconstruction is and how it intersects with democratic concerns. In particular, they point to how one might better realize the democratic injunction to increased inclusiveness – it is precisely through inheriting, in a distinctly deconstructive way, that one might increase the level of universalization to which a certain tradition of democracy is committed. Of course, both of these suggestions come from within Derrida’s oeuvre. Pursuing further these brief sketches would thus constitute one kind of inheritance, on our part, of his writings. But it would be wrong to think that such a faithful reproduction of Derrida’s writings is the only way to inherit from them, or the only way to understand democracy as inheritance. Fidelity, after all, involves a measure of infidelity. And infidelity is always possible, for it is not the case that Derrida’s writings constitute a complete and integral whole that must be affirmed in all its aspects. Perhaps there are parts of it that would best be left behind. For example, we might find that Derrida’s characterizations of the tensions and contradictions in democracy as aporetic in the end, or at least some of the time, lead to a paralysis, to a tragic acceptance of the status quo. Or that the strategy of surenchère – which is a strategy, a choice to inherit in one particular way – is not always the best way to transform a received aspect of democracy. Or that what Derrida privileges in democracy is not the most important aspect to emphasize in a certain situation or debate, and that we must turn to other democratic traits that receive less attention in his writings.

All of this is to say that the inheritance of Derrida comes to us by no will-and-testament. Simply repeating what he has said does not tell us what to do, nor do his writings contain within them the key to their own interpretation or instructions for their own development. The formula “democracy as inheritance” is, I would maintain, a treasure, and its tremendous wealth lies not in the prescriptions it gives us on how to be democratic, but in precisely the
lack of prescription that Derrida argues must be a part of every legacy. It is always in a lack of prescription that chance lies, and so there lies here a chance for democracy – a future.

Democracy has no future without inheritance and possibility of repeating.

References:


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**Endnotes:**

1 There are some very good accounts of inheritance in Derrida to which I am indebted. Inheritance is the central focus of Michael Naas’s *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the legacies of deconstruction* (2003). While not contradicting anything in this work, in what follows I aim to describe inheritance at a more general level as it operates across Derrida’s writings than does Naas (*Taking on the Tradition* is a series of close readings that tend to respect textual borders much more than I will). Inheritance also makes regular appearances in Geoffrey Bennington’s collection *Interrupting Derrida* (2000) (in the essays ‘Jacques Derrida,’ ‘Ethics and Politics,’ ‘Deconstruction and Ethics,’ ‘Circanalysis (the thing itself),’ ‘Is it Time?’, ‘Genuine Gasché (perhaps)’ and ‘An Idea of Syntax.’) As with Naas, I can only agree with almost everything Bennington says on this topic. I do find, however, that Bennington does not delve too deeply into the issue of just precisely what “inheritance” means for Derrida. When he does address this question, his answer tends to focus on the move Derrida makes in his early work, for example in ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’ and in ‘Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,’ where the issue is explicitly the inheritance of metaphysics. In examining inheritance in Derrida’s more recent work, the formulation and emphasis produced by my account is, while certainly compatible with the claims made in the earlier work, quite different. For another exploration of inheritance in Derrida’s writings, of rather a different style, see Paco Vidarte’s *Derritages: Une thèse en déconstruction* (2001).

