



THE CLAMOUR OF VOICES: NEDA, BARACK, AND SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

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Taking up the significance of Neda Agha-Soltan's death in an Iranian street protest and novelist Zadie Smith's analysis of President Obama, I offer an account of society as a "multivoiced body." This body consists of "voices" that at once separate and bind themselves together through their continuous and creative interplay. Viewing society in this manner implies the simultaneous valorization of solidarity, diversity, and the creation of new voices as well as the kind of "hearing others" that makes these three political virtues possible. It also encourages resistance to the always present countertendency of raising a particular voice to the level of the "one true God," "pure race," "Capital," or any other "oracle" that eliminates the dynamism of contesting voices.



Neda and the Vertical Axis of the Social Body



In Persian, the name Neda means "voice." When Neda Agha-Soltan was felled by a bullet during recent protests in the streets of Tehran, many Iranians said she was now "the voice of Iran."¹ In this context,

¹ "Iranian woman's death stirs outrage," NaziliaFathi (*New York Times*), syndicated in *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 25 June 25 2009. In their well-documented paper, "The Power of Tank Man versus Neda: How New Media Iconic Images Penetrate Censorship and Indifference," Maggie Jones Patterson and Virginia Whitehouse provide further details concerning Neda and her death. Besides "voice," Neda also means "divine message." Neda was a music student who tended to be apolitical, choosing not to vote in the elections at that time. But she went to demonstrations and frequently said that she valued "freedom for all people." She was killed close to her car as she left a "Green Revolution" demonstration; a doctor who was fleeing the pervasive tear gas attended to her, in vain, while his friend photographed Neda's ordeal. The right wing Basiji paramilitary that shot her said he intended only to shoot her in the leg. After deciding not to lynch him, the crowd stripped him of his shirt, took his identification card, and released him. The government attempted to cover up the event, imprisoning or coercing witnesses, and prohibiting funeral services on the appropriate day. Her gravestone was vandalized at various times. She appeared as the number one "person who mattered" in *Time* magazine's list for 2009. President Ahmadinejad



voice has several references. One of them, the individual voice of Neda, her force as an enunciator of thoughts and feelings, is silenced forever. She lives on, however, in at least two ways that are relevant for understanding the meaning of voice. The first is the same as for all of us: she helped keep discourses and dialogues alive through her participation in them. When our generation is gone, we will still exist in the voices that continue the conversations to which we contributed. Our immortality lasts as long as the dialogic exchange begun on this planet persists here or elsewhere, that is, as long as the ideas of the past are reshuffled and new ones produced from them.

The second way in which Neda lives on, she may not even have wanted for herself: “the voice of Iran.” Despite the universal scope its proponents give this voice—all of Iran—its possible meanings are more specific. It could mean the voice of Iranian democracy, a social movement that confronts a repressive theocracy. Or it could bear the message attributed to it by its detractors: a desire for Western secularism and material goods at the expense of religious spirituality and the plight of the poor. Despite these possible nuances, the collective status of the voice of Iran helps highlight how all voices exist at two levels at once. The first level is bodily and individual: each voice depends upon the materiality of its signs and the bodily apparatus responsible for its audibility or visibility. This bodily source is part of what makes a voice yours, mine, or Neda’s. In contrast to this bodily level of voice, the second level is discursive and intersubjective: each voice embodies a social discourse, for example, the norms to which professors and students conform in the university classroom. Such a discourse can be articulated in a variety of ways while remaining true to the voice, to the “sense,” that it expresses. Moreover, our enunciation of a discourse is simultaneously its “interpellation” or “subjectification” of us and the things with which we interact. That is, discourses provide us, their enunciators, with identities; they also give names to the things in our surroundings and, by dividing these things up into the relevant and irrelevant, shape our values and the direction of our thoughts and actions. Because of this subjectification, the Iranian protesters are as much the passive vehicles of Neda, the voice of Iran, as they are its active spokespersons and inventors. The dissidents are those who choose to confront the Basiji thugs, the

made various disclaimers about Neda’s death, including that the CIA had shot her. The images of her death spread world-wide. My thanks to Maggie Patterson for generously allowing me to summarize this part of her and Whitehouse’s still unpublished paper. I also wish to thank the *Symposium’s* reviewers for their helpful comments on my paper.

Revolutionary Guard, the show trials, and the other extensions of State power; but they are equally those who find themselves thrown headlong into that conflict.

Along with these two levels or aspects of voice, there is a third, one that concerns the mutual responsiveness of the vocal forces constituting the social body: each one of them interacts with the rest. A voice does not first exist and then act; from the very beginning it addresses or responds to other voices in an effort to maintain or augment its audibility in the social arena. In other words, these voices, and therefore we ourselves, are supremely dialogic creatures. We wake up in the morning already thinking, that is, talking to ourselves or to actual or imaginary others; and this continues until we sleep, often pressing on with new variations in our dreams. We may think that we initiate and direct these dialogues; but it is equally true that they make us their accomplices and carry us along in the exchanges among their constituent voices. If we end one dialogue, we are immediately part of another. Thus society is the dialogic interplay among these voices—an interaction that simultaneously separates and holds them together, forming what I call a multivoiced body.²

These three aspects of voices—their embodiment, discursivity, and mutual responsiveness—constitute the “vertical axis” of society. There is also a “horizontal axis.” But before discussing it, we should note some of methodological advantages of proposing voices as the major unit of society as well as some of the innovative details of the vertical axis that were left behind in the wake of the effort to highlight its three aspects. The first of these details concerns three methodological advantages of proposing voice as the basic unit for understanding society. The first advantage is the most obvious: voice captures the sense in which we are oriented to the political, ethical, and cultural expression of our lives. In other words, it echoes the spirit if not the letter of Aristotle’s famous dictum that we are political animals.³ A second advantage is the flexibility of the term voice.

