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Between Habermas and Rancière: The Democracy of Political Translation

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In this essay I outline a political model of democratic translation as a method of resolution in cases of possible crises of representative and deliberative democracy models. My outline links two opposite poles of the theoretical spectrum: Habermas's idea of democracy as a space of deliberation and dialogue and Rancière's thesis of the impossibility of rational deliberation that is free from power. Taking my cue from Rancière, I suggest conceiving of political deliberation as based on "disagreement," a type of political differences of opinion that have nothing to do with common misunderstandings and everything to do with unequal power relations within consensus-democratic public spheres. Finally, I show how power-ridden public stages can be translated into a democratic public sphere that is political because it transforms social relations – and translates them into more just relations. The democratic praxis of political translation lies in the interstice of Habermas's dialogical stage and Rancière's impotentiality, which I empirically examine using examples from social movements and translators who go on strike and speak (out).

A long, ongoing debate between political theory and philosophy concerning the transnational public sphere and the multiplicity of languages forms the theoretical basis for my considerations (e.g., Fraser 2007; Nanz 2006). A common opinion in political philosophy and empirical research on democracy is that the "Babylonian" multiplicity of languages is the reason for the increasing crisis of democracy within the context of global migration, European integration and cultural heterogeneity (e.g. Parijs 2011; Putnam 2007). Thinkers like Jürgen Habermas, however, suggest the contrary, namely that political dialogue and democracy are translatable on the European Union level and within new postnational public spheres (Habermas 1996, 2005, 2008). While part of European democracy research assumes language and culture barriers to be structural stumbling blocks for democratic public spheres, other theorists argue similar to Habermas that democracy is possible within the multilingual public sphere of Europe (Kantner 2004; Nanz 2006). Linguistic philosophers inspired by Habermas, however, base their definition of the political public sphere on the existence of an intersubjective, deliberative (or dialogical) communication (Kantner 2004; Nanz 2006).

The Impossibility of Understanding and the Invention of a Politics of Translation

The current crisis of European politics, however, points to a failure of democratic dialogues beyond the nation state, which also indicates reconsidering and expanding on the idea of transnational democratic deliberation – to include the question of the impossibility, the untranslatability and the failure of political dialogues. Is the current crisis of European democracy, then, a

crisis of translation, the expected repetition of the Babylonian language conflict within a multinational entity, as skeptics have long expected? On the other hand, does this not imply that we must also consider European politics as lacking the faculty to speak beyond conventional language and cultural barriers? What exactly is the problem of translation within the context of European politics?

In *Disagreement*, French philosopher Jacques Rancière proposes an interesting counter-model to Habermas's deliberative public sphere. In diametric opposition to Habermas, Rancière thus claims that misunderstandings – and not the basic assumption that dialogue is possible – are the underlying beginnings of democratic politics. "We should take disagreement to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying" (Rancière 1999: x). Rancière places great emphasis on showing that disagreement is a power-based misunderstanding between poor and rich, who are in a struggle with each other about a more equal distribution, but cannot take place at the same table – because there is no place for the poor, their political position is not recognized, accepted and therefore also not *understood* as a matter of negotiation.

Rancière's thesis has a certain relevance today, as the latest media analyses show that there is a split in the debate on the European debt crisis along national lines, which appear to *divide* the European *community* into poor and rich countries, into creditors and debtor states. In the following, I will argue that, as an alternative to the usual models of deliberative politics, Rancière's counter-model provides us with a method for clarifying the ongoing crisis of the European public sphere and democracy. I will show how Rancière's model helps us to grasp the difficulties of

translating democracy beyond language barriers in the strict sense, precisely by interpreting misunderstandings as being beyond language and yet related to the possibility to speak as such. With this approach, Rancière fills a crucial gap in research on transnational politics and a political translation of democracy in Europe.

