VIlASSESSING DEMOCRACY DISCOURSES:
A 'Critique of Arms'492

We cannot change the world simply by evidence and reasoning, but we surely cannot change it
without them either.

Kwame A. Appiah493

The essential pluralism of the discourses on democracy which I have just
demonstrated threatens to jeopardize the whole enterprise of critical
assessment. Each discourse presents its own idea of what a democratic society
is about and none can claim an objective status that allows it to be used as a
gauge in assessment. There is no neutral ground, no 'true' conception of
democracy, from which to judge.

Should we, therefore, give up the whole idea of critically assessing
democracy discourses? I do not think so. I do not even have to revert to the
strategy of importing my own favourite conception of democracy as a gauge for
others. The solution may be that assessment is possible by measuring each
discourse according to its own idea of what a democracy discourse should be.
One can assess whether discourses deliver the goods they promise. In fact,
when it comes to the promises of the discourses on democracy, they share the
basic pledge to provide a viable democratic alternative for contemporary
Africa.

In order to pursue the assessment, the heuristic that guides the
discourses has to be analyzed. In this way, the assessment can show those
issues that come into full focus when following the heuristic of the discourse
and those that remain blind spots. Such an analysis can have salutary effects as
it indicates inherent contortions and blockades that have to be overcome in
order for the discourse to live up to its idea of a good discourse on democracy.

The setting of the game and its players

The liberal discourse involves a focus upon a range of issues which are at the
core of current debates on democracy in Africa, such as human rights,
citizenship, separation of powers, the right to free political association, and
freedom of the press. On many of these issues liberal views have become
generally accepted,494 and even where disputed they still tend to constitute the
'received view'.

The characteristic focus of a liberal view is on the institutional
arrangements for a democratic polity, such as a system of rights, parties and

492 The expression "Critique of Arms" is derived from the famous book La Critique des Armes
(1974) in which Régis Debray, after having participated in the struggle in Bolivia with
Che Guvarra, assessed the revolutionary ideology of the struggle.

493 Appiah 1992, p. 179

494 Presently, Marxist and neo-traditionalists tend to accept such liberal concerns which they had
disqualified as typically 'bourgeois', or 'Western' preoccupations for decades. A change of
view which remains in most cases unacknowledged.
parliaments as institutions of representation, and separation of powers within the state. When it comes to formulating political alternatives for African societies, the relevance of the issue of political institutions can hardly be denied. The liberal focus is, thus, relevant. It may, however, be too narrow. In Africa the question of the appropriate form, preconditions, and sustainability of institutional arrangements has special relevance. A liberal discourse may not be well prepared to discuss these questions. Let me digress shortly into the presuppositions of a liberal polity.

A liberal polity presumes a particular context. Firstly, it assumes that there is a state embodying supreme power within the territory (the monopoly of legitimate use of force). Secondly, it assumes that there is a national community which shares a basic solidarity and which comprises of individuals who perceive themselves as citizens, accepting the state as their state. Thirdly, it presumes that individual citizens have sufficient skills and interest to act their part in the democratic polity. Fourthly, it assumes that power and wealth are not distributed so unequally that institutionalized procedures can easily be subverted. Of course a whole range of other presuppositions could be mentioned, such as material and technological ones as well as conditions of 'normality' such as freedom from war.

This excursion into some of its presuppositions shows that a liberal polity is a delicate thing, it resembles a modern limousine that needs well-paved roads and a complex infrastructure, rather than a landrover that can run under virtually any conditions. The hidden 'contextuality' of a liberal polity has consequences for the assessment of African liberal democratic discourse. It leads to the conclusion that questions of infrastructure should be a coherent part of the discourse, and that an institutional set-up that fits one context (a particular European one for instance) will not automatically fit another context (a particular African one).

The heuristic of the liberal discourse is ill-prepared, however, to discuss questions of infrastructure. The metaphor of 'the rules of the game' suggests a focus on the practice of the game itself. The players remain largely out of scope. An essential, practical fiction of liberal democratic theory is that 'as players' (i.e. 'as citizens') all are equal. As far as they have outspoken religious, ethnic or political identities it is assumed that these can all be accommodated within the game. A further, and more debatable, assumption is that citizens who can play the game have time, interest, no fear and are sufficiently equipped with 'cultural capital' to play effectively, and, on the other hand, that players are never powerful enough to subvert the game. The setting of the game remains out of scope as well in the game model. The modern state is suggested to be the natural unit of the political game. But is this necessarily

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495 Unlike a liberal democracy, a patrimonial system, for instance, appears to survive under any conditions.

496 This idea of equality-as-citizens is simultaneously one of liberalism's emancipatory missions: the democratic game is self-consciously built upon an egalitarian universalism; whatever your differences in ideology, income, religion etc., you are equal as citizen.
the case? Could not more comprehensive, transnational or more local frameworks of democratic politics exist? In some cases the role of the national state can be contested. Then the state-political process as locus of coordination has to relate to other processes of coordination organized around religious, regional, ethnic or commercial bonds. In such a situation different games are played, following rules that are not always compatible with that of the official political process. The liberal model may need to be stretched considerably to depict such a multi-focal political context.

The main weakness of the 'rules of the game' metaphor appears to be that it represents politics as an abstract, decontextualized arrangement which depends on defining the proper rules in order to function. It suggests general solutions to universal problems of political coordination in modern societies. In African realities in particular, however, the great challenge of democratic theorizing is to contextualize democratic arrangements by fitting them to suit historical situations and cultural resources at the individual and collective level. The universalistic modernism inherent in the liberal democratic model thus makes it ill-prepared to ask exactly the most challenging questions of democratic theorizing in Africa.

The Modern Palaver

The idea of African communal democracy, exemplified by the Palaver, is both classical and topical in African political discourse. It incorporates promises of harnessing the indigenous cultural resources that were too long neglected and suppressed, and promises of overcoming the harrowing exclusion of the majority of Africans from involvement in the political system. The idea of African communal democracy thus coincides perfectly with two global trends, that of a 'cultural turn' in the perception of development problems, and a turn to a 'bottom up' view of politics.