² Many of the concepts and issues in this paper, in particular the ideas of voices, oracles, and society as a multivoiced body, are explored and defended at length in Fred Evans, *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, ppbk. 2011).

³ Aristotle, in his *Politica*, thought that the State was a “creature of nature,” the ultimate goal of all earlier forms of society and the appropriate setting for those whom nature has “endowed with the gift of speech.” (1253a1–18) Aristotle, *Politica*, (tr.) B. Jowett, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (ed.) R. McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1127–1324. Despite these passages in *Politica*, it is possible that one can accept Aristotle’s general point about persons being

This advantage is made clear when we realize that the concept of voice can stand for macro as well as for micro social formations. It can represent a civilization, nation, or cultural tradition as well as an individual, a family, or an artistic style. We can even speak of the voices of nature or of the gods. Put otherwise, the term voice has the same scope as “identity,” but its meaning reminds us that our identities are something we do rather than just are.⁴ The third methodological advantage of voice is its specificity. A voice embodies a discourse and thus has a particular logic or repertoire of practices associated with it. We can therefore almost always distinguish it from other voices. This is true even though each voice is unfinalizable, even though each expression of its logic, each enunciation or voicing, is a variation of its inexhaustible theme.

The second innovative detail that we had to bypass earlier concerns the nature of our relation to voices. The Iranian protestors *are* Neda, *are* the voice of Iran, but they are only “elliptically” rather than completely identical with it. We are the voices whose discourses we utter, and these voices are us; but they are also always more than us, throwing us headlong into the trajectory set by their impulse toward audibility and interaction with each other. We therefore always have more to say, see and feel than we immediately know. For the same reason, these dialogic exchanges are both personal and anonymous, both our efforts and the forces constituting us.

This seemingly paradoxical status of our relation to voices is possibly due to a prominent structure of many languages, the binary relation between active and passive voice: we can say either that we are doing something or that something is done to us, but have no similar grammatical device for capturing the in-between way we actually exist. We need a new vocabulary to escape this binary logic of the passive and the active and to express the way we continually “become” rather than “are” our voices, as well as the way we find ourselves leaving our previous voices behind and becoming new ones.⁵

We can summarize this elliptical relation between us and voices by saying that in speaking we transform the abstract patterns of

political animals without necessarily linking that status to the existence of a State.

⁴ This is so unless these identities are the ones imposed upon us from those who are ignorant of or ill-disposed toward us. I refer to these imposed identities as “oracles” and treat them in a later section of the paper.

⁵ This “new vocabulary” is discussed in more detail in Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 154–56.

language into voices and their dialogic relations; these voices, in turn, immediately establish the parameters of our existence—our identities—as well as our status as participants in the dialogic movement that characterizes the social body: language becomes dialogue, and subjects become voices. In other words, voices are never merely persons talking to one another; rather, they are the vocal forces that provide us with our ever so clamorous lives.

The third and last innovative detail we need to discuss takes us back to the bodily aspect of voice. The economies, technologies, and other institutions of a society are extensions of our bodies and hence of the voices that we enunciate. Thus Marx is right to say that both workers and owners of the means of production are “personifications” of capital.⁶ Similarly, Freud is correct to speak of technologies as “auxiliary organs” that, once we have put them all on, transform us into “prosthetic Gods.”⁷ We can think of our physical location, our “place,” as including these non-linguistic practices and structures as well as our linguistic formations. Capital, for example, is the dynamic structure or mode of production that Marx and other economists attempt to describe; but it is also the discourses or ideological pronouncements that define, explain, manage, and attempt to justify this economic mode. These structural and linguistic dimensions taken together are the voice of capital, its personification. Indeed, the two dimensions exist together in what Deleuze and Guattari call “reciprocal presupposition”: each interrupts and brings about changes in the other.⁸ In today’s capitalism, for example, the unexpected recession of 2008 has disrupted the certitude and political efficacy of discourses lauding the market’s self-correcting capacity. The voice of market fundamentalism therefore loses some of its audibility and a new voice gains saliency, a more pragmatic discourse that urges us to graft governmental regulatory practices onto the wounded body of capital, modifying it but, perhaps unfortunately, also preserving it, albeit in an altered form. Thus even on the macro level of economics, these bodily and discursive dimensions make voice a useful concept by which to designate social structures.

⁶ Karl Marx, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” in *Capital*, (ed.) E. Mandel (New York: Vintage, 1976), vol. 1, 989–90.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilizations and Its Discontents*, (tr.) and (ed.) J. Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 43–44.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (tr.) B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 145; see also 108, 140–41, 146.