Interestingly, Rancière argues that the assumption of the possibility of a rational, consensus-oriented dialogue in Habermasian terms fails to take into account a specific kind of misunderstanding: *disagreement* (Rancière 1999: xii, 43). According to Rancière, disagreement is not a simple misunderstanding "stemming from the imprecise nature of words," the "ambiguity of the words exchanged" (Rancière 1999: x) or from differences between languages, instead it is based on differences in power where there is contention over the speech situation itself and where the relation of the speakers to one another is constituted:

"Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it. [...] An extreme form of disagreement is where X cannot see the common object Y is presenting because X cannot comprehend that the sounds uttered by Y form words and chains of words similar to X's own." (Rancière 1999: x–xii).

In his discussion of the "rationality of disagreement," Rancière demonstrates the limits of understanding in Habermasian terms as consensus-oriented rationality, and suggests a positive understanding of disagreement as the beginning of an urgent need for a politics of interpretation. It is precisely this possibility of a politics of translation that, as I would like to show, seeks to reinvent social relations and create a more just speech-situation as

such. Interestingly, Rancière presents the opposite extreme of disagreement by contrasting it with Habermas's intersubjective communication, which is conceived as an "ideal speech situation" that operates without power differences (Habermas 1973: 258).[1] In this classic situation of political dialogue, those in power can hear but "cannot see" what their interlocutors mean (Rancière 1999: xi–xii).

Rancière paradigmatically interprets the misunderstood question of "do you understand?" as a "performative contradiction" (Rancière 1999: 44–45). The duplicity of the question lies in the fact that, in common language, "do you understand?" is both an order and a question to clarify if one has been understood in the sense of models of deliberative democracy. With this critique, Rancière aptly illustrates the situations of possible power asymmetries, which Habermas's presumption of an ideal speech situation theoretically precludes – thereby reducing the scope of models of deliberative democracy. For Rancière, "do you understand?" is an expression that tells us that "understanding" means two different, if not contrary, things: to understand a problem and – in speech situations with extremely asymmetrical power relations – to understand an order (Rancière 1999: 45). The "law of power" is what leads to the performative contradiction here, to the unequal division of the world of the logos: by responding to the speaker with "yes, we understand," those to whom the order is addressed affirm the unequal relation, whereby the one giving the orders becomes a speaking and thinking being. By understanding, they consent to a relationship of inequality that defines them as those who carry out the order, while the one giving the order becomes the speaker, the thinker for those who carry out – thus creating a democratic dichotomy consisting of "experts and ignorant fools,"

and indicating a crisis of consensus democracy in a post-democratic era (Rancière 1999: 14, 45–46).

The Beginning of an Interpretation of Politics: The 'Third People' Who Go on Strike and Speak (Out)

Within the context of the current debates on the European Union debt crisis and following Rancière, it could be concluded that democratic understanding, in a Habermasian sense, is an illusion because, according to the logic of consensus democracy, the experts' word and the sum of the carefully calculated "counted" votes paradoxically make egalitarian distribution impossible (Rancière 1999: 101f.). Unlike Jean-Francois Lyotard, Rancière's model does not end with the premise of an irreconcilable "*differend*" (Lyotard 1988), a structural untranslatability of politics (Rancière 1999: xii). On the contrary, Rancière takes the existing disagreement and derives from it a positive term for the "return of politics" (Rancière 1999: 92). My argument here largely refers to a passage where Rancière frames disagreement as a positive model of politics as *political interpretation* – or, as I will argue here – "political translation."

According to Rancière, a key element in forming a democratic notion of politics – which I suggest here as a model for a justice-oriented politics of translation – is the initial turn or transformation; the basic political, democratic reversal where *politics* "block" the initial relationship of brutal inequality between rich and poor, allowing those who have no part to have a part (Rancière 1999: 14), allowing the nameless to write a "name in the sky" and thus a material "place" within the symbolic order of the community (Rancière 1999: 25, 29–30). Rancière uses the example of the Scythian slave revolt to show that political translation is a contentious dialogue and not simply a form of rebellion. Drawing

on Herodot's tale of the slave revolt, he demonstrates that in order to achieve political equality within a community, the "rich" must recognize the "poor," but that the slaves' attempt to achieve this solely by war is unsuccessful (Rancière 1999: 13). In an astonishing manner, Rancière uses a second tale to argue that such recognition would indeed be successful the moment the poor were actually able to *convince* the rich that, like them, they possess the political faculty for speech. To this end, Rancière introduces a tale by French thinker Ballanche, who traces the advent of a new era of political struggle in Ancient Rome by explaining the succession of the plebes and their rebellion against the patricians, the only ones entitled to vote. In their speeches before the Roman Senate the rich patricians refused to believe that the plebes – those poor and working, yet without means, who went on strike and assembled on Aventine, the southernmost hill of Rome – actually possessed the faculty of speech: "They have speech like us, they dared tell Menenius!" (Ballanche in Rancière 1999: 24).

