

## Democraziness: Reading Claude Lefort in Baghdad

Ignaas Devisch<sup>1\*</sup> and Christopher Parker<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ghent University, University College Artevelde, Lange Boomgaardstraat 89000 Ghent, Belgium

<sup>2</sup>Ghent University, Belgium

### Abstract

Given the ongoing political turbulence worldwide, it is more than necessary for us to reconsider the question of democracy. This question has been posed by French philosopher Claude Lefort for many years, but it has assumed a renewed urgency. Although in Iraq the first danger of democracy, totalitarian dictatorship, was tackled, the liberators clearly had not thought about the other risk when dealing with democracy: the complete implosion of society into a pure formless collection of atomic individuals. Since democracy is a particular political regime, Lefort says, it comes down to understand the formal differences between totalitarianism and democracy. In democracy the place of power is symbolically empty; this place of power can be refigured into a totalitarian power, but can also be actually empty, when a regime falls apart into factions and fractions, all fighting for their own interests and idea(l)s. It is therefore not sufficient to bring democracy by dethroning the king. Although the source of legitimacy in a democratic regime is the people, the people remains indeterminate. This indeterminacy and thus also vulnerability is a core principle of democracy in Lefort's theory. Ultimately, the craziness of democracy lies in its vulnerability.

**Keywords:** Democracy; Political regime; Vulnerability; French philosopher

### Introduction

One would be hard-pressed to find a contemporary political project that does not claim the mantle of democracy. From the operations room of George W. Bush's pentagon a decade ago, to the streets of Cairo, Athens and Kiev today, democracy provides the banner for a motley variety of efforts to change the world. For some, democracy is an end in itself, a set of technical procedures and rituals for the stable reproduction of order. For others, it provides means to an end (social justice, for example). And, for others still, democracy provides a veil of legitimacy facilitating the advance of projects, practices and rationalities of government have little or nothing to do with democracy as such (the rule of markets, for example; or the justification of military/colonial occupation).

This remarkable quality—the sense in which democracy provides a seemingly “empty place” into which otherwise contradictory political projects might be projected and spun into the constitutive agencies and meanings of government—provides a crucial source of its resilience and (almost) universal appeal. Democracy refers to a power or regime that resists objectification or determinacy. At the same time, however, this indeterminacy also points to a constitutive paradox: how does one go about constituting a meaningful order which, by its own definition and logic, is premised on the constant displacement of order and meaning? This points not only to the vulnerability of democracy, but also to borrow the term applied by French political philosopher Claude Lefort—its “craziness.” Can such a crazy, indeterminate phenomena be engineered? Is a techno-politics of democratization possible?

In the following remarks, we reflect on this paradox, developing a tentative critique of the techno-politics of contemporary democracy promotion. We do so by positioning a critical reading of Lefort against the backdrop of efforts at forced democratization in Iraq. Insofar as democratization was indeed a primary objective of the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation, Iraq provided a testing ground for the theories and technologies of late-20<sup>th</sup> century liberal democracy. These theories, articulated in the “transitology” literature that came to dominate the field of Comparative Politics after the fall of the Iron Curtain, closely informed the assumptions and practice of the policy makers, consultants and academic experts who sought to engineer

democratic institutions in Iraq after 2003 (the locus classicus of this vast literature can be found in works including [1-4]). The transitology literature emphasizes formal procedures, civic virtues (e.g., leadership, public reason, etc) and the normative/strategic effects of institutions (i.e., their role in orienting and structuring political choices). The focus is on positive structures, and the theoretical exercise is reduced to descriptive classification and institutional modeling. Transitology represents democracy as something that might feasibly be engineered. By contrast, Lefort takes democracy's indeterminacy—the “empty place of power” at its core—as the starting point for a hermeneutic inquiry into the phenomenon of democracy. In doing so, he shows how democracy's contradictions are sources of its strengths as well as its vulnerabilities and—indeed—of the dangers that lurk within it. Lefort's analysis suggests the craziness of the project to engineer democracy, if only because—in the final analysis—democracy is not a thing at all.