Obama and the Horizontal Axis of the Social Body

The three major aspects of voices that we have considered above—their corporeality, discursiveness, and responsiveness—provide only the vertical axis of society and its multivoiced body. The second or “horizontal” axis of this body is always obscured because it is from the very beginning pulled into the dynamic exchanges of the vertical axis. We can approach the horizontal axis most easily by first considering some often unnoted dimensions of communication. A dialogic exchange between two persons is actually an exchange among a multitude of interlocutors. To be sure, the explicit focus is on what you and I say together and on the theme of our exchange. In the simplest case we could be two interlocutors talking about a common theme from within the parameters of the same discourse. For example, we could both understand the voice of Iran as a passionate appeal for freedom and fair elections. We would then be one voice enunciated by two persons in conversation about the recent Iranian elections. But there is also an implicit dimension of even this conversation: at play within it are all the other ways of voicing Neda’s legacy, including those of the people who oppose it, who favour religious authoritarianism over democracy and see the current protests as a tacit bid for materialism. Indeed, at the margin of this conversation are even more distant voices, for example, the policies of the United States and Israel as well as the broader aspirations of the North and the South, the First and Third Worlds. These other voices are at least an implicit presence and force in the conversation between you and me. As the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, the immediate participants in a dialogue pay these other voices a “side-ward glance” while explicitly conversing about the events of the day within their own common discourse.⁹ Implicitly, then, you and I are surrounded by a veritable cacophony of social discourses. Moreover, we would have to take into account these silent references in order to have the fullest possible understanding of our conversation or any of the variations of the voice of Iran. This task, of course, can only ever be partially fulfilled in practice.

This sketch of a tri-part division within communication—explicit and implicit voices plus a theme—helps us specify the meaning of the horizontal axis of the multivoiced body. But another example will be even more fruitful in articulating this axis in theoretical terms and bringing home its relevance for understanding ourselves and society.

⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, (tr.) C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1984), 196.

In her article on President Obama, "Speaking in Tongues," the British novelist, Zadie Smith, talks about the gains and losses, the richness and the poverty, of acquiring new social languages. Her *original* idiom is the working class tongue of her childhood home, the London district of Willesden; her *later* linguistic acquisition is the literary speech preferred by her peers at Cambridge University. Smith laments that her second tongue and the fame it has gained her as a novelist has come at the price of losing her original dialect. Like the Eliza of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (also known by many as the musical, *My Fair Lady*), she can't go home again, at least not without the awareness that the people in Willesden might view her as a class traitor:

Voices are meant to be unchanging and singular.... We feel that our voices are who we are, and that to have more than one, or to use different versions of a voice for different occasions, represents, at best, a Janus-faced duplicity, and at worst, the loss of our very souls.¹⁰

But Smith continues with this reference to *Pygmalion* and points out that the "apparent didactic moral of Eliza's story" —to "thine own self be true" —is "undercut by the fact of the play itself, which is an orchestra of many voices, simultaneously and perfectly rendered, with no shade of colour or tone sacrificed."¹¹ Smith reinforces this observation by relating her own experience and the trials of Eliza in Shaw's play to the many voices that inhabit Barack Hussein Obama. She highlights his involvement in the black and white cultures of the U.S. as well as his links to Kenya and Indonesia, and to such disparate States as Hawaii and Kansas. She considers Obama to be "a genuinely many-voiced man," one whose story carries the "moral" that "each man must be true to his selves, plural" and to consider them "gifts." Smith goes on to describe what she calls "Dream City," a "place of many voices, where the unified singular self is an illusion" and where "the citizens...prefer to use the collective pronoun 'we' [when referring to themselves individually]."¹² But Dream City is equally Real City, no matter how much we might overlook this or shun the very thought of it. Smith therefore adds a key point to her portrayal of

¹⁰Zadie Smith, "Speaking in Tongues," in *The New York Review of Books*, 26 February 2009, 41. The article is based on a lecture given at the New York Public Library in December 2008.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 41.

¹²*Ibid.*, 42.

Obama. She argues that his “audacity” is to suggest that “most people come from Dream City” —that “purity” or univocity is our greatest and most damaging lie. A lie, we might add, fully exploited by Samuel Huntington and others of the political right who dream of the United States as an Anglo-Saxon cultural monolith.¹³ Obama’s gift to us as President, and from us to ourselves in electing him, is the acknowledgement that we are as individuals and a society what we have always been and too often hidden, a multicultural or multivoiced body.