For Rancière, the Roman senators' speech demonstrates the exacerbated problem of disagreement as a situation in which it is impossible for dominant groups and/or political experts to hear those "without a name." For the plebes in Ancient Rome, being without a name also meant having "no place under the sky," for only those whose families owned land had names, those whose families could pass on the privileges of their lineage and had bought a place in the senate – the plebes without means, however, dared "delegate one of their number" as a democratic speaker (Rancière 1999: 24). An important point for Rancière is that this speaker was a third person who only *became* the speaker once the collective thought up a name especially for him (the name "Brutus"). According to Rancière, this act of naming gives a heterogeneous group of the "nameless" intelligent speech, as they

themselves claim to be the "demos," which, according to the tale, surprisingly leads the reluctant patricians to recognize the collective (Rancière 1999: 25). Following Rancière, the real scandal and actual success of the political constitution of "that hoard who had nothing" (Rancière 1999: 9) as the demos was that the naming and resistance of this rebellious group immediately led to a symbolic and ultimately *political* transformation of the relation between the patricians and the plebes. In arguing this, Rancière speaks about the immediate confusion of the patricians when the plebes proclaimed themselves the demos, how scandalously outraged the senators were over their audacity to do so – and, surprisingly, the secret council of old wise men's subsequent recognition of the plebes, and their concession to speak with the plebes because, whether they liked it or not, they had become "creatures of speech" (Rancière 1999: 26). The plebes' truly political speech transgressed the symbolic order and thus forcibly shifted the patricians' identity as the dominant group – leading to political consequences.

According to Rancière, a politics that acknowledges those without means as the demos, one that not only dares to rebel (as in the example of the Scythian slaves), but also to speak, always has a transformative effect on the whole of social relationships and distribution of power within society. Therefore, Rancière explicitly defines politics as those rare moments of speech (and of the interpretation of politics), in which "the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich causes the poor to exist as an entity" (Rancière 1999: 11). Unlike deliberative democracy theory, Rancière creates a non-ideal speech situation in which the dominant groups are simply unable to hear the dominated groups until the scandalous political moment arises when the dominated invent themselves as political subjects equal to the dominant.

Thus, Rancière argues, the dominated must not only rebel, not only criticize, they must also prove their intelligence, delegate their own representatives and carve out a new *place* within the symbolic order of the community that does not yet exist. In this way, the scandalous speech of those unheard, which demands and already demonstrates a common language between the plebes and the political experts – thereby undermining and interrupting the natural political order – is a communicative action in Habermasian terms, and thus an action that effectively alters power relations (Rancière 1999: 55).

How Does Political Translation Become Publicly Visible in Power-ridden Societies?

Insightfully, Rancière observes that mainstreaming deliberation models as "consensus democracy" within all areas and on all levels of politics makes moments of political speech as a reinterpretation of power relations impossible – which is ironic because deliberative processes of consensus should allow everyone to speak, and yet "nameless beings" still remain of no "ac/count" (Rancière 1999: 121, 24). In order to distinguish his theory from models of consensus democracy, Rancière devises the model of "metapolitical interpretation" (Rancière 1999: 88), which renders the unequal power relations *political*, thereby simultaneously aiming to (re)interpret and shift them towards democracy, with the effect of making the speech of the nameless count:

> "Politics consists in *interpreting* this relationship, which means first setting it up as theater, inventing the argument, [thereby] connecting the unconnected." (Rancière 1999: 88, my emphasis)

This brief passage contains the core concepts of a "politics of interpretation" according to Rancière: the argument, the dramatic sense of the relationship, the politics, the relationship between the unconnected parts of a society, which I would like to grasp in the following as a politics of interpretation, or a political translation.