We begin by sketching the contours of Lefort's thinking on democracy. We then move to a discussion of the Iraqi case itself, suggesting that the failure of the USA-UK project of forced democratization in Iraq had at least as much to do with failures of theoretical imagination as with failures of decision-making and implementation in the field. In conclusion, we suggest what the exercise of applying Lefort to the Iraq case tells us about the limitations of mainstream (liberal) theories of democratic change, and also how attention to what happened in Iraq might help us think with Lefort to move beyond the limitations of Lefort's approach to democracy.

**\*Corresponding authors:** Ignaas Devisch, Ghent University, University College Artevelde, Lange Boomgaardstraat 89000 Ghent, Belgium, Tel: 00-32-498574801; E mail: [Ignaas.Devisch@UGent.be](mailto:Ignaas.Devisch@UGent.be)

Christopher Parker, Ghent University, Belgium, Tel: +32 9 264.55.69; Fax: +32 9 264.69.97; E mail: [Christopher.parker@ugent.be](mailto:Christopher.parker@ugent.be)

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## The Place of Power

What makes democracy a 'crazy' thing? What is so particular about its 'mise en forme', its shaping, that makes democracy a crazy scene? What is it about its structure that can sometimes make democracy its own worst enemy? If we want to understand what democracy is all about, Lefort argues, these are the questions to start with. Since democracy is a particular political regime, Lefort says, it all comes down to understanding democracy's formal characteristics, distinct from totalitarianism or absolute monarchy. In considering the 'craziness' of democracy, Lefort is undeniably one of the main references [5-8]. Long before the collapse of the Berlin wall and the uprising of an all too easy anti-Marxism [9] he subtly articulated the formal differences between totalitarianism and democracy, starting from the distinct way they deal with the 'place of power'. In a democracy, Lefort says, the place of power becomes literally 'infigurable'. In democracy, the place of power is 'empty' [10]. To Lefort, the infigurable character of democracy implies there is no blueprint or essence or 'figure' of that regime. In contrast with totalitarianism, a democracy society has no essence. That's one of the reasons why Lefort emphasizes 'formal characteristics' and not of essential features.

This 'empty place of power' or 'void' is one of the central theses in Lefort's work: the idea that political regimes can be distinguished from one another by the way in which the place of power is (re-)presented within them. The essence of power, Lefort writes, is 'to present and make visible a model of social organisation' [11]. In democracy – as a political regime distinct from absolute monarchy and totalitarianism – the place of power is 'symbolically empty'.

Here, Lefort draws upon Kantorowitz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), one of his main references in the outline of his typology of absolute monarchy, democracy and totalitarianism. The beheading of the king and the disappearance of the absolute monarchy during the French revolution, Kantorowitz argued [12] left empty the place of power. Lefort, inspired by Kantorowitz, argued that the 'birth of democracy' gave rise to an order in which no one is consubstantial with power, as the king used to be. In a democracy, no single person owns power or is power; we can only represent power and are therefore never really present in it. This is why Lefort writes that, in democracy, 'the place of power, as such, is symbolically empty' [11]. It is not really empty as long as there are people governing, but no single governor coincides with what he represents; he is only temporarily mandated to represent the people [7]. Lefort elaborates:

"The legitimacy of power is based on the people; but the image of popular sovereignty is linked to the image of an empty place, impossible to occupy, such that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it. Democracy combines these two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other, it is the power of nobody. And democracy thrives on this contradiction. Whenever the latter risks being resolved or is resolved, democracy is either close to destruction or is already destroyed [11]."

In other words, every democracy is inherently characterised by a divergence at the heart of its regime. The empty place of power installs an exteriority at the heart of the modern political order that prevents it from foreclosing itself. In contrast with absolute monarchy, democracy is internally fragmented. Several spheres—politics, right, media, knowledge—interfere with each other, but there is no overall power who keeps them all in awe. Since no sphere is dominated all the others, all of them together 'are' democracy, and therefore democracy is the ongoing balance of power struggles between the spheres. Democracy,

Lefort says, is the institutionalization of conflict.