2 For the most precise account of the aporia of hospitality found in Derrida’s writings, see *Of Hospitality* (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). In identifying the contradictory injunctions that we inherit with aporias I am treading on slightly tricky ground. This kind of contradictory structure appears throughout Derrida’s writings, and goes by various names (in addition to ‘contradictory injunction’ and ‘aporia,’ Derrida also uses ‘double bind,’ ‘antinomy’ and, most recently, ‘process of auto-immunity’). As each of these names operates in
particular contexts and has its own particular connotations, it is a mistake to claim that they are saying or referring to exactly the same thing. Indeed, the language of reference is not appropriate here, for, as we shall see, there is no ‘thing’ here to which we can refer. In light of this, is the identification I make legitimate? While I cannot fully justify this move, I can give two reasons for doing so. First, it is a consequence of the strategy I have chosen to take. I am intentionally generalizing from remarks on inheritance across Derrida’s writings, so as to uncover something like general theory at work there. I am willing to concede that in the end there is no such general theory, given the contextual particularities of Derrida’s writings. Nevertheless, certain insights can be gained by making this generalizing move that we would not gain otherwise. Second, while it is difficult to transfer these names (aporia, double bind, etc.) across contexts, is not impossible to do so. Derrida himself does it all the time. He will often speak of the aporetic structure of an antinomy, the antinomic nature of auto-immunity, etc. Among such interchanges of vocabulary, the name ‘aporia’ has come to gain some weight over the last fifteen years of Derrida’s publications (and in secondary literature devoted to his work) occupying, I would suggest, a position more central than any of the others. So I am following Derrida’s own practice in privileging this name. It does remain however that my use of ‘aporia’ remains to some extent arbitrary, and has the danger of erasing differences across Derrida’s texts.

3 I note in passing that this phenomenon, so frequent in Derrida’s writings, of quietly citing other works from his oeuvre suggests that inheritance is not only something that takes place between different authors or across “generations”. It also takes place within the work of a “single” author – one can inherit from oneself. In addition to nuancing Derrida’s general project, mentioned in this citation, of destabilizing the notions of “filiation” and “generation” (itself a central aspect of his discussions on democracy to come – see, for example, Politics of Friendship (Derrida 1997, 102-105)), following through the implications of this practice would also place in a different light the Derridean notion of iterability. In ‘Signature, Event, Context’ Derrida writes: “by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of ‘communicating’, precisely” (1988, 9). What might we learn by considering this “detachment” as an act of inheritance?

4 A version of this paper in English appears in Deconstruction is/in America (Haverkamp 1995), but some of Weber’s remarks on the notion of surenchère have not been retained in the later, shorter version.

5 The kind of justice at stake here is that which Derrida develops elsewhere, most notably in ‘Force of Law’ (2002b). Justice is theorized there precisely as this kind of attempt to approximate an unconditionality, “in
the experience of an inadequation or an incalculable disproportion” (p.249). Further, in this text Derrida also presents the call to justice as the inheritance of an injunction: “As to the legacy we have received under the name of justice, and in more than one language, the task of a historical and interpretative memory is at the heart of deconstruction. This is not only a philologico-etymological task or the historian’s task but the responsibility in the face of a heritage that is at the same time the heritage of an imperative or of a sheaf of injunctions. Deconstruction is already pledged, engaged [gagée, engagée] by this demand for infinite justice” (p.248). There is therefore much more to be said regarding the relation between inheritance and justice in Derrida’s work, which I cannot go into here. I will limit myself to two brief remarks. First, we should of course be careful when discussing normativity in Derrida’s work, given his strong opposition to reducing injunctions to rule following. But speaking of a normative dimension to inheritance does not in this case reduce the injunction to inherit to a rule or calculation. For unconditional hospitality is, for Derrida, precisely incalculable, and is therefore not something that can be understood according to a rule that one would follow. Second, we should not assume that the idea of justice at work here will necessarily produce the good. Derrida is clear throughout his work that with this kind of justice, which is based on an openness to the other (i.e., a hospitality), there is always the possibility that the worst will arrive.

6 In the interview “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicide,” speaking of the trauma that arose in the wake of September 11, Derrida states “We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come (à venir)…. There is traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come—though worse. Traumatism is produced by the future, by the to come, by the threat of the worst to come, rather than by an aggression that is ‘over and done with’” (2003, 97). The similarity between the temporal pattern invoked here with that of inheritance suggests a relation between these two notions, which can be linked to the necessity, discussed above, of having to inherit. If we inherit before we choose to do so, this experience may well always involve a degree of trauma.