My model of a democratic politics of translation – as an alternative to representative and deliberative models – links up with the following arguments from Rancière in two ways. In addressing the issue of representation, Rancière first only briefly touches on "political interpretation," at the same time, he continuously returns to the necessary yet missing "in-between space" – this non-*relationship* – which is actually the reason for disagreement (Rancière 1999: 87, 88). This inability to take effective action is also linked to the existing gap in translation or mediation between the different political stages – the gap between the "representatives" and the "nonpeople," between the patricians and the plebes – the meaning of which "may vary from the simple illusion masking the reality of power and dispossession to the necessary mode of presenting a social contradiction not yet sufficiently developed" (Rancière 1999: 87). For Rancière, this nuanced sense of translation, which is missing, is at the core of an inventive politics of interpretation – a politics of translation in which the disadvantaged demand a politically more just translation of unequal power relations. In this way, I would like to use Rancière to argue that:

> "Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where

> they are not, the world where there is something 'between' them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing." (Rancière 1999: 27).

Secondly, Rancière not only introduces the idea of political interpretation, but also a new kind of actor, a group capable of political translation, which he describes as a "third people," whose political subjectification and invention is what makes politics possible in the first place. Thus, Rancière assumes that the moment the nameless constitute themselves as a "third people" of political translators, an act of "political subjectification" that brings forth a demos, we can begin to imagine a new, more just politics and social transformation, for "political subjectification reconfigures the field of experience" (Rancière 1999: 35).

Because, as in the case of the patricians and plebes, the political stages are separate from one another, the third people would also need to carve out "a place" where *transgressive* encounters can take place *between* "divided" communities. *Divided* societies are simultaneously separate and yet shared communities with extremely unequal internal power relations (Rancière 1999: 26). In order to conceive of such a social transformation, Rancière's model of a politics of interpretation points to the power of political translators who, unlike common translators of language, organize strikes during which they demonstrate and create public visibility for the kind of just relation they want in the future:

> "The political act of going out on strike then consists in building a relationship between these things that have none, in causing the relationship and the nonrelationship to be seen together as the object of dispute. This

> construction implies a whole series of shifts in the order [...]." (Rancière 1999: 40).

Thinking Political Translation beyond Language: Representation and Deliberation

The theoretical appeal in using Rancière's model of political, democratic translation is that his notion of translation is *not* bound to conventional language: he is in no way interested in bridging gaps between languages, which could easily be misunderstood as bridging neutral, purely dialogic or deliberative gaps. Instead, Rancière's theory also factors in conflicts around unequal power relations. He defines political interpretation as a transformative, weighty and core element of democratic politics, the outcome of which alters these relations and "brings about a shift." My own definition of a politics of translation is derived from the idea that translation is democratic once it is interested in creating more just social relations and thus also political in Rancière's sense, as it has the potential to alter the balance of power and social relations as such.

A second crucial contribution Rancière has made to deliberation research is that his notion of translation, as a critique of Habermas's original model, includes the empirical question of power imbalances within culturally and linguistically heterogeneous situations (see also Calhoun 1995: 74–84). Another point in terms of empirical research on democracy is that Rancière's model of political translation purposely sounds out the gap between representative and deliberative approaches and, although his model is not aligned with either of these models, it does forge a connection between them: by giving themselves a "new name" and delegating a speaker for a collective that did not yet exist in the "effective power in the city of Rome," the plebes invented a new

democratic relation (Rancière 1999: 25). This relationship not only alters the existing order and power relations, it also creates a new group
of speakers, of actors – the "third people" – which is situated *between* the identity of the nameless and the patricians of political account. Rancière therefore writes:

> "This invention is neither the feat of the sovereign people and its 'representatives' nor the feat of the nonpeople/ people of labor and their sudden 'awareness.' It is the work of what we might call a third people, operating as such or under some other name and tying a particular dispute together on behalf of the uncounted." (Rancière 1999: 88).