The idea of a specifically African democratic alternative builds upon two principles. Firstly, it maintains that there is a distinctly 'African' type of culture, personality and 'way-of-being-in-the-world' which corresponds with a mode of political organization. Secondly, it builds on the idea that such an African mode is essentially democratic. Both contentions (in fact, empirical claims) are hotly debated and will be discussed below. For the moment, however, I will assume that they hold and inquire into the credentials of a democracy discourse built upon these assumptions.

The idea of a palaver democracy for political practice today for one thing raises questions of a practical nature. For instance, it introduces questions about the specific political institutions that should be established or about the

497 In all cases it involves discarding unwarranted claims to universality of any particular form of a democratic polity. Just like we have to give up the idea that there is something like 'modernity' in the singular (and secretly model this modernity on contemporary Western societies), we have to learn to think of 'democracy' in plural terms.
adaptation of palaver democracy to situations where the size of society is too large for a community gathering. I propose, however, to discuss the question at a more fundamental level as well, namely by exploring in what significant ways contemporary societies differ from those for which 'traditional' institutions were designed and what consequences political philosophers should derive from these differences.

K.A. Busia is one of the few authors who discussed the question of reviving African political heritages at this level. He noticed, firstly, that the old systems focused on politics internal to the community whereas the present situation involves primarily the question of organizing political processes between and beyond individual communities. Secondly, he noticed that the religious, supernatural aspect of rule was an essential aspect of the 'traditional' system while this cannot be maintained in present-day multi-religious and multi-cultural societies. Other issues could be added, such as the need for formal, juridical structuring of modern political institutions or the possible clash of the 'modern' ideal of democratic equality with status differences related to family, age or sex, such as were basic to 'traditional' systems.

In short, it is a requirement for any discourse concerned with reviving the indigenous political heritage to seriously tackle a number of dilemmas concerning the proposed alternative. Among contemporary neo-traditionalist authors, however, such discussions are astonishingly rare. These authors are mainly concerned with the more basic issue of defending a legitimate space for a discourse on African democratic alternatives.

The defensive concern with questions of legitimacy is also reflected in the structure of many texts on indigenous democracy. These texts include extensive critiques of other conceptions of democracy mostly identified as 'Western' democracy and reduced to a stereotyped 'multi-partyism', while giving little attention to discussing the indigenous alternatives themselves. By constructing the intellectual terrain in a completely bi-polar way, opposing 'indigenous' with 'alien', 'adversarial' with 'consensus' variants of democracy, or the "paradigm of the European conqueror" versus "an emancipatory African solution to African political problems," every argument against one pole seems to allocate credit to the other. General expositions of 'the traditional system' and its values are reiterated frequently but the discussion on the implementation of indigenous alternatives is not advanced.

This lack of innovation in most of contemporary neo-traditional discourse on democracy is puzzling. Why do most authors not proceed to

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498 Especially in chapters I and II of *Africa in Search of Democracy*, where, in the context of an attempt to "examine the problems facing contemporary Africa within the context of the search for democracy", Busia discussed the religious and political heritage.

499 Of course African states and empires involved coordination between and beyond communities, but the actual forms can hardly be described as 'democratic' and are only very rarely propagated as 'traditional' African political systems to be revived.

500 Ramose 1992, p. 72-73

include new data and develop more sophisticated and better argued positions by building on the work of colleagues and by answering criticisms? Historically, the apparent blockades in neo-traditionalist discourse are an even more astonishing phenomenon since there have been sophisticated discussions of traditional political systems within the last century by authors such as Mensah Sarbah, Casely Hayford, de Graft Johnson, Kenyatta, Danquah and Busia.502

The blockades in neo-traditionalist democracy discourse derive in part from the function of the discourse in political practice. It is often an oppositional discourse challenging hegemonic racist or (neo-)colonial positions.503 In such situations, the issue is to state a strong counter-position to the hegemonic one whereas a frank discussion of the problems of one's own democratic alternative is reserved for later.504

The cause of stagnation may also be sought in the model of thought in which the neo-traditionalist position is framed. There are two different ways to frame such a position. In a minority of cases, the position is supported by empirical data and based on an argument specifying why particular indigenous political institutions can provide an appropriate solution to current problems and why these institutions are preferable. In most cases, however, the choice for indigenous alternatives is based on a culturalist argument stating their 'Africannes' and 'thus' their appropriateness. Here one finds quite general arguments on types of culture, modes of being or kinds of political communities.

I will leave the first type of neo-traditionalist argument for discussion later. Here I will investigate whether the culturalist model of thought has inherent limits which can be the cause of the noted blockades in culturalist neo-traditional discourse. For that purpose I will first trace some of the most famous criticisms of culturalist assumptions and then try to derive the consequences of culturalist assumptions for a contemporary discourse on democracy. The first step will follow the criticism advanced in some of the highlights of contemporary African philosophy, namely in Paulin J. Hountondji's discussion of ethnophilosophy, in Valentine Y. Mudimbe's analysis of the invention of Africa and in Kwame A. Appiah's discussions of

502 See my discussion in the previous chapters. Busia, it should be noted, supported his deliberations on the future of chieftaincy on his sociological and historical investigations (The Position of The Chief In the Modern Political System of Ashanti, OUP, 1951). It is curious that the recent book by G.B.M Aititee Africa Betrayed practically ignores the reflections of his countryman.

503 Neo-traditionalist discourse is found especially in the USA and South Africa, where such a struggle makes really sense.