The specific 'form' of democracy is that it never obtains an accomplished and fulfilled form. In a way, the only 'form' of democracy is its formlessness, a form without form. With this formlessness, we seem to have arrived at the craziest aspect of democracy: its indeterminacy, its indefinite, provisional character. Although the source of legitimacy in a democratic regime is the people, 'the people' remains indeterminate. This indeterminacy and thus also vulnerability is a core principle of democracy in Lefort's theory. Ultimately, the craziness of democracy lies in its vulnerability. Because its order is never definite, it can always be perverted from within. We will come back to this.

## Different Spheres

A second key feature of democracy is the separation of the principle of power, of law and of knowledge, Lefort says. As already stated, right (law) and knowledge turn into spheres that are not entirely under political control. In a democracy, there is no longer a totality that transcends its parts. A democratic society is characterised by different spheres and none of them dominates all other spheres. This internal dissension within a democratic regime allows people to be legitimately opposed to a regime without being expelled or excluded from it. Think about the media, which inscribes the possibility of criticising the current political regime at the heart of society.

This opportunity for criticism and disagreement is constitutive of democracy. It makes democracy a questionable regime in every sense of the word. Bernard Flynn agrees. Quoting Lefort, he asserts that '[...] the identity of modern society, and of modern humanity as well, is not one of loss but rather one that is continually called into question. Who we are, and who speaks in our name, is given in modernity not as a fact but as a question' [6]. With democracy, the political order has become a questionable and thus indefinite matter. Who we are, and the conditions are of our being together, turn out to be the political questions par excellence in contemporary society.

Here, we read one of the most remarkable starting points of Lefort's reflection on political modernity: the collapse of the traditional political markers and foundations does not put us into an unbearable situation. On the contrary, the questionability of the political framework is a constitutive condition of our being together. We are never 'as one democracy' but come together as the result of an ongoing struggle of ideas and opinions about what democracy is all about. Democracy, as Lefort says, institutionalizes conflict at the heart of its functioning. It is because we can quarrel with each other at an institutional level—a parliament, a public debate, etc.—that there is democracy.

## The Dangers of Democracy

If the intertwining of this indeterminacy and the empty place of power is of crucial importance within democracy, these features are completely absent in the regime that Lefort calls 'totalitarianism' [11,13,14]. Since totalitarianism is a response to the failure of democracy, the 'refiguration' of power is always a latent danger within democracy. If the empty place of power is 'filled' again, the danger of totalitarianism is already around the corner:

"But if the image of the people is actualized, if a party claims to identify with it and to appropriate power under the cover of this identification, then it is the very principle of the distinction between the state and society, the principle of the difference between the norms that govern the various types of relations between individuals, ways of life, beliefs and opinions, which is denied; and, at a deeper level, it is the very principle of a distinction between what belongs to the order

of power, to the order of law and to the order of knowledge which is negated. The economic, legal and cultural dimensions are, as it were, interwoven into the political. This phenomenon is characteristic of totalitarianism' [11].

This is a complex and sometimes misinterpreted point in Lefort's analysis, as Bernard Flynn also stated [6]. Lefort is not defending democracy as such, nor is he naïve about democracy as if it would protect us from all evil. Rather, he makes a plea for understanding what democracy is all about, and for an awareness of the contradictions that might provoke a slide towards totalitarianism. We should be aware of this intrinsic potentiality and not make the mistake—to paraphrase Alain Badiou—of moralizing about democracy instead of thinking about it. This is what he calls 'le consensus anti-totalitaire et démocratique' [15]. With this, he articulates a profound concern regarding the lack of genuine thinking about democracy today. Badiou suggests that it is almost forbidden to question democracy today: those who dare to do so run the risk of being called totalitarian. Instead of agreeing with this moral common sense, Badiou wants to think about democracy.