Rancière is certainly not the first theorist to conceive of a democratic model based on the problems of translation within the multilingual, culturally diversified context of Europe. In critical dialogue with theories of deliberative public spheres, Cathleen Kantner devised a hermeneutic model of a multilingual European public sphere of the media (2004) and Patrizia Nanz developed a linguistic theory model of intercultural translation and European constitutional citizenship (2006). Both these theorists approach democracy by looking at extreme situations of problematic intercultural communication that go beyond purely linguistic differences, and therefore address another form of cultural misunderstanding that is not central in Rancière's work.[2] Elsewhere, I have pointed out the empirical practicability of applying these theories to multilingual public and participation models within the context of European social movements (Doerr 2005, 2012). In contrast to Nanz's dialogical approach to political communication based on interdiscursive translation, Kantner rejects Rancière's model of untranslatability. Different than

Rancière, both Nanz and Kantner agree with the Habermasian assumption that dialogue is communication oriented and show how this understanding can be achieved even in extreme situations of multilingual intercultural public spheres. Although both models address European policy issues, neither of them addresses the Rancièrian question of *how* political translation can be successful in dialogue situations where there is an asymmetry in power.

An Empirical Model and the Third Power of Political Translators

In the following, building upon Rancière's thoughts on disagreement, I will investigate a democratic model of translation, which does not imagine deliberation as an ideal speaking situation void of power, but rather systematically addresses asymmetries in power and structural misunderstandings. At the core of this model is the "third people" that Rancière speaks of, but whom he does not yet see becoming publicly visible within the current European political context (Rancière 1999: 138). I will now present a few examples from my research on social movements in order to demonstrate that there are groups of political translators in different parts of the world who have managed to transform power-ridden stages of representation and deliberation through practices of translation by taking the risk of giving themselves a place and a name, and giving the nameless a third voice.

Rancière concludes his analysis by rejecting the consensus-oriented model of a democratic public sphere, positing that a distinctive feature of "politics" is that it is "rare" and always limited to local and sporadic situations of interpretation and subjectification. However, in contrast to Rancière, I will discuss a transnational empirical politics of translation, which, in moments where representative or deliberative democracy models come into crisis on a national, local or transnational level, turn power-ridden stages

into spaces of democracy. Unlike the Habermasian model of deliberation, this politics of translation – in line with Rancière – builds upon the notion that misunderstanding is categorically at the basis of political dialogue. However, unlike in Rancière's model, the translators here do not assume that there is a common language, a common understanding that precedes discourse; on the contrary, they assume that misunderstandings exist within the smallest group, even within the individual, and that their translation is where democracy begins.

The San Antonio Case: Translation After Failed Representation

How is communication possible in power-ridden, multilingual public spheres? I would like to begin answering this question by discussing an interesting stage for multilingual democracy on a local level that appeared not in Europe, but in the USA: in San Antonio[3], a poor suburb near Los Angeles, where the city council decided by majority vote to include Spanish-speaking immigrants in a novel form of multilingual political dialogue. As immigrants, the majority of the low-income residents of the area were not entitled to vote. Despite this, a number of forward-thinking politicians succeeded in setting up multilingual meetings at city hall – the use of multiple languages was already a common practice for the local courts and the police. However, despite the availability of simultaneous translation at the meetings, the residents criticized the attempt at creating a democratic political dialogue at the city hall, claiming it had failed. Yet were the reasons for the sentiment of disagreement between politicians and residents different than those that Rancière discusses?

For Rancière, modern politicians and political experts in consensual civic processes resemble the classical model of the ancient patricians because they "do not understand the speech of

those who can't possibly have any" (Rancière 1999: 27). In San Antonio, however, both the local residents and all the politicians at city hall were proud of having elected a representative "all Latino" city council. At the beginning of meeting to discuss a new large-scale construction project, mayor Pimento[4] reassured the concerned residents from one of the poorest parts of the city, whose homes were to be destroyed in the process of the building project. "Today, everyone will be heard." From an intercultural perspective, the translation that evening should have been a success because the dedicated politicians ensured that language translation was provided. Not only those with citizenship rights, but also immigrants, the poorest of the low-income residents, were able to speak and be heard by their representatives.