Despite her insightful treatment of Obama as a “many voiced man,” as a man for whom the pronoun “I” is “too straight and singular a phoneme to represent the true multiplicity of his experi-

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenge to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004). Huntington favours what he calls the “American Creed.” (xvii, 37, 40–41, 62, 104–106, 337, 338–40, 354, 365) This Creed consists primarily of the political principles of liberty, equality, democracy, civil rights, and the rule of law. (338; see also 40–44, where Huntington mentions “individualism” and “private property” as part of the Creed, and 337) Adherents to this Creed can include all races. But Huntington believes that political principles, including those embedded in the Creed, are not enough by themselves to provide people with the common identity required for membership within a “meaningful community” or for steadfast commitment to and defence of a group’s or country’s policies. In addition to the Creed, therefore, immigrants to the United States must “learn America’s language [English], history, and customs, absorb America’s Anglo-Protestant culture, and identify primarily with America rather than with their country of birth.” (337–40; see also 256, 258, 264) In particular, Huntington sees “civil religion” as part of Anglo-Protestant culture and as central to the “American system of government.” This civil religion includes belief in God, belief that Americans are God’s “chosen,” the prevalence of religious symbols in public ceremonies, and the taking on of religious functions by national activities, for example, Memorial Day and Thanksgiving. (104–105) He adds that “[c]ivil religion converts Americans from religious people of many denominations into a nation with the soul of a church” and that “[w]hile the American Creed is Protestantism without God, the American civil religion is Christianity without Christ.” (104–105) This view includes an outright rejection of multiculturalism: “[m]ulticulturalism is in its essence anti-European civilization” or “anti-Western ideology.” (171) In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), he adds that the United States and the West are currently besieged from within and weakened by those who promote multiculturalism: “[T]hey wish to create a country of many civilizations, which is to say a country not belonging to any civilization and lacking a cultural core.” (305–308; see also 318) He insists that standing up to Islam or other civilizations that would challenge the West involves “rejecting the divisive siren calls of multiculturalism” and the internal fragmentation that he thinks such a plurality produces. (307)

ence,”¹⁴Smith talks as if there is a neutral Obama who possesses these several voices. More specifically, she offers a “little theory” of four stages, in which one goes from being “trapped between two...competing belief systems” and winds up with a “creative sense of dissociation in which the claims that are particular to [one’s own voice] seem no stronger than anybody else’s.”¹⁵ But we have already seen that we cannot exist apart from being one voice or another; we are always elliptically identical to a voice and are never a neutral substrate or subject for voices. Our “lead voice” is the viewpoint, style, or logic that predominates in our discourse and practices with regard to ourselves and our human and nonhuman surroundings. We have seen, however, that this lead voice is shot through with the other voices of society. The voices outside of our own also have an existence within our own. Because these other voices maintain a degree of their audibility, our lead voice is not a dead synthesis of the others. Within it the others are still alive and contest with it and each other for greater audibility. Obama, for example, has his own voice, one which many of us are waiting to identify more clearly. But what we already know and celebrate is that it is many sided; the other voices clamour within it and, in response to them, Obama modulates his discourse and administrative policies.

Smith portrays each of us as a “we” and society as a cacophony of voices. But how are we to understand the unity of this “we”? Most societies, and many of us much of the time, order our voices hierarchically. The unity of this hierarchy is the totalizing sort, in which one voice dominates and provides the social discourse to which the rest conform. However, all that Smith and I have said indicate that this totalizing unity is an aberration or act of expediency. It would be more appropriate to think of the “we” in the case of both individuals and society as initially a “unity *composed* of difference,” one that is heterogeneous rather than homogeneous—yet still a unity—and standing in stark contrast to its opposite, a unity *imposed* on difference. The horizontal axis of this multivoiced body would then be akin to Ferdinand Saussure’s idea of a “synchronic system,” one having a “diacritical” form of unity. Rather than a hierarchical system, in which a particular element of the system unifies the rest by dominating or totalizing them, the elements in a diacritical system are established through their differences from each other.¹⁶ For example, the

¹⁴ Smith, “Speaking in Tongues,” 42

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶ Ferdinand Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, (tr.) R. Harris (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 111–20.

meaning of the concept of “blue” is inseparable from those of the other colours in that system; the same is true for “male” and “female” or any other set of related terms. What Saussure and also Jacques Derrida say of signs holds for voices as well: each carries the traces of the others.¹⁷ We can therefore think of the voices of society as initially related to one another in this diacritical manner. This structure is therefore the primary meaning of society’s horizontal axis.

But as part of the multivoiced body, this horizontal axis and its purely diacritical relationships are already and forever transformed by the vertical or diachronic axis of society. The formal relations of difference on the horizontal axis become those of citation. In the contestation among voices to maintain or increase their audibility, each of them cites the others. This citing usually involves incorporating parts of the other voice’s discourse into one’s own or, alternatively, rejecting the other voice. Either way, the differences that were diacritically constitutive of one’s own voice on the horizontal or synchronic axis now become forces that actively influence the content of one’s own voice on the vertical or diachronic axis. Thus the rejection of religious autocracy by the protesters in the streets of Iran gives Neda’s voice, as appropriated by them, a slant toward a more democratic idea of religion and politics. In synchrony with this rejection, their discourse also incorporates into itself talk of “fair elections,” “free speech,” “right to assembly” and other fragments of western democratic discourse as well as of former and even contemporary Iranian and Islamic political idioms.¹⁸ Similarly, Obama’s politics are defined in part by his rejection of U.S. conservatism. In order to succeed with his health care reform, however, he found himself having to incorporate in his proposals more of the conservatives’ emphasis on the role of private enterprise and limited government than he might have wanted. Either way, by rejection or incorporation, other voices always remain simultaneously part of the identity and the other or alterity of our own.¹⁹ More precisely, the

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, (tr.) A. Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 26.