This, of course, is also Lefort's concern. Today for instance, we may be satisfied with the idea of resisting the possible desire to 'refigurate' politics, to guarantee the brightening prevalence of democracy. If the dictators are sent home, then democracy is waiting in all its glory. This was clearly a characteristic of the assumptions that informed the project of forced democratization in Iraq: not only the neo-conservatives close to the White house, but also many liberals—together with scholars influenced by more than a decade of research that seemed to confirm the post-Cold War spirit of democratic and free-market triumphalism—bought into the idea of Iraq as a "democracy in waiting." All that had to be done, it seemed, was to destroy the barriers that held back the global flow of transition and newness, and root out the totalitarian core of the regime, and democracy would flourish. Larry Diamond made the point poetically: via the application of principles divined from the systematic study of democratic transitions elsewhere, he argued, it would be possible to demonstrate that "the social soil of [Iraq]...had not been turned irretrievably into desert. It could be irrigated and brought back" [2]. Diamond is an influential scholar of democratic transition who served as the Coalition Provisional Authority's 'Senior Advisor on Governance' from 12/03 to 08/04.

Lefort explicitly warns us against such lazy thinking. On the other hand, and this is also a crucial point in Lefort's thinking, if democracy has become nothing more than mere disagreement or dissent, then it tends to collapse from within:

'If the place of power appears, no longer as symbolically, but as really empty, then those who exercise it are perceived as mere ordinary individuals, as forming a faction at the service of private interests and, by the same token, legitimacy collapses throughout society. The privatization of groups, of individuals and of each sector of activity increases: each strives to make its individual or corporatist interest prevail. Carried to an extreme, there is no longer a civil society' [11].

Jean-Luc Nancy, who, in the early 1980s, invited Lefort to his 'Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique' (Centre for philosophical research on politics), also seems to be aware of this. In *The Sense of the World*, Nancy writes that "This question forms the contour, if not of the aporia, at least of the paradox of political sense today: without figuration or configuration, is there still any sense? But as soon as it takes on a figure, is it not 'totalitarian' truth?" [16] Nancy not only summarizes the aporia of contemporary politics, he also puts his finger on it when he writes: "The totalitarian subject turns out to

be suicidal, but democracy without identification also turns out to be without any demos or krates of its own' [16]. According to Nancy, a society consisting of atomic entities, a formless society, is as hopeless as the suffocating grip of the communal collective on the individual.

## Iraq

While weapons of mass destruction provided a pretext for the March 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, policymakers in Washington and London quickly signaled that democratic transition, culminating in freely contested national elections, would provide the eventual endgame of Iraq's forced revolution. This was in keeping with the spirit of the Bush Administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) document of 2002, which advocated "coercive democratization as a solution to Middle East terrorism" [17]. Leading neo-conservatives in the Bush Administration envisioned a more substantial, assertive and permanent US presence in the Gulf region. More specifically, they advocated a role for the US military in securing and expanding "zones of democratic peace" [18]. Democratization—together with the advance of free markets and other perceived cornerstones of liberty and social modernity—would not only provide additional means for achieving these objectives, but also serve as an ideological justification for the project of consolidating US hegemony into the 21st century. The NSS even went so far as to assert that in the present world, "there is only one model for success: freedom, democracy and free enterprise. ... These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society [19].

Yet, while the invasion of Iraq was clearly a neo-conservative policy coup—and while the project was contested on grounds related to international law (e.g., the admissibility of regime change, the legality of a pre-emptive strike, the consequences for Iraqi civilians, etc.), as well as by some conservative isolationists—it is remarkable few observers questioned the assumptions that underpinned the actual project of democratization itself. Indeed, insofar as the proposed project of democratizing Iraq faced questioning, doubt tended to center on the presumed traits of Arab-Islamic society rather than on assumptions and practices identified by, and derived from, the comparative literature on democratic transitions. These assumptions had so dominated the field over the previous fifteen years that otherwise critical scholars had few tools with which to counter the image of the Iraqi regime as an object that might be transformed by war and techno-political intervention.