Surprisingly, the San Antonio politicians were the polar opposite to Rancière's patricians: they understood Spanish and English and were proud to be the children of poor immigrant families, who would certainly be able to understand their own people: in comparison with its neighboring cities, San Antonio was known as a relatively welcoming place for illegalized immigrants. The elected city council members showed their closeness to the citizens partly through speaking directly with immigrants and local residents on the sidelines of the city council meeting. However, at the end of the meeting, the intercultural translation had failed: "Liar, liar! Take him out of office!" shouted the immigrants, mothers who had taken their children to the meeting, and workers who had to get up at the crack of dawn and still waited at the back entrance of the city hall for hours until they were given the right to speak. One publicly stated:

> "I, Maria[5], don't feel like you represent us. If you really want to change things, why don't you put down in [contractual] writing that the plans to build the new

> apartments really do include social housing? We support the project, but we need a [contractual] guarantee. You could push back the approval of the project. You could sit down at a round table and talk to us, you can trust us. All we need is three signatures. In the end, it's you, not us, who are in office. I am so angry. I have children at home, and I couldn't make dinner for them tonight [because the meeting took so long], they are hungry. And I'm furious."

The political dialogue in San Antonio failed for reasons that were different from Rancière's example of the repressive patricians. Covered in sweat, the representatives attempted to explain to the public their decision to go forward with the large-scale building plans and to justify their decision to leave out a clause in the contract that would ensure social housing, as the local residents had demanded. One politician said: "I want to apologize and I promise that I will keep working so that new social housing will be provided within this project." A young representative said: "The work I did is for you. I know it's hard [to understand], because we're not on the same stage together tonight, but I am asking you to trust me. The decision we made today says a lot about the complexity of the issue. The mayor will be pleased with this decision." Another politician said: "You don't go into politics to be loved, but to make tough decisions, and this was one of them."

Why Representatives Are Not a Third People: Limits to Officials' Understanding

Unlike classical political elites, at least a few of the newly elected representatives in San Antonio claimed to understand the poor people's concerns that they would have to leave their apartments because of the large-scale building project that had been contracted

out to a private company. That is precisely the irony and, I suspect, also the reason that the translation in the form of political representation failed: the representatives *believed* they were the "third people" representing the poor. All of the representatives responsible for the decision had emphasized during their election campaigns that, being from poor Latino immigrant families themselves, they went up for election to change things. They thought they understood, but they were wrong: the moment these dedicated citizens became representatives, came "into office," they understood something else: the "complexity" and decision-making rationale of their political "stage," the entanglements between the mayor, the newly elected representatives, the administration and the economy. That's why they made the "tough" decision that did not ensure social housing.

The disagreement among the representatives becomes visible when we take a look at the non-verbal interactions within the space of the city hall: as a participant in the meeting that went on all evening, I watched bureaucrats and the security staff ask immigrants who came to the meeting with small children to sit in the back, to stand on the sidelines or at the back of the room. By contrast, the service personnel ushered representatives from the economic sector or prestigious persons to the seats in the first and second row. Whenever immigrants brought up critical arguments in broken English, the mayor would interrupt them, mispronounce their Spanish names or, in extreme cases, ask security to reprimand immigrants that were acting out of line and check their passport.

Using the new concept of political translation, these impressions show why the relation of democratic representation that was set up in San Antonio failed so dramatically – it hinged on the assumption of an ideal dialogue situation, one without complications. This brings up the following theoretical

implications: assuming an uncomplicated intersubjective understanding – for example, as the representatives believed they were in an ideal speaking situation – forecloses the possibility of a truly democratic or deliberative dialogue between politicians and those affected by the political decisions.