¹⁸ See John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009), and his discussion there of early Islamic democratic practices and documents. Prior to the Shah of Iran, Iran had democratically elected leaders.

¹⁹ Even when we reject another voice, it affects us and thus is part of our voice or identity. Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of “negative prehensions” captures the role of these exclusions in the formation of systems of feelings and beliefs: “The negative prehensions have their own subjective forms which they contribute to the process [of self-constitution]. A feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth; it

diacritical relation among voices along with the more dynamic process of citation ensures that each voice is a dialogic hybrid of all the rest. But each voice is also its own way of nuancing these other discourses, its own way of being this hybrid reality. Indeed, what philosophers call our “singularity” or uniqueness is the way our particular dialogic histories shape the coming together of these other voices within our own.²⁰ Each of us is a microcosm of the social macrocosm, but differently.

Within the multivoiced body, then, the logical relations of diacritical difference become those of dynamic citation. Moreover, this ceaseless citation of each other’s social idioms means that we are constantly producing changes in each other’s discourse. Indeed, new voices are created whether intended or not. Thus Obama’s voice is the product of all those other voices referred to by Smith in her article on his many “tongues.” Similarly, the idea of the multivoiced body is itself a hybrid: it is generated from and contests with Modernity’s emphasis upon unity and post-modernism’s penchant for difference and novelty. Even more startling, the diacritical form of unity among these voices means that the creation of a new one changes the identity of all the rest. Just as a new colour or a new sex would change the meaning of the colour and gender concepts in the systems involving those terms, so the inclusion of a new voice in the multivoiced body changes all the others. We can even say that the very being of this body is its continual metamorphosis—that it is a Deleuzian line of variation, always the same and always different.²¹

The metamorphosis of society carries an implication that is more far-reaching than we might expect at first glance. Specifically, the creation of a new voice affects all the other voices in existence even if the event is local, say just between you and me right now. We, the producers of this new voice, may be immediately aware of it and the changes it makes in our identity. But far-away others are more indirectly affected by it even if they are not conscious of it. The new

recollects as a subjective emotion its struggle for existence; it retains the impress of what it might have been, but is not.” See his *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 226–27. See also Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 2: *Within a Budding Grove*, (tr.) C. Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin, (rev.) D. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 185–86: “A powerful idea communicates some of its power to the man who contradicts it... The final verdict is always to some extent the work of both parties to a discussion.”

²⁰ For an interesting characterization of “singularity,” see, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, (tr.) M. Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 406–407.

voice is as much a part of their immediate dialogue as it is of ours, but it has a saliency that is lower in theirs than in ours; its audibility is less for them and hence so is its immediate influence on their discourses. If events happen that shake up the current hierarchical ordering of the salencies of the voices resounding in their own, then the power of this new one might increase and make itself more evident in their dialogues. Indeed, the simultaneous discovery of new ideas by people who are not in direct communication with each other might serve as evidence for the immediate and universal, but at least initially differentiated, audibility of a new voice in a multivoiced body that includes us all.

This way of articulating the pervasiveness of voices within the social body is akin to some of Ferdinand Saussure's remarks on language. According to Saussure, we never exist outside the diacritical system of our common language. Moreover, this language "is never complete in any single individual, but exists perfectly only in the collectivity."²² When I say I speak English, I imply a certain totality—my language—but not that every part of it is lodged in my brain. However, the ease of access I have to these other parts, to "discovering them" while using the language or learning them from others (as if they fit a pre-existent pattern), suggests that *I* am lodged in the language of my linguistic community, even if not all of it is immediately accessible to me. Translating Saussure into my own idiom, I am part of the multivoiced body, and therefore all of its voices are part of mine (and at the same time my other) even if some of them influence me more immediately and with greater effect than others.²³

Oracles and the Multivoiced Body

We can already begin to see what the ethical and political implications might be when we recognize that society is a multivoiced body with vertical and horizontal axes. Before these implications can be

²² Saussure, *General Linguistics*, 13.

²³ I am very grateful to a criticism by Emiliano Diaz for alerting me to the necessity of clarifying this part of the meaning of the "multivoiced body." There is a "pluralistic" alternative to this relatively monistic view: one can hold that a society of voices is elastic in that it can always include new voices within its circle; thus voices outside our society are not included in or heard by ours on any level until they have actually entered the circle. Once entered, however, they become part of our identity and our other at the same time. The difficult notion of "elasticity" replaces the idea of a range of "saliency" proffered by the more monistic model.

fully stated, however, it is necessary first to explore the darker side of this creative tension among the voices of society. For the history of the social body has been dominated by a contrary tendency. The current theocratic government in Iran, as well as the secular monarchical regime of the Shah that preceded it, are examples of what I call "oracles." So are the market and religious fundamentalism and the racist and patriarchal tendencies that have dominated politics in the United States and still threaten Obama's hopes of health care, environmental, and other policy reforms.