This problem raises questions about representation, and—more specifically—about relationships between the representation of power and the exercise of that power to shape and make the world. It also suggests the role of social scientists in the making of the objects that the claim only to study. How did Iraq come to be imagined and presented as an object of techno-political intervention? And how did war come to be accepted as a legitimate means through which to pursue such a project? What led so many people to believe that war might be an effective and legitimate vehicle for democratization? Part of the answer to these questions might be found by investigating the ways in which scholars produced images of the Iraqi regime (and, indeed, the figure of the regime more generally), and in the ways in which knowledge about democracy was produced and represented by scholars, think-tanks and policy makers. A full ethnographic account with corresponding genealogy of knowledge production in these areas is beyond the scope of this brief paper. But Lefort's insights provide us with a possible shortcut. In the following paragraphs, we look briefly at the issue of representation. We focus on a particularly crucial episode between 2004 and 2006. This was a time when occupation authorities were



pushing ahead with elections, and when Iraq was sliding precipitously toward all-out civil war.

In order for the project of forced democratization to present itself as plausible and effective, power and politics in Iraq first had to be represented as an object—a thing or substance that could be studied, opened up (by war if necessary) and made amenable to technical intervention. In short, power and politics in Iraq had to be represented through the figure of the regime.

The objectivity of political regimes is by and large taken for granted in contemporary political thought and practice. We tend to forget that its appearance reflects a particular style, or tradition, of making claims upon, and producing knowledge about the political world. The regime first emerged as a claim about the (legitimate) place of power during the course of the French Revolution, and was passed along through a various political traditions before becoming reified in comparative politics literature over the last thirty-plus years of the twentieth century. During the course of more than two centuries, it has provided a potent “practical illusion” of political life, orienting the political imaginations of leftists and liberals alike, and serving as a framework around which knowledge of the political world might be constructed and deployed. Underlying this figure, however, is a certain conflation of the conventions for representing power with actual sources, articulations and distributions of power [20,21]. We return to this point below.

In Iraq, power was represented in the form of the totalitarian regime. If the literature presented the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab world as a phenomenon that was “out of step with history,” by 2000, Iraq was considered a special case even by Middle Eastern Standards. Scholars, largely drawing on accounts from Iraqi exiles, produced an image of a political order built upon fear and organization [22], for example, argue that Saddam molded the Iraqi Ba’ath party along Stalinist lines. “By the end of the 1970s,” they suggest, “the state apparatus controlled Iraq, the Ba’ath party controlled the state apparatus, and Saddam Hussein controlled the Ba’ath party” [22]. This totalitarian image was reinforced by works like Kanan Makiya’s hugely influential book *Republic of Fear* [23]. Makiya detailed the totalitarian aesthetic that pervaded Iraq’s public life, linking it to the personality cult around Saddam and the willingness of the state to deploy violence in service of political order. These tropes ran through both the popular and academic work published on Iraq through the 1990s. Not surprisingly, in 2003 Pentagon officials presented the first task of democratization in Iraq as destroying the regime’s “centers of gravity” (i.e., its places of power). Officials frequently presented the policy in a single word: “decapitation.”

To be sure, Iraqi political life during the period before 2003 was characterized by violence (although nothing in comparison to what came after). And few would deny the megalomania of Saddam. However, the actual articulation of political and economic power in Iraq was very different from that contained in the trope (or image) of the totalitarian regime. Indeed, the organization of political and economic power within Iraq had been transformed dramatically during the course of the Iran-Iraq war and the international sanctions regime of the 1990s-early 2000s. Furthermore, the sources of power did not emanate from Saddam himself, nor from within the institutions and departments of the state apparatus as such. Power was articulated within a variety of complexes of economic and political relationships involving oil companies, international smuggling networks, UN institutions and relations with foreign governments [24]. To make a long story short, the power that presented itself as the focus of effort techno-political transformation was in fact much more diffuse and

amorphous than its theoretical representation allowed for. Accordingly, in order for the project to be made legible, they were themselves forced to identify and place the power that provided the focus for efforts at democratization. They accomplished this with reference to the ethno-sectarian framework that they took as an organic given of Iraqi society. And in doing so they unwittingly consolidated the stakes, and stoked the fires, of ethno-sectarian conflict.