504 Steve Biko, for instance, explicitly considered his struggle to be part of a transitory phase. The new political structure of Azania will be different, open, and humanistic. (Biko 1978, p.123) Although even the new situation remains conceptualized in terms of whites and blacks as groups, not in terms of citizens of a democratic community. "Therefore we wish to state explicitly to state that this country belongs to black people and to them alone." (Biko 1978, p.121)
nativism, ethnophilosophy and African-American afrocentrism.\textsuperscript{505}

Culturalist thought in its various forms tries to present to the reader the essentially African culture, philosophy, personality and religious experience. The main point highlighted by the critics is that, far from making up an 'African' discourse, culturalism replicates the patterns of European thought on Africa. As Appiah states, it is a "reverse discourse: the terms of resistance are already given to us, and our contestation entrapped within the Western cultural conjuncture we affect to dispute."\textsuperscript{506}

The criticism of ethnophilosophy by the Beninese philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji is an early example of a critique of culturalist assumptions. Ethnophilosophy holds that there is an essentially African type of philosophy corresponding with 'traditional' African world-views. Truly 'African' political philosophy, then, expresses the principles of organization of the traditional African polity. In his sophisticated dissection of the idea of ethnophilosophy Hountondji showed that ethnophilosophy does not counter but reaffirm European influence. Postulating 'Africa' and 'the West' as generic entities and positioning them as opposites copies the logic of colonial discourse with its racist and culturalist dichotomies. Ethnophilosophy, which explicitly claims to be `African' and criticises others for copying `The West', turns out to copy itself European stereotypes.

Discussing nativism, Kwame A. Appiah makes similar observations.\textsuperscript{507} Nativism uses a vocabulary of Us versus Them, Indigenous versus Alien, inside (Africa) versus outside (the West) but these entities and oppositions are mythical constructions. The fact is that African intellectuals themselves are marked by Western influences, writing in European languages, participating in European or global debates. So-called 'inside' is also 'outside'. This European imprint counts in particular for nativism itself: "Nativist nostalgia, in short, is largely fuelled by that Western sentimentalism so familiar after Rousseau; few things, then, are less native than nativism in its current forms."\textsuperscript{508} The idea of a 'national' philosophy and literature based on African traditions and norms, Appiah argues, follows the old assumptions of Herder about a community or nation having its 'Sprachgeist' and about literature and nation (or race) organically belonging together. Like nineteenth-century 'scientific' racism one tends to conflate biological and cultural facts. Trendy Afrocentrism, even C.A. Diop’s interpretation of the 'negro', black character of Egyptian civilization, suffers from these flaws.\textsuperscript{509} "The very invention of Africa must be understood, ultimately, as an outgrowth of modern European racialism," Appiah states.\textsuperscript{510}

\textsuperscript{505} Hountondji 1976/83 and 1982/90; Mudimbe 1988; Appiah 1992 and 1993
\textsuperscript{506} Appiah 1992. p. 60 and p. 59
\textsuperscript{507} Appiah defines nativism as: "The claim that true African independence requires a literature of one's own" (Appiah 1992, p.56), equating it some pages later with "the rhetoric of ancestral purity", (p.61)
\textsuperscript{508} Appiah 1992, p. 59-60
\textsuperscript{509} See Appiah's magnificent "Europe Upside Down; Falacies of the new Afrocentrism" (Appiah 1993)
\textsuperscript{510} Appiah 1992, p. 62
The origins of culturalist views may be suspect, yet the views can still be correct. Confused parents may have enlightened off-spring. The other part of the critique of culturalism is empirical, therefore. This critique argues that the statements of what is essentially African should not be taken for granted. The ideas of 'Africa' and 'Europe', as if these are entities with a core or essence, are constructions.\textsuperscript{511} Cultures, communities and identities are not just there, but rather they are continuously produced through human actions. Contemporary affirmations of tradition are, therefore, modern affirmations, `inventions of tradition' which themselves rework and redesign selected indigenous elements often according to foreign designs. "Writing for and about ourselves...helps constitute the modern community of the nation." "Ironically, for many African intellectuals, these invented traditions have acquired the status of national mythology, and the invented past of Africa has come to play a role in the political dynamics of the modern state."\textsuperscript{512}

Let me now proceed to the second step in the assessment of culturalism and try to trace the consequences of culturalist assumptions for a contemporary discourse on democracy. The logic of culturalist thought, as analyzed in chapter VI, is relevant here. Culturalism (see VI. 1) is characterized by a combination of two ingredients: 1) an essentialist idea of cultures, and 2) the idea that the natural, unalienated state of people is within their culture. The political logic of the culturalist model can be derived at once. Firstly, culturalist thought carves up the world into various cultures (groups) thus creating borders between them. Secondly, creating domains produces the idea of import and export traffic, the idea of 'indigenous' and 'alien' elements and the idea of customs and immigration control to protect 'inside' from 'outside'. Thirdly, the geographical metaphor of cultures as domains brings on a 'Whig' historiography: by projecting the present view of culture-domains back into history the multi-dimensional historical process is streamlined into 'the history of' each of the domains.\textsuperscript{513} Fourthly, the model suggests a difference between 'purity' and 'hybridity': mixing is abnormal and a bastardization rather than a happy marriage with strong offspring.

The political logic of culturalist thought is fully exposed when the second basic characteristic of culturalism is taken into consideration. If a

\textsuperscript{511}Koenis & Boele van Hensbroek 1994; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983.

\textsuperscript{512}Appiah 1992, p. 55-56, resp. p.61. The fact as such that identities are situational constructs does not disqualify them. The struggle for an identity simply needs a political justification, just like any political objective. The justification for such a struggle can, finally, not rely on a claim for intrinsic value.

\textsuperscript{513}The pitfalls of this culturalism in historiography are shown in the heated debate about the 'origins' of western culture. (Bernal 1987/1991) Do the 'origins' of Europe lie in Greece (= Europe, as western culturalists say) or in Egypt (= Black, as African culturalists say). Present-day categories are applied to partition a world 2500 years ago in which these categories made no sense. Historically, there was one cultural space involving West Asia and the eastern mediterranean basin. (Binsbergen 1996) Such questions of origins are culturalist artifacts.
culture is a positive entity that defines a way of 'being-in-the-world' and if the natural unalienated state of people is within their culture then there is no escape. The first assumption constructs a world of separate niches and the second assumption locks people into the niches. Culture sticks and stigmatizes: the political logic of culturalism suggests a system of segregation.