Connecting Separated Stages and the Role of the Translator Collective

Read from Rancière's perspective, the political translation in San Antonio was also unsuccessful because there was a separation of the political stages: in Rancière's example of ancient Rome, the patricians only speak to their own, meaning the representatives of the senate with "ac/count," and only one good-natured patrician is sent to speak with the plebes after they had rebelled, leaving the city of Rome to assemble at Aventine and demand their rights (Rancière 2002: 24f.). However, unlike the malicious patricians in Rancière, the young representative at the city hall in San Antonio did indeed recognize the problem of disagreement, the source of which she believed was the gap between the political "stages" that separated the representatives from the people. This is evident in her response to an angry local resident: "I know it's hard [to understand], because we're not on the same stage together tonight, but I am asking you to trust me." After saying this, however, she only received boos from the crowd.

I would like to use this example from San Antonio to show that given the failure of political representation, another group of possible political translators may exist, a *collective* group made up of local residents, thus a kind of "third people" in Rancière's sense, a group that differs from the representatives and from the poor local residents. I want to argue that precisely because it acted as a

collective, this group was able to successfully perform the act of democratic translation.

One of the translators was Carla[6], a young bilingual community organizer in her mid-twenties who, unlike the young representatives from city hall, believed in a common language that went beyond the mere the function of creating a division of roles (Rancière 1999: 87). This is an important point because, unlike the young representative quoted above, it is not her own political career that Carla believes in, but a *common politics*. For Carla, politics does not mean creating an ideal dialogue situation between equal partners, it means working for those "who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account" (Rancière 1999: 27). In this way, Carla, an immigrant herself, worked to build a political *communità* with the poorest of the poor, which she tried to do in teamwork, together with others. Carla and her fellow activists were underpaid or volunteer community organizers. They were all from poor immigrant families, trying to create a new place, to forge a relation between representatives and local residents that did not yet exist in the city hall. To achieve this, Carla's organization set up a community forum (for which the Catholic church, among others, provided rooms for meetings) where those who were sent to stand in the back at the city hall could sit on the same stage as the elected representatives. What was new about this situation was that representatives of the people and the non-represented met on equal terms and the politicians were not allotted all the speaking time they wanted. Another new aspect was that Carla and the other community organizers specifically enabled the poor, Spanish-speaking immigrants the role of negotiators, by training them as civic experts and community leaders. I saw that Maria, who had

already spoken at the city hall, was now one of these new community leaders.

Maria did not speak English and had been interrupted by the mayor on several accounts. Her words at city hall had been: "I, Maria, don't feel like you represent us." Now, Maria, together with a bilingual local resident, was in charge of facilitating the dialogue with the representatives invited to the meeting. The representatives found this situation unheard of, as the power relations that had been in place at the city hall meeting (who had the word, allocations of speaking time, language and spatial setup) had totally been reversed. That was precisely Carla's political aim: setting up specific kind of new space that breaks with the power relations and dominant order in other ways as well. Whenever a representative would try, as ever, to interrupt a local resident who was speaking, Carla would intervene and prevent it. In addition, at the city hall, the city's attorney and building project planner had presented themselves as experts on the building project, while here, local residents like Maria were the civic experts who explained the current state of the negotiations and the community's demands. Since each of Maria's critical demands was met with roaring applause from the community, at that moment, she represented the community's voice by posing critical questions that the representatives responded to in various ways: some spoke in colloquial or fluent Spanish, and others in English. Maria was the third voice of San Antonio, and the much younger Carla, who befriended Maria during their close work together, looked after Maria's children.

What Defines a Politics of Translation: Intentional Reversal and Interruption

I understand Carla and Maria's politics as a praxis of political translation as Rancière describes it, a practice that blocks and reverses the "natural current" of unequal power relations (Rancière 1999: 13). The politics of translation that Carla employs reinterpret the social relations between the representatives and the nameless by inventing an entirely new space: the community forum. In this exceptional sphere of speech outside conventional city hall meetings, representatives and local residents met as equals – thereby creating visibility for a political relation that does not yet exist. In Rancière's terms, this is a subversive praxis because Carla and her fellow activists intentionally and skillfully *reversed* the existing seating order and spatial arrangements at city hall. Carla trained others like Maria, for example, as so-called democratic speakers (cf. Rancière 1999: 27, 59). Although Maria had recently immigrated and was not entitled to vote, in the community forum she was a self-assured political expert. I observed how the politicians who had interrupted Maria at the city hall were forced to respond to Maria's critical questions and, feeling the weight of the assembly, agreed to change their intended decision. The paradox here – that is, from Rancière's perspective, the transformatory elements within this situation of political translation – were not only the concessions the community was *fighting for*, but the symbolic power of the vote at the end of the forum: in place of a consensual decision, as at the city hall, where only the representatives were permitted to vote, at the community forum, the local residents themselves voted for the proposal to guarantee social housing per contract. The democratic speakers had prepared this proposal, factoring in the public debates; the representatives at the meeting bore witness to this symbolic (although legally ineffective) resolution. According to Rancière, this contested, in/effective political symbolic power of the vote defines the actual power of political interpretation. Democratic