More specifically, an oracle is a voice that is raised to the level of a universal and necessary truth, as the one true God, the pure race, or any other non-revisable discourse. Such a discourse ultimately dictates the decrease of the audibility of the other voices in society and thus blocks the creation of new voices and the metamorphosis of society. These oracles can take two forms, redeemable or irredeemable. Redeemable oracles are comprehensive doctrines like communism or capitalism that may initially present themselves as non-revisable but nonetheless do not inherently preclude hearing other voices and, as a result, changing their primary discourse. For example, communism can change from a vanguard party politics to a democratic form of polity that affirms a collectivist version of society as a multivoiced body; and capitalism can permit regulations that place it primarily in the service of fulfilling people's needs and only secondarily as a means of gaining profits. These doctrines still remain communism and capitalism, but differently than their more common historical forms to date. We can also imagine some religions being open in this way. On the other hand, oracles like white supremacy (or other forms of racism), patriarchy, homophobia, and classism are fundamentally closed comprehensive doctrines. It is impossible for them to hear the voices of those they exclude without rejecting totally their own basic doctrines, that is, the restrictive form of life that they primarily are. This closed type of oracle is ultimately nihilistic in that it must disown and negate the very multivoiced body from which it and all other voices emerge. To do otherwise would involve a commitment to hear the voices they declare unworthy of their ears. Because of their inherent intransience, these doctrines are irredeemable. It is possible, however, that the persons enunciating these voices are redeemable—they might become another, non-oracular voice in the ongoing interplay among the participants of the social body.

Just as communication produces new voices and metamorphosis, so another factor endogenous to society gives rise to oracles. Because of the creative tension among the many voices resounding

within our own, we always have a barely perceptible anxiety of being overwhelmed by their presence. When we are threatened by invasion, epidemic, economic calamity, or similar disturbances, this anxiety is exacerbated and we tend to raise one voice to the level of an oracle and diminish the audibility of the other voices and the creative interplay among them. The oracle inculcates a narrow identity in our lead voices, further limiting the interaction among the voices of the community and calling for yet an even narrower range of what is considered acceptable. Thus the Iranian government exacerbates fear of the protestors' idea of democracy by linking it to the threat of western influence and possible invasion. The right wing in the U.S. does something similar by attempting to connect Obama's health care plans with what they call "socialism" and the phantom of the former Soviet Union. Two other examples are pertinent: President Ronald Regan's use of "evil empire" to refer to the Soviet Union and President George W. Bush's inclusion of Iran, North Korea, and Iraq in what he famously called an "axis of evil." "Evil" means that there's no need to listen to what the other side might have to say, that elimination of them is warranted without further adieu. In the most extreme case, the increased fear of otherness due to this ever-narrowing identity and greater exclusivity can lead to mutilation of living and dead bodies, mass rape, and other forms of violence that are far in excess of what would be needed to fulfil goals of self-interest alone. In other words, the multivoiced body becomes a society turned against itself, a sacrifice of its heterogeneity and fecundity, of its ongoing metamorphosis, to a rigid solidarity built on fear, hatred, and violence.

Society can and often does turn against itself. But even then it carries a counter-memory of itself as a creative interplay of voices, of the simultaneous affirmation of solidarity, heterogeneity, and fecundity. In her essay on Obama, Smith alludes to this sort of counter-memory and one kind of resistance to oracles it can provide. She describes the violence of Britain's war between Catholics and Protestants and how William Shakespeare used the "many-voiced theatre" to do what the enunciators of the competing religious oracles could not do: "speak simultaneous truths" and thus "live in freedom."²⁴ Shakespeare therefore represents one of the ways in which the multivoiced body tries to resist its nihilistic turn against itself. Moreover, the existence of oracles as reactions to convenient evil others has at least one advantage: it inadvertently makes sure

²⁴Smith, "Speaking in Tongues," 43.

that an alternative voice is kept in mind, no matter how maligned by the current oracle.

The Political Dimension of the Multivoiced Body

Now that we have a fuller picture of society as a multivoiced body, of its two axes, of voices and oracles, we can characterize democracy, justice, and citizenship in its terms and resolve two problems that threaten the very concept of this body. As stated before, each voice is simultaneously part of the identity and the other of the rest. The spontaneous affirmation of one's own voice is therefore the affirmation of the others and their difference from us. More concretely, the spontaneous affirmation of one's own voice is accomplished simply by the very act of uttering any of the locutions belonging to it; but our affirmation of others and their voices consists in hearing them in an open manner, that is, in a manner that leaves one's own discourse open to revision in the light of what they say. Such openness, when it actually occurs, also makes possible the creation of new voices. Indeed, the ethic of the multivoiced body borrows from what Nietzsche calls "the gift-giving virtue"²⁵: we must hear other voices in a way that willingly puts at risk the integrality of our own discourse; but this mode of hearing is a gift in that it contributes to the production of new voices and the metamorphosis of society.

This ethics is also the basis of the principle of justice for society: the creative interplay among equally audible voices. Indeed, this idea of hearing others characterizes democracy as the attempt to affirm the social body's solidarity, heterogeneity, and fecundity at once. It also requires that we resist oracles and their efforts to limit or eliminate the creative tension among the voices of society. Thus the positive side of the idea of a multivoiced body is its affirmation of its three political virtues: solidarity, heterogeneity, and fecundity; and the negative but necessary side of this idea is its call for resistance to oracles.