The peculiar political logic of culturalism can be found also in European right-wing politics.\(^{514}\) Without using the notion of race, right-wing ideology involves a framework of thought suggesting divisions between people which are as ossified as racial divisions. The classical anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl is another case in point. Lévy-Bruhl's works are often considered examples of racist anthropology because they map out a 'primitive mentality' that is qualitatively different from the 'modern', 'scientific' mind. It should be noted, however, that Lévy-Bruhl did not see this primitive mentality as anchored biologically in the 'primitive' humans. In a long evolution of primitive culture the primitive mentality could advance to the modern form. Yet Lévy-Bruhl's theory has racist implications because, within any practically relevant time-span, mentalities are supposed to stick to people.

The analysis of the political logic of culturalism can now be used to assess the credentials of a culturalist discourse on democracy. Can a culturalist discourse on democracy address crucial issues such as those brought forward by K.A. Busia? His first point, the management of inter-group and inter-culture affairs, is not addressed in culturalist discourse, it is even made into a major problem. From the outset culturalism segregates by defining particularized group-cultures. The possibility of inter-group cooperation can only be based on the vague idea of a universal human brotherhood.\(^{515}\) The model does not give a clue as to how this brotherhood-in-segregation can be shaped politically.

Busia's second issue, that of handling pluralism within communities, is neither addressed. By stressing the essential unity and coherence of the culture-group matrix plurality is played down. Even in those culturalist arguments where consensus is not assumed to pre-exist but to emerge from reconciliation of different points of view, the culturalist conception provides no methods or clues to manage persistent disagreements. They remain an anomaly. It can be expected that, finally, the persistent dissident will have to be excluded due to being unfaithful to the community.\(^{516}\)

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\(^{514}\) This 'New Racism' melts together concepts such as "culture", "nation", "natural home", "tradition" and "way of life" into a framework that can effectively stigmatise (minority) groups. The message is: there are essential differences between cultures, defining a way of life and eventually also a nation. Every culture should be respected, guarded and protected against outside influences. It is therefore necessary to limit immigration and repatriate non-indigenous elements to where they naturally belong. This is in the natural interest of both sides. Barker 1982 and Balibar & Wallerstein 1991.

\(^{515}\) e.g. Nyerere's idea of Ujamaa implies familyhood at the national level but again a kind of super-familyhood at the level of humanity as a whole.

\(^{516}\) This is not to deny that, as political values, consensus and compromising are certainly basic to managing plurality within a community. They are just not enough, not by far.
A third crucial issue in the reemployment of traditional political heritages is the question of the need for an institutionalized and legalized framework in complex societies. Here again, the culturalist view gives no clue and, in fact, it even creates obstacles. The monistic idea of cultures, communities and their politics suggests that the legal-bureaucratic framework can only be an extension of the shared cultural basis of the community. The state should be an organ of the community directly representing its values, mission and identity. Formalizing a system of rights and political institutions of representation and control can be divisive, disturbing the natural bond linking the community together. The Zairian philosopher Chimalenga Ntumba speaks of the primacy of the 'We' (*Wir-Primat*) as the basic principle of an African society.  

In conclusion, the identity type of discourse does not provide instruments to tackle several of the most basic issues of democracy in plural and complex societies. The silence of this type of discourse on dilemmas of the implementation of neo-traditional democratic alternatives, which I noted above, may have a very simple reason: it stands empty-handed, or handcuffed, in the face of these dilemmas. The 'We' and 'They' polarity of culturalist discourse does not suggest a fruitful approach to contemporary problems in democratic thought.

At this point I can return to the case of the more empirical and pragmatic non-culturalist neo-traditionalists. The above argument, after all, only defeats a neotraditionalist argument involving the assumption of cultural essences. In fact the non-culturalist position produced some of the most interesting arguments on democracy. Examples in the last chapter show that such neotraditionalist arguments can put into question some of the standard ideas about democracy, such as that political pluralism necessarily needs adversarial politics or the idea that politics primarily concerns the state.

A number of non-culturalists still defend that the category of 'the African political system' makes sense as an empirical generalization. They then point to the phenomenon of politics aiming at consensus in the gathering of elders under the chief, or of chiefs under the paramount chief, where the chief, finally, is only a *primus inter pares*. It is rarely noted, however, that the widespread occurrence of a phenomenon within Africa does not make it typically African. This is only shown if the phenomenon does not occur (or rarely occurs) outside Africa. Similar political systems, however, occur and have occurred in many parts of the globe.

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518 Polynesian, American Indian and African examples can often be used interchangeably (e.g. E.A. Hoebel *Anthropology*. New York:McGraw-Hill. Hoebel states on p. 459 e.g. that "the universal instrument of government is the council"). The attempt to return to a supposedly unique indigenous source for shaping an alternative development path is also a familiar political strategy. Kitching (1982) calls this strategy 'populism'.
Popular Struggles for which democracy?

The turn towards democratization in Africa is easily perceived, especially from outside of Africa, as happening despite Marxist influence. After all, the immediate object of contestation for the democratic opposition, namely single partyism, has been part and parcel of 'radical' (revolutionary anti-imperialist) programmes of various types. But the fact is that democratic movements as well as democratic thought in Africa have been greatly inspired by radical discourse. Empowerment, popular movements and the struggle for actual political participation of the populace have been central to radical politics and are an important aspect of the idea of democracy as increased popular accountability.

The focus of radical discourse is on social struggle. It concerns social movements ("those movements that set out to change Africa"), their histories and experiences. Its interest is not in the puzzles of organizing a democratic polity but in attaining it and making it serve popular interests. Radical discourse focuses on 'attaining power' rather than on 'taming power', that is, on the institutions of a democratic polity. At this point I will investigate whether this idea of democracy can deliver the democratic products it promises.

Within the basic Marxist radical framework it is logical not to focus on the institutions of a democratic polity. Marxist class theory assumes that all conflicts in civil society are ultimately class struggles. Politics is therefore essentially class struggle. In the coming socialist society the phenomenon of class itself is overcome, so no fundamental social conflicts remain and politics becomes obsolete. Socialist society is a self-managing community.