Even as Bush Administration officials and Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) chief Bremer increasingly (and ironically) stressed the importance of a strong central state (with central control over, inter alia, oil resources), the CPA in practice continued to manage public sentiment, and channel political demands, through sectarian intermediaries. This was enshrined in the composition of the Iraqi Governing Council, the federalization provisions of the Transitional Administrative Law, the Shiite- Kurd-Sunni troika of the Presidential Council, and the Iraqi Interim Authority that was handed power in the formal transfer of sovereignty to Iraqis on 28 June 2004, and not least in the elections that were held on 30 January 2005 to choose the membership of the Transitional National Authority, members of which would also be selected to write Iraq’s constitution.

The degree to which outsiders insisted on seeing Iraqi political society in sectarian terms is not only striking, it became and self-fulfilling<sup>1</sup>. According to the International Crisis Group [25], Iraqis themselves consistently rejected the sectarian vision even as they found themselves increasingly forced to express themselves politically in such a framework. Polling conducted by Mansoor Moaddel [26] suggests that Iraqis stand out in the region in terms of asserting their national (i.e., Iraqi) identity above alternatives (e.g., religious, sectarian, or ethnic). His survey suggests that 60 percent of all Baghdadis “consider themselves Iraqis above all.”

Both prior to and following the invasion, US officials saw sectarianism as a framework for managing Iraqi political society in the absence of strong state institutions, and they actively advanced ethnic/sectarian communities as the constituent building blocks of the new political order. Elections were advanced to address ritual functions of legitimacy, and to reveal the actual balance of power between agents representing communal interests and visions of political life, thereby making it possible for communal agents to rationally negotiate the framework of a new order on that basis. Even as planners were forced to pull back from the more radical elements of neo-liberal restructuring, this communalist vision was built into the constitutional and electoral exercises that unfolded over the course of 2005. While no doubt reflecting genuine (however misguided) views within the administration regarding the nature of Iraqi politics and society, the communitarian framework was also convenient from the perspective of blocking articulation of any mass political movement that might undermine implementation of the underlying neo-liberal/neo-conservative project. In other words, officials sought to segregate residual political interests and passions from the wider project of restructuring Iraq’s political economy along neo-liberal lines. Against this backdrop, the electoral arena might be seen as consolidating and legitimating a calculative framework through which to manage the residual passions of a political world otherwise being remade in the image of the self-regulating market. In invoking the sectarian framework, occupation authorities were reviving a framework for managing political society reminiscent of that advanced by the Ottomans and British Mandate officials of earlier eras.

<sup>1</sup>The argument that Saddam governed by cultivating ethnic and tribal divisions is overstated; he did not so much cultivate communal divisions as undermine all secular, non-communal bases of opposition to his authority.

## Concluding Remarks

By calling attention to the indeterminacy of power—indeed, to the imperative of constantly de-placing power—within a democratic order, Lefort provides us with a figure of thought that helps us to see and understand the relationship between representations of power in the world on the one hand, and the actual whereabouts of power in the world on the other. Furthermore, by stressing the emptiness of the “place of power” in an ideal democracy, he implicitly suggests the impossibility of a democratic techno-politics: if the place of power in a democracy is empty, then such a project has no object; nor does it have any frame of legibility but that which carries within itself (and this frame is one that condenses the history of others). The project of democratic transition thus faces the paradox of having to create its own objects based on representations that disguise the actual whereabouts of power to varying degrees. And these representations—whether condensed in the figure of the regime or situated in other categories through which knowledge about social and political life have been constructed (e.g., sectarianism or tribalism)—tend to be more compelling by virtue of their legibility within a broader constellation of representations, than by virtue of any real insight into lived political experience. The resulting danger—demonstrated vividly in the case of Iraq—is that, like Goethe’s wizard’s apprentice, the architects of democratization find themselves unable to contain the ghosts that they themselves called into existence.

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