The multivoiced body view of society also gives us a new way of understanding citizenship. The two major paradigms of citizenship today are communitarianism and liberalism.²⁶ Communitarianism

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, (ed.) and (tr.) W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1968), 187.

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of this issue and the points I make below, see Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, Chapter 10; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 209–210, and *passim*; Greg M. Nielsen's extended treatment of *ethnos* and *demos* in his *The Norms of An-*

appeals to religion, race, tradition or some other common identity, some other notion of the good, that the members of society are thought to share. Although these values and the solidarity they inspire are often effective in motivating acts of citizenship in their name, they tend to be narrow and exclude those who do not fit the identity or accept the privileged notion of the good. In other words, this constricted brand of solidarity and the allegiance or acts of citizenship it inspires requires the sacrifice of heterogeneity and fecundity. This sacrifice seems to fit the current Iranian theocracy and its identification with an interpretation of Islam that emphasizes a draconian idea of evil versus good.

In contrast to communitarianism, liberalism tends toward a type of all-inclusive universalism. Its appeal to abstract rights and democratic procedures tolerates a broad variety of identities and ideas of the good. Thus President Obama embraces a multicultural understanding of U.S. democracy that at least implicitly rejects the efforts of Samuel Huntington and other conservatives to base American democracy on strictly Anglo-Protestant values. But the abstractness of the rights and principles of such liberalism have great difficulty in outweighing the power of identity as a motivating factor for acts of citizenship: we all too easily engage in unnecessary wars and even the torture of those who we see as outside “our own kind.” In other words, liberalism appears to sacrifice solidarity in the name of heterogeneity, at least in the form of voting and other individual rights.

In contrast to both these positions, the multivoiced body view of society combines the communitarian emphasis on identity with the liberal’s penchant for universalism. Because our own lead voice is shot through with all the rest, because each is part of the identity and the other of the rest simultaneously, our spontaneous affirmation of our own voice is also the valorization of the multitude resounding within our own voice. It is therefore also the affirmation of the multivoiced body and its three political virtues. We therefore have a double-citizenship or identity. We may identify with a national or other lead voice and thus be *legal* citizens of a nation-state. But we also have *substantial* membership in a multivoiced body that includes all actual and possible voices. Because of this inclusiveness,

swerability: Social Theory Between Bakhtin and Habermas(Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); as well as Janna Thompson, “Community Identity and World Citizenship,” in *Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy*, (ed.) D. Archibugi, D. Held and M. Köhler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 188–90, and *passim*.

our substantial membership in the multivoiced body is communitarian and universal at once. Moreover, this universal membership does not efface the more particular identity of our lead voice: each of us is a member of the multivoiced body, each of us is shot through with all the other voices of society, but as, and only as, a different particular identity. Once we recognize this dual citizenship, one legal the other substantial²⁷, once we absorb that we and our society are hybrids rather than “pure” or univocal voices, that justice amounts to being ourselves, to fulfilling our dual identity, we will be more motivated to be just. The fulfilment of our dual identity, then, involves carrying out acts of citizenship that affirm us and the other voices making up the global body to which we all belong.

Besides its capacity to motivate acts of citizenship that are inclusive, the view of society as a multivoiced body and of its members as holding dual citizenship offers a number of advantages as a theory of democracy. We have seen that the very being of this body goes beyond the solidarity and heterogeneity of its voices: it includes the creation of new voices and the metamorphosis of society. With respect to the first part of this statement, that is, the values of solidarity and heterogeneity, pursuing justice does not mean simply that interlocutors respect and avoid violating the rights of others; it means that they engage in and promote programs that seek to increase the audibility of the other voices in society as well as their own. Unlike traditional views of justice and their emphasis on “freedom from” coercion, the multivoiced body endorses “freedom for” greater audibility, that is, the empowerment of voices and the encouragement rather than mere tolerance of dissent. This activist orientation holds even though the voices of society are continually contesting with one another for audibility and, in many cases, for the role of “lead” voice in society.

The second part of the principle of justice goes even further than the commendation to be proponents of equal audibility. It reminds us that the engaged form of hearing and speaking we discussed earlier (openness to revision of one’s own social discourse in light of other discourses) involves the creation of new voices and hence the metamorphosis of society. This creativity is therefore also part of society’s good and an aspect of what is meant by doing right by ourselves and society, that is, by being just. Justice, then, includes creating new voices and metamorphosis as well as promoting the

²⁷ Of course, we may have ethnic, political, or other “local” identities besides or in place of this “legal” identity—and we may still have them along with our substantial multivoiced body identity.

audibility of and interplay among voices. In other words, justice is a way of life and not just a series of “don’ts” or formal procedures.

Understood in this way, the principle of the interplay of equally audible voices is a radical notion of justice and of democracy as well. It urges us to embrace the values of solidarity (interplay and mutual immanence), heterogeneity (mutual transcendence), and creativity (production of new voices and metamorphoses). Moreover, its equal emphasis on these three values discourages us from eliminating one of them in the name of another: solidarity cannot become a univocal voice that would eliminate difference and novelty; heterogeneity cannot become a plurality of voices that cease or minimize the creative interplay that holds them together; and fecundity cannot become a futurism that silences or dismisses any voice that fails to follow the command to create at the expense of all else. These observations on justice allow us to sum them up as follows: *justice is the orientation of the multivoiced body—the creative interplay among voices—when it is not dominated by an oracle*. When the social body is dominated by an oracle, the creative interplay of equally audible voices still remains as the principle and latent tendency of that body. Indeed, justice is no more and no less than the performance of democracy, understood as the creative tension among voices simultaneously contesting and promoting each other’s audibility.