Already in the Green Book of 1988, however, the Marxist assumption is abandoned that conflict in civil society is merely class struggle. Social movements are now considered as movements of various kinds without assuming a priori the primacy of class over other types of social forces. If the class theory is dropped, however, then the expectation of the end of fundamental social conflict in the future society has to be abandoned as well. Furthermore, when fundamental political conflicts will always remain, then the need will always exist for the mediation of conflicts in a political process. Such need for mediation will unavoidably raise a range of questions on how to organize this political process in a democratic way; questions, for instance, on how the usurpation of power can be avoided, how rights and liberties are to be protected, how the government can be controlled, participation organised, etcetera. In summary: the first step of acknowledging a fundamental pluralism within civil society dictates a second step, namely of discussing how this plurality is going to be mediated democratically.

In the 'democratic turn' of radical discourse the first step was taken in

\[519\] Even today discussion of the single-multi party issue does not excel in unambiguous statements (e.g. Mamdani 1996, p.8/9).
the Green Book of 1988 but not the second step, not even in African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy of 1995. The question of "how state power should be organised and of how it should relate to social forces" is announced there but not addressed. Without addressing these issues, however, radical discourse can only provide valuable theorizing on liberation but not on democracy. Recognizing the plurality of civil society without discussing a plural political order constitutes a half-way house between the old theory of class (class as the ultimate force in civil society) and of history (as proceeding towards socialism), and the new sense that both theories have to be given up.

A fundamental reason for not addressing these concrete questions concerning political institutions was given by Mamdani himself. In his critique of the 'civil society perspective' (i.e. liberal Africanist theorizing) he mentions "the differentiation between the social and the political" as the key to their mistaken position. If my argument above holds then exactly the resistance to this differentiation should be given up. Without recognizing that there are specifically political issues, namely those that have to do with the institutionalized handling of social, economic and cultural differences, the basic question of what is involved in framing a democratic society remains. If questions such as "how state power should be organized" or of "how to redefine the form of the state" are considered relevant, as is the case in contemporary radical discourse, then it is necessary to discuss political issues in their own right, distinguished (but not separated) from social ones. After all, the issue of social justice and transformation is not identical with the issue of a democratic society.

A Shared World-view

My critique of arms started with a rather minimal agenda of checking whether the various democracy discourses deliver the products that they promise. For

520 Mamdani 1995a, p. 33
521 Mamdani 1995a, p. 4
522 Mamdani 1995a, p. 33
523 Failing to do so can lead to curious arguments, like Mamdani's when he argues that "The demand for democracy...is not always progressive" (68), there is "the need to underline the class content of every demand for democracy in a specific situation" (68). The concept of democracy is here analytically so unspecified that conservative claims can be told from progressive ones only by reference to who puts forward the claim (not why certain demands in the name of democracy are deficient). The suggestion (p. 57) to distinguish movements struggling for 'rights' from those struggling for 'privileges' can neither be of much help here.

524 Radical intellectuals in Latin America as well as in the West took this step and thereby blurred the distinction between socialist and liberal positions in a fundamental way. Pursuing their new agenda, questions can be asked such as what could be a "socialist civil society" (Keane) or a "liberal socialism" (Mouffe). By this move a wide range of issues in political thought are raised which have hitherto received attention primarily in liberal and social democratic thought.
each of them it turned out that their agendas are truncated: a range of relevant issues remain unaddressed making the currently dominant discourses unsatisfactory as vehicles for democratic thought in contemporary Africa. This is not to say that the discussions concerned are not relevant, but that the dominant discourses have fundamental deficiencies. They stop just an arms-length away (and in the case of the culturalists much more than that) from the most relevant questions concerning a democratic polity in contemporary Africa. To conclude my investigation, this section intends to fathom the specific sources of the limited agendas. Let me quickly review the main points of the criticisms for that purpose.

The modernist liberal democracy discourse, I argued, decontextualizes the issue of democracy. It suggests that the problems of political order in modern societies are universal and that by adhering to the rules of the democratic game these problems can be handled. The issue of democracy in Africa, consequently, is seen basically as a question of implementation. A whole range of relevant questions do not come into focus from this perspective. Above, I described these as questions concerning the 'setting' and the 'players' of the democratic game. More specifically, one can think here of the question of appropriate democratic institutions for specific African countries and communities and of organizing the empowerment of marginal groups in order for them to become participants in the democratic process. Other relevant questions concern ethnicity as a form of political organization, the issue of the democratization of civil society organizations and of the incorporation of existing 'traditional' modes of political deliberation into a modern democratic polity.

It is essential to note that the limited focus of the liberal democracy discourse is in fact predetermined in its ground-plan, namely the 'modernization model' of thought as discussed in chapter VI. The tradition - modernity polarity involves the idea of universal modernity and thus suggests that there is a single 'modern' political system only. Liberal democracy is perceived as simply the political requirement of universal modernity. The determining influence of the idea of modernity on democratic discourse can be brought out clearly by erasing it. As soon as the idea that something like 'modernity' exists is given up, or even if it is used in the plural, as 'modernities', then the issue arises of different variants of democratic polity that are contingent upon the historical and cultural context. The idea that there is some specific model of 'modernity', therefore, is the key to blocking a host of interesting and pertinent questions of democratic thought for Africa.  

In the case of culturalist neo-traditionalist discourses on democracy, I argued that the two assumptions of culturalism determine a political logic of segregation. Culturalism hypostatizes the idea of cultures, races or identities, it ossifies differences between cultures, creates 'aliens' and suggests, for instance,
that purity of the groups and conformity within groups are the normal cases. At the same time, highly relevant and fascinating questions concerning the revival of 'traditional' institutions are not addressed. One could think here of the similarity of the idea of palaver and the idea of the public sphere. Could not the idea of the palaver be incarnated in large-scale societies in the form of a public realm with appropriate values, institutions and guarantees to facilitate the inclusion of all citizens? If such unconventional conjectures are explored, one could ask which institutions (massmedia, social movements, associations) could best facilitate such a public sphere. What would be the appropriate legal and organizational frameworks which could guarantee equal access to this public palaver sphere, which relations of ownership (state, commercial, Church, cooperative or other) would facilitate best a sustainable, open and politically relevant palaver? No such questions are explored, however, in contemporary neo-traditionalist discourse.