7 This is to say that commentators sympathetic to Derrida’s writings are at times a little to quick to accept the aporias Derrida speaks of as aporetic, a charge from which I do not exclude myself. On some occasions, as with hospitality, Derrida argues at length (and in my opinion very persuasively) to make his case. At other times, such as in this quotation involving the couples implicated in democracy, the supporting evidence is rather thin. How we are to treat this depends on how we understand the notion of aporia in the first place. I prefer to see it not as a non-path, but as a path that leads to nowhere, that takes us to a “place” in which we do
not know where we are. It may be that there is a way of orienting ourselves in this confusion, if we just look a little harder. This would allow us to accept Derrida’s ascriptions of aporia (if we share his disorientation – if not, all the better), while always leaving open the possibility that this status could change. In saying this I am contradicting some of Derrida’s statements about aporias, such as the one above where he claims that democracy “will always remain aporetic in structure,” but at the same time confirming others that affirm the essential non-knowledge and unpresentability of aporias. To my mind these latter statements necessarily entail that one can never rule out the possibility that what we experience as an aporia will perhaps one day be experienced otherwise. I cannot imagine Derrida being able to deny this last claim. This view might also help to ward off a danger I feel is always present in Derrida’s discussions of aporias, namely that we just accept the contradiction in some kind of tragic resignation and cease to attempt to actively negotiate it. While I do not think Derrida himself ever gives into this temptation, it is certainly one possible response.

Similarly, Derrida writes that democracy “is (without being) equal and proper to itself only insofar as it is inadequate and improper, at the same time behind and ahead of itself” (2005, 38).

For similar statements, see ‘Non pas l’utopie, l’im-possible’ (Derrida 2001, 360), and For What Tomorrow… (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004, 130).

But would it matter if another regime also shared this characteristic? Perhaps only if this other regime turned out to be totalitarianism, which Derrida insists does not involve this kind of openness and to which he consistently opposes democracy to come. Otherwise, it may simply be that ‘democracy’ turns out not to be the best name for what Derrida is here describing, and that another word will prove to be a better political choice.

For a discussion of the appropriateness of the name of democracy, see ‘Politics and Friendship’ (Derrida 2003c, 181-182).

Stressing the futural dimension of the ‘to come’ is, I would suggest, the dominant trend in the secondary literature on this aspect of Derrida’s writings. For a prime example, see John Caputo’s The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida (1997). While Caputo does discuss Derrida’s debt to the tradition, in particular the tradition of negative theology, the overall thrust of the book is to emphasize the ‘messianic’ dimension of Derrida’s thought, which is found in the call of “come” that sounds towards an unknown future. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Bennington, in his essay ‘Ethics and Politics’ (in Interrupting Derrida (2000)), stresses the theme of inheritance as central to Derrida’s relationship to politics, and in particular links it to democracy to come. In ‘Derrida’s democracy to come’ (2002), Matthias Fritsch argues for precisely the claim I
am making that inheritance is intrinsic to democracy through an examination of an earlier Derridean formulation of democracy’s perfectibility (although his approach and choice of terms is slightly different to mine).

12 For alternative (but closely related) discussions of this phrase, see *Interrupting Derrida* (Bennington 2000, 31-33) and ‘Derrida’s democracy to come’ (Fritsch 2002, 578).

13 Another question that this relation raises concerns equally what democracy can bring to our understanding of deconstruction. What effect has the introduction of democracy into Derrida’s (and others’) practice of deconstruction? How has it altered not just the concerns, but the very structure of deconstructive reading? Pursuing such questions would be to examine not so much the implications of deconstruction for politics, but the implications of politics for deconstruction.

14 On this last point see ‘Derrida’s democracy to come’: “It seems undeniable that Derrida’s reformulation of democracy does not affirm just any form of political organization, and not even just any strains and interpretations of democratic heritage. For example, Derrida’s democracy to come appears much less defined by popular sovereignty, equality, and majority rule – although Derrida recognizes their importance – than by free speech, openness to criticism and otherness, and hospitality to singularity” (Fritsch 2002, 581-582).