This view of justice also endorses economic democracy in general and democratization of the workplace in particular. This endorsement is not based just on the support that workplace democracy might give to equality in the political sphere; it reflects the fact that dialogic exchange is definitive of human existence. To refuse such democracy in the workplace is therefore a violation of what we are as human beings. There are some specific situations, of course, when democratization may not be possible in practice. But these exceptions, if they are to have legitimacy, must always be shown as necessary supports for the long-term maintenance or establishment of democracy.

Despite these democratic virtues, the very idea of the clamorous body raises a problem that would seem to undermine any value it might have. For doesn’t the affirmation of the other voices of society include racist, sexist, and other nihilistic discourses, that is, voices whose enunciators, in the name of an impossible “purity,” deny their dialogic hybridity and their origin in the multivoiced body? But if I am right in claiming that society is a multivoiced body and that each voice is a dialogic hybrid, then the very denial by these social discourses of their origin legitimates us in doing what would have seemed to be a paradox: to exclude the excluders. We have to *hear*

the enunciators of these nihilistic voices for both structural and pragmatic reasons²⁸, but we cannot justifiably give them a *policy-making* role in a body that they repudiate in principle. Oracles of this nihilistic sort, then, are aberrations, albeit ones that have been made all too prevalent historically and geographically due to our too easily exacerbated fear of diversity and novelty. These aberrant voices are therefore the proper target of acts of citizenship such as protesting in the name of Neda as the voice of Iran, voting for Obama as the herald of a multicultural society, and Shakespeare's use of literature and the arts as a form of resistance to the religious oracles of his time.

However, this attempt to exclude the excluders opens the multivoiced body view to a second objection. This objection points out that the view itself appears to be an oracle. My response to this objection is to agree that my concept of society is an oracle, but to show that it is simultaneously an anti-oracle. The multivoiced body view is an oracle because it provides a utopian vision of society as well as a direction for critical thought and political activism. As we have seen, this utopian vision is the solidarity, heterogeneity, and fecundity of society; and the political direction it prescribes and motivates is the fulfilment of the principle of justice through special acts of citizenship. But this view of society is also an anti-oracle because the very idea of it is in principle unfinalizable. Our affirmation of the multivoiced body commits us to hear other voices and thus to remain open to possible revisions of our idea of this body. This commitment, in other words, valorizes the very conditions that maintain the idea of the multivoiced body as a lure for new articulations of itself and thus for the unending contestation over which version of it will represent society at any given time. Stated more succinctly, the status of this dynamic body as the continual production of new versions of itself intrinsically undermines any finalized idea of the nature of that body.

This reason for the anti-utopian character of the multivoiced body is stronger than it may at first appear. The multivoiced body not only acts as a lure for articulations of itself; it invites divergent

²⁸ Structurally, the voices are interrelated and so necessarily hear one another. Pragmatically, silencing even nihilistic voices would dampen discourse in general, prohibit fuller determination of the meaning of a voice's associated discourse (a task that must remain open for continual reconsideration of the discourse in question), and decrease the likelihood of the enunciators of a voice from changing their mind and becoming another voice. These reasons are elaborated further worked in Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 269–70.

rather than convergent versions of itself, new voices rather than closer approximations to old truths. And yet these divergences, as divergences *of* the idea of the multivoiced body and not, say, of fascism or any other idea of society, fall within the range permitted by this generative and essentially incomplete or inexhaustible idea. The idea differs, then, from the convergence-orientation implicit in Kantian regulative ideals and phenomenological horizons.²⁹ In operational terms, the anti-utopian aspect of this body acts as a disrupter of any pretender to the throne, of any oracle that would attempt to give it a final destination or claim to be intrinsically closer to the right path than other articulations of this vision of society.

To summarize these claims and this paper, the idea of society as a multivoiced body is oracular in that it provides a utopian vision of society; but it is equally anti-oracular in that it intrinsically undermines any attempt to present an articulation of itself as final or even as closer to it than are other articulations. For practical or political reasons one articulation will usually win out over another, but never because it is closer to some absolute standard of what this body would be. Because these articulations of the idea of the multivoiced body are not final, and insofar as they affirm the heterogeneity, solidarity, and creativity of society, they will always accord with the spirit of the social body, will always be preferable to the oracles that declare themselves to be the unchangeable truth and are for that very reason the antithesis of society and the dialogic hybridity of its voices. As Smith says, the voice of Neda, or that of Obama or Shakespeare, is many voices. In particular, each of these voices is the interplay among the others resounding within it, a social solidarity that thrives on heterogeneity, produces new social discourses, and continually metamorphoses itself.

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²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, (tr.) K. Smith (London: The Macmillan Press, 1933), 210–11. For the idea of “horizon,” Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, (tr.) D. Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 149, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (tr.) C. Smith (London: Routledge, 1962, reprinted 1989), 503.