Like the case of modernist liberal discourse, the underlying model of thought predetermines the limitations of neo-traditionalist thought about democracy. After establishing the basic culturalist oppositions between 'We' and 'They' or 'Africa' and 'the West', a segregated view of political communities follows which directs attention away from relevant questions concerning indigenous democratic alternatives.

In the case of the radical discourse on democracy, I argued that by discussing political issues only in the framework of the struggle of the majority of the people for social transformation, radical discourse can provide theories of liberation but not of democracy. Within a Marxist theory of class and of history the absorption of the political into the social belongs to the logic of the discourse. Contemporary radicals distanced themselves from Marxist class theory, however, embracing the idea that the plurality of civil society cannot be reduced to class. A plurality of interests and orientations raises the need for permanent regulation of this plurality, that is the need for politics. The discussion of political issues as distinct from the issue of social struggle thus becomes a necessity if the Marxist theoretical framework is abandoned. A range of questions on shaping a radical democratic polity, on the institutions required for political empowerment, on a system of rights for all and on democratizing civil society become relevant. Radical authors who refuse to discuss political issues in their own right stop their post-Marxist turn just in sight of such key questions concerning a radical democratic polity.

In the case of the radical discourse, like in the cases of the liberal and culturalist discourses, the limits of its theorising about democracy derive directly from the 'liberation model' as discussed in chapter VI. The idea that there is a basic and all pervading opposition between oppressor and oppressed subsumes the issue of democracy under that of the social struggle. The question who holds power is addressed rather than how power can be handled democratically.\textsuperscript{526}

\textsuperscript{526}Of course individual radical thinkers can address such typically political issues but dominant
The conclusion of my three critiques puts into question not only the dominant democracy discourses but also the key models which shaped African political thought for more than a century. The conclusion should be that the intellectual armoury available to think out a political alternative today is comprised of three arms systems which have serious limitations in terms of range, accuracy of fire or adjustment to the conditions of the field. The critical assessment of democracy discourses leads to the conclusion that the battle can not be won unless the armoury is improved.

Should we resolve at this point that the key models of thought have to be discarded completely and a new paradigm constructed? Such a voluntaristic reshaping of our intellectual world is clearly illusory. After all, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, we are intellectually out at sea; if we want to reconstruct our ship we cannot take it apart to rebuild it without drowning ourselves. The only thing we can do is to restructure and to make adjustments in a piecemeal manner.

There is another reason why the attempt at starting from scratch may be illusory. Each of the three models of thought that were identified in chapter VI underlines a basic aspect of society: the modernization model focusses on the economical-technological, the identity model on the cultural, and the liberation model on the political. It cannot be expected that such basic orientations can be avoided. Neither, however, are we forced to conclude that such basic orientations should necessarily lead to deficient models of thought.

The conclusion, therefore, should not be to completely eliminate some of the models of thought but to track down the specific causes of the handicap within the three models. And in fact the analysis of the three critiques that I have just presented already pinpointed such causes. The truncated agendas of democracy discourses derive right from the basic assumptions of the dominant models of thought.

Remarkably, the analysis allows for an aggravated conclusion at this point. Despite their differences, the three models of thought share the characteristic of a bi-polar structure. Each of the models, although in different ways, starts out to create one major division in which all elements of thought are subsequently positioned. In different ways, 'We' and 'They' or Africa and the West become the major compartments of this world. In the modernization-type, We and They are the pre-modern and the modern where the one has to catch up with the other. In the liberation-type the polarity is even clearer. It is a hierarchical order of Oppressor versus Oppressed, or "they up
there (the 'centre') versus we down here (the 'periphery')." In the identity-type
the order is a horizontal opposition of cultural difference between Africa and
the West or We and They. The polarity, in this case, is not to be eliminated but
something that is valued highly.

The bi-polarity of the ground-plan also involves the introduction of one
grand a fundamental idea, one could say a myth, in each of the models. In the
modernization model this is the idea of a state of modernity (clearly modelled
upon the self-image of the West), in the identity model it is the idea of a state
of authenticity (modelled upon the negation of the self-image of the West) and
in the liberation model the idea of a state of complete liberation (in its classical
form it is the idea of socialism as a self-managing community of equals).

The bi-polarity in the ground-plan has far-reaching consequences for
discourses built upon such a plan. One consequence is that it radically
simplifies our thinking. Where a multitude of differences and resemblances,
problems and options could be conceived of only one remains. In the case of
the issue of democracy, for instance, it leads to the peculiar view that 'basically'
one major issue should be resolved for democracy to work. For the modernist
liberal, the basic issue of democracy in Africa would be resolved if modernized
political institutions would be established. For the neo-traditionalist, the issue
would be resolved if the proper authentic African traditions would be revived.
And for the protagonist of the popular struggles view on democratization, the
issue of democracy would be resolved if the poor would be empowered. The
idea of one grand basic solution leads to the neglect of many challenging
specific issues relating to the question of democratization, such as those of
empowering citizens in their different roles or of harnessing indigenous
cultural resources in institutionalizing democratic practices.

Another consequence of the bi-polar models is that they define Africa as
something 'different from' or 'opposed to' something else. The characteristics of
'Africa' are then given in terms of its difference from the stereotypical
description of the other rather than by elaborate reference to African realities.
The basic point of reference in thinking about Africa is something outside of
Africa, namely 'modernity', 'the West' and 'the exploiting imperialist system'.

527 The clearest example is culturalism. See also Appiah 1993; on the chimera of 'the West':
Koenis & Boele van hensbroek 1995 and Boele van Hensbroek 1997; on defining a
position in terms of the position it opposes, see Dick Pels 1998.

