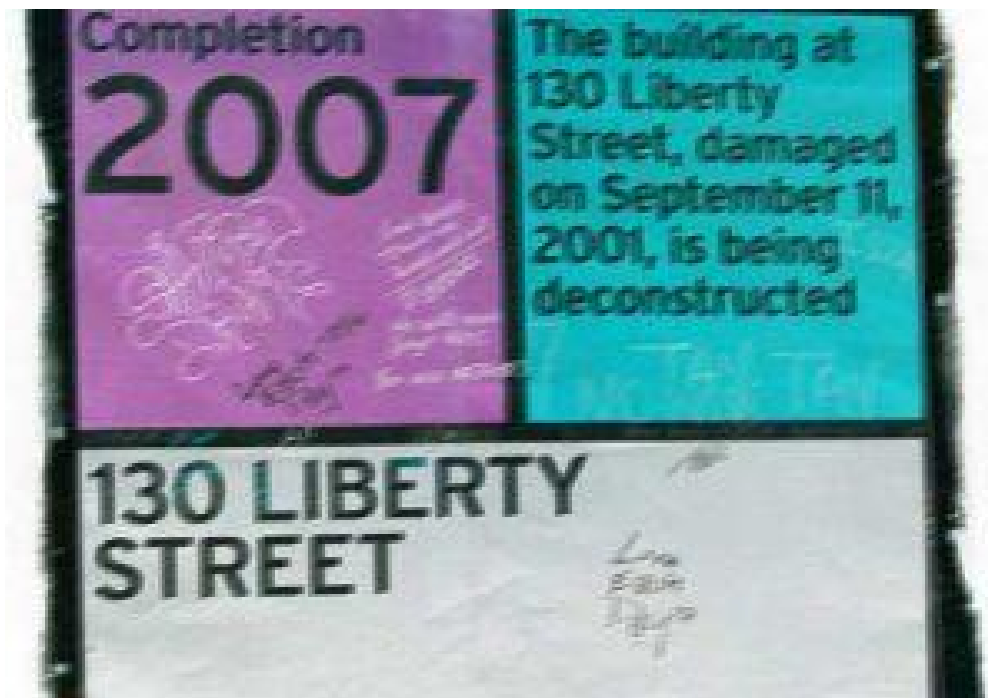


2008 Vol 8 Issue No. 1 — Democracy Under Fire

> EDITORIAL

This issue of Transformations concerns the idea of democracy and its uses and abuses in various contexts of public debate and analysis. Democracy is always more than an idea expressing the core values of liberty, equality and fraternity. It is also a discursive concept: a product of the way meaning is circulated, practiced, structured and embodied in human action and thought. Democracy is, if you like, a rhetorical figure in a broader set of strategies related to power and its capacity to organize, maintain and reproduce belief systems. As such, democracy is both an ideal held forth as something towards which we should aim or which we should defend, and at the same time, a signifier in a strategy of power in which the stakes are always reducible to sectional interests of various kinds.



It is the view of this journal that democracy is not an already completed task, but an ongoing project requiring constant critical engagement across wide social and cultural fields, especially in the field of education where democratic principles should be foundational for

the curriculum. Democracy can only work as democracy in a climate of critique and rigorous debate, against the tendency in institutions of power towards dogmatism and ideological closure. All of the articles in this issue of Transformations engage critically with the ideological closure of meaning that inhabits institutions and discourses, especially the media. They expose democracy and its associated ideas to its own discursive strategies, thereby making it available for refiguring and redeployment.

The lead article, by Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler, entitled "The War on English: An Answer to the Question, What is Postmodernism?" takes up the debate in Australia around the issue of "critical literacy" as a strategy in the teaching of English in secondary schools, and exposes the misreadings associated with the word "postmodernism" by conservative commentators, especially as a catchword for cultural relativism. Lucy and Mickler expose these misreadings as attempts to portray critical literacy as an enemy of democracy. Upholding Enlightenment values and the spirit of critique first proposed by Kant, Lucy and Mickler engage in a counter-attack by arguing that "If it is 'postmodern' to ask after the conditions under which the meaning of a text might be said to occur, it is therefore also democratic to do so."

The article by Elaine Kelly, entitled "Democratic Hospitalities: national borders and the impossibility of the other for democracy" examines the politics of hospitality related to the immigration debate in Australia, and the controversies surrounding the previous Liberal coalition government led by John Howard in its handling of asylum seekers. Kelly invokes Jacques Derrida's and Giorgio Agamben's work on the logic of democracy as an aporia in Western discourse, requiring careful unpacking and exposure to critique. Terry Eysen's article entitled "Democracy of the Civil Dead: The Blind Trade in Citizenship" critiques the idea of the citizen in democracy as a subjectivity bound to the contractual logic of exchange. Drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, he develops an alternative concept of the "denizen" as an exposure "which opens up the state to contestation and the possibility of a democracy worth its name." In her article entitled "Judith Butler, Gender, Radical Democracy: What's Lacking?," Julie MacKenzie critiques Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in terms of radical democracy proposed by Chantal Mouffe and others. Defending Butler against the charge of linguistic idealism, she argues that Butler's theory of performativity offers a materialist account of democracy in terms of singular, contingent iterations.

In "Democracy Now! Decolonising US News Media," Kevin Howley describes the practices of non-commercial public radio broadcasting in the USA, in particular, the Democracy Now! radio station and its agenda to provide a space for independent critical comment on political issues, and promote participatory democracy in the face of the all encompassing corporate-state nexus of media power. In a similar vein, Henk Huijser and Janine Little, in

their article entitled "GetUp! for what? Issues Driven Democracy in a Transforming Public Sphere," examine the Australian on-line media outlet GetUp!, its impact on the recent Australian federal elections, and its potential to help drive participatory democracy in the public sphere. Ben Isakhan's article entitled "Oriental Despotism" and the Democratisation of Iraq in The Australian" is concerned with the way democratic ideas are used in the mainstream Australian press, in this case, the figure of the oriental despot, as a way of characterizing debates about Islam and terrorism and its framing in Orientalist discourse.