The suggestion of the depolarization of the models of thought may be discarded
as the typical view of an outsider who does not see that the opposition between
Africa and the West is a basic fact of life in Africa. Polar models are thus seen
as particularly appropriate to the African situation. I do not want to deny that an
antithetical relation to the West marks African history in the age of, what I
called in the opening chapter, the "Great Confrontation" involving the epochal
events of colonial subjugation and liberation. Even in the lives of many
intellectuals the colonial experience has probably been the single most
dramatic political event.\textsuperscript{528}

For the generations of Africans that grow up in post-colonial states the situation may change, however. Their world is primarily that of African societies. Neo-colonial relations have not disappeared and continue to have a strong imprint upon political consciousness, but \textit{internal} problems, such as misuse of power, state violence, stagnation and poverty are more visible and prominent. A number of key historical events as well do not necessarily reinforce the idea of a polarity between Africa and the West. For instance the 'development failure' of post-colonial states, the disenchantments of African Socialism and Marxism, the ruthless slaughterings in internal strife, such as in Liberia, Ruanda, Somalia, Algeria, the Ethiopian - Eritrean war, and the victory over Apartheid are primarily events \textit{within} Africa. There is a problem-shift from issues situated \textit{between} Africa and the West towards issues that are, at least in important ways, \textit{internal} to Africa.\textsuperscript{529} This shift could have its intellectual counterpart in moving away from bi-polar models of thought.

In a way, overcoming the bi-polar models is a decolonization of African thought in a fundamental sense. There is nothing particularly European in thinking in terms of We - They oppositions. The \textit{specific} polarity, however, between the 'modern' and the 'primitive' ensues from the Enlightenment tradition; the culturalist logic of the various identity discourses, with its 'völkische' oppositions between cultures, clearly has its roots in the European Romantic tradition; and the opposition between oppressor and oppressed as the ground-plan for a historicist conception of society took its inspiration from the Marxist eschatological tradition. In each case, these traditions suggest forceful representations of political problems but at the same time they are blinding us to contingent facts and the diversity of development options. In order to address the pertinent questions concerning democracy in diverse African contexts and to search for creative solutions it is required to overcome the bipolar logic that is inherent in the models of thought that have dominated African political thought in the last one hundred and fifty years.\textsuperscript{530}

\textbf{From bi-polar to discursive conceptions of democracy}

If my argument holds, then the present intellectual situation is a curious one. The main traditions in African political thought, which have been powerful vehicles for addressing relevant issues in the last 150 years, have run out of

\textsuperscript{528}Leaving what Basil Davidson termed "the deep and lasting sense of injury, above all of moral injury". (Davidson, 1992, p.297)

\textsuperscript{529}This 'problem of politics', or of democracy, does not immediately suggest a bipolar order, in the way that the problems of identity or imperialism do. It is a problem of \textit{construction}, namely that of \textit{regulating} political processes in society. It is a problem for all human societies.

\textsuperscript{530}The result of such changes would \textit{not} be the end of a neo-traditionalist, liberationist, or liberal political discourse, since they would be built upon a different ground-plan.
steam. The issue of democracy is a major invitation to African political thought to reset basic parameters. The conclusion should then be that the more authors distance themselves from the bi-polar models of thought, the more relevant and original their contribution to the discussion on democracy in Africa will be.

On the one hand, the issue of African democratic alternatives involves a reorientation towards the specific situations in diverse countries and the actual resources in terms of political heritages in specific African societies. On the other hand, it implies a return to the essential issue of politics formulated by Hannah Arendt as *handling plurality*. In fact, the basic issues for African political thought are not essentially different from issues discussed elsewhere in the world among contemporary political theorists. Theoretically, they express a post-modern, post-Marxist and post-liberal era; politically, they concern the question of a political order in highly plural societies.

African political thought may make for an interesting input in contemporary debates internationally by rethinking a number of its values and institutions for skillfully regulating conflicts. From the old commercial cities and long-distance trading networks to the markets, bazaars and commercial quarters in modern African cities usually a relatively peaceful coordination of actions of many individuals and diverse communities has been achieved. In many cases, formalized central state structures did not play a dominant role in such coordination. The issue of politics was not primarily that of handling the Weberian absolute monopoly of legitimate use of violence in a definite territory. Probably the current situation of shaky national states with various competing power structures will continue to determine the discussion of state and civil society in political thought in Africa. With issues concerning multi-community and multi-cultural states arising in most countries in the world today, African discussions may be of relevance everywhere.

Taking up the challenge to reset basic parameters raises immediate dividends for African political thought. Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba from Congo, for instance, addressing the danger of a new elite politics due to democratization, discusses the possible parameters of a radical democratic politics. Wamba elaborates on the *Mbongi* groups within the Zairian civil society during the struggle in the period of the National Conference in the early 1990s. The *Mbongi* is a certain type of political meeting of people at workplaces, wards or villages. In Wamba-dia-Wamba's work, the idea of the *Mbongi* is the beginning of interesting reflections on the concept of 'politics' and on what an emancipative politics should be. Conventional conceptions of politics, Wamba argues, are state-centred: politics is either the business of the state itself or of organizations trying to influence or capture state power. In contrast, the *Mbongi* exemplifies a 'mode of politics' that allows communities to "deal with their own differences" in terms of sex, origin (immigrants) and minorities. The really democratic state would be: organized around the category, 'people of all walks of life' (gens de partout)...The State must rest on the multiplicity and diversity of
the people: old, young, peasants, diverse national or ethnic origins, workers, merchants, intellectuals, professionals, women, men, atheists, believers...the State must not be a simple composition or expression of this multiplicity; it must transcend it with new categories...These conditions are required to avoid differences from becoming discriminations.\textsuperscript{531}

Interestingly, Wamba-dia-Wamba's discussion concerns palaver democracy while avoiding all cultural essentialism; it concerns radical liberation while avoiding the common 'reduction' of the issue of democracy to that of the social struggle.

A number of authors emanating from the radical tradition also embark on discussions of a democratic polity. The question of democracy is no longer absorbed into the promise of a coming state of liberation (socialism), thus immediately raising a whole range of essential political issues. A SAPES/CODESRIA conference in Harare in 1992 on "Democracy and Human Rights in Africa" affirmed the formal manifestations of democratization in terms of a) plural parties, unions and mass media; b) constitutional rule; c) observance of human rights; d) accountability; and e) effective representation," while also raising fundamental issues such as "transforming authoritarian political cultures into democratic ones," "the building of a democratic civil society in which the supremacy of civil institutions has been established," "the expansion of democratic space" and "the construction of effective citizenship capable of demanding and getting more civil, political, social and economic rights."\textsuperscript{532} The Kenyan scholar Peter Anyang 'Nyong'o, whose earlier views were mentioned in par. VII.2, defines democracy as the question of 'taming the state' and of organized pluralism within a political process in 1992.\textsuperscript{533} The question of democracy is in these three examples not reduced to that of empowering the masses. The essential shift has been to abandon the Marxist heritage in terms of a theory of class and a theory of history which promises the coming state of a totally self-managing community (socialism) in which the question of democracy would be resolved. In the absence of classlessness and total liberation, democracy involves the need for a carefully devised institutionalized regulation of differences between social actors.\textsuperscript{534}

Quite different from Wamba, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu

\textsuperscript{531}(Wamba 1995, p. 9). Wamba's version of a palaver discourse constitutes an interesting answer to the issue of handling intra-community pluralism. Other issues, such as that of managing inter-Mbongi matters, practically managing the state of the 'gens de partout', and institutions and rights involved are hardly dealt with.

\textsuperscript{532}Ibrahim 1992, p. 2 and p. 5


\textsuperscript{534}This is the direction in which political discourse around Codesria develops. The theoretical statements of several of the 'new' leaders in Africa, such as Museweni (Uganda) and Afworki (Eritrea), seem not to follow new directions here. They are rather repeating discourses from the 1960s.
addresses the idea of consensus politics while avoiding the standard stereotype of the African communalistic polity where the individual is submerged in the community. Wiredu maintains the Gold Coast/Ghanaian tradition (from Sarbah to Danquah and Busia) of what I called 'concrete neo-traditionalism' earlier in this book, a tradition which in many cases avoids a bipolar model of thought. Wiredu's "Plea for a Non-party Polity" provides a sophisticated argument for a democratic alternative of a "consensual non-party system". Such a system can build on a resourceful African heritage of values and institutions to achieve consensus and reconciliation. Discussing the case of the Akan political system, Wiredu argues for the superiority of a system which negotiates consent by reconciliation of all views presented (a system of 'substantive representation') over a system which simply aims at gaining majorities and power (a system of 'formal representation').

Wiredu's argument is neo-traditionalist, namely pertaining to the mobilization of 'traditional' values and institutions, yet it can avoid an essentialistic opposition between African and European culture. Significantly, Wiredu even concludes that "there is nothing peculiarly African about the idea itself" of a consensual non-party system.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, another Ghanaian, provides an argument for Pan-Africanism which is even further removed from a culturalist identity model of thought. Appiah argues that:

"An African identity is coming into being. I have argued throughout these essays that this identity is a new thing; that it is the product of history...and that the bases through which so far it has largely been theorized - race, a common historical experience, a shared metaphysics - presuppose falsehoods too serious for us to ignore." This does not mean that African or Pan-African identity should always be rejected. The 'useless' and often 'dangerous falsehoods' which create "tags of disability" or "disabling labels" have to be replaced; "another set of stories will build us identities through which we can make more productive alliances."

African identities can thus have different political roles, which makes them a vital issue for debate: "we must argue for or against them case by case". In many contemporary situations in Africa, Appiah argues, "the inscription of difference...plays into the hands of the very exploiters whose shackles we are trying to escape"; "there are times when Africa is not the banner we need." The Pan-Africanism that Appiah argues for is a project which needs to be

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535 Wiredu 1996
536 Wiredu 1996, p. 190
537 Appiah 1992, p. 174
538 Appiah 1992, p. 176. "The are...disabling labels; which is, in essence, my complaint against a racial methodology - The Africa of Crummell and Du Bois (from the New World) and of the bolekaja critics (from the Old); against Africa as a shared metaphysics - the Africa of Soyinka; against Africa as a fancied past of shared glories - the Africa of Diop and the "Egyptianists."
540 Appiah 1992, p. 179 and 180
justified as a relevant and emancipatory, and preferable over other possible political projects that Africans could engage in, rather than as an essential requirement of a given African identity.

A number of discussions on the question of democratic governance in situations of ethnic pluralism follow new approaches as well. The Zimbabwean political scientist Masipula Sithole, for instance, argues that ethnic organizations, instead of erecting an obstacle for a pluralist democracy, "historically represent pressures for representation" and cannot be accommodated better, politically, than in a democratic system that 'plays the game by the rules' and thereby facilitates 'voice' and inclusion. Another interesting discussion is Peter Ekeh's work on the public realm in Africa. The Nigerian Ekeh argues that the perversion of political authority during the era of slavery and colonialism has created an alienation between state and society in Africa. This alienation precludes the emergence of a public sphere on which a democratic system and citizenship can be built. Instead, two 'public' spheres emerged: a realm of the state maintained basically by force, and an ethnic and community based sphere where there is, what might be called, local, individual, community 'citizenship'. The two spheres are so much apart, Ekeh argues, that they even maintain their own systems of taxation of 'public' finance! Any political alternative must take note of this situation of what he calls 'two publics'.

The crucial observation concerning the various examples mentioned here is that they move away from the bipolar models. Such 'depolarization' immediately results in interesting and original discussions which go far beyond the ritual re-statements of worn out stereotypes on multi-partyism, the rule of the community or the rule of the masses. The invitation to consider the question of Africa's future after the age of 'the Great Confrontation' and beyond the standard bipolar models leads to discussing development without encasing it in the fiction of some specific model of 'modernity', cultural resources without choking the diversity at hand in culturalist and essentialist stereotypes, and liberation or emancipation without clouding the political horizon with the chimera of a state of complete liberation in a self-managing community, whether defined as socialism or not.

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542 Ekeh 1994, p. 234-248