translation is the "choice" that cannot exist in reality (Rancière 1999: 25). As I have shown, the critical voices of the poor workers did not count within the deliberation process that took place in the city hall of San Antonio, which were organized around a principle of exclusion, since local residents – immigrants without voices – were not able to vote their representatives out of office, although this had been one of Maria's demands.

One point that Rancière's theory raises is if and how "rare" and possibly purely symbolic acts of an "interpretation of politics," as in the case of the community forum, can actually have long-term effects and lead to a shift power relations within politics (Rancière 1999: 40). Therefore, the question that remains open is: how could political translation transform actual decision-making processes and, over a longer period of time, lead to institutional change? This links up to a second empirical question: how does the power of political translators differ from that of conventional language translators? I have shown that, as a democratic translator, Carla employed a specific politics of translation that did not have so much to do with translation in the classic sense of "*bridging*" gaps created by language barriers – after all, the representatives in San Antonio and the majority of the local residents were bilingual. Instead, Carla was an activist interested in building community and – this is the decisive point – she was part of a collective of democracy translators, interested in setting up locally new spaces, roles and ways of speaking for political dialogue. The power of these translators only worked as a collective, an enabling power that allowed democratic speakers of the nameless, like Maria, to re-imagine negotiating the terms of the contract with the representatives and effectively demand that decisions be changed. Carla only played a supporting role at the community forum,

however, her position gained visibility whenever the representatives attempted to interrupt the speakers of the nameless.

The Role of the Third People and the Power of Democratic Translation

In a second case study, I delved into the definitive question of the collective power of the third people of translators and their ability to successfully bring about long-term political effects through translation. Because, unlike Rancière, I do not believe that politics as interpretation is only possible on a local level, I investigated the effects of political translation on the European level, and over several years, I researched its long-term effects within the context of decision-making processes. The case study was the European Social Forum (ESF), an activist-organized transnational public sphere of anti-globalization movements within Europe, which was used broadly over the last decade. For over ten years, the organizers of ESF managed to build up a vibrant counterpublic to the discussions and decisions made by EU institutions, coordinate EU-wide alternative movements and protests, and develop transnational campaigns. Unfortunately, on a national level, the social forum public spheres in the countries where I conducted my research were not able to successfully maintain participatory democracy and political dialogue for longer than one or two years after they were initiated. On a national level, in all the countries included in my research (Italy, Germany and Great Britain), the ideological rifts and differences seemed too great; and new initiatives for democratic dialogue within the national assemblies ended too quickly, with harsh conflicts between influential trade union leaders, party officials and "radical" local activists (Doerr 2012). In particular, members of the local citizen forums, especially women, autonomous activists, anarchists and migrant representatives felt marginalized on the national level, due to the radically democratic

model of consensual decision-making, which was dominated by a few of the more established political experts and/or professional policy-makers from larger organizations (ibid.).

What was different about the European forums that resulted in the greater inclusion of those who had felt excluded on a national level? I addressed this question in my comparative study of the three cases of European and national social forums. One interesting point is that influential parties and trade unions dominated both the national and European forums – they were the moderators that predetermined the consensus. Similar to the political representatives in San Antonio, the interviews I conducted with influential party and trade union representatives *and* with the facilitators show traces of disagreement. With the financial backing of their organizations, it was easier for the moderators to attend all the international meetings and, in contrast to the local grassroots activists, they understood their own role as that of political experts: "The local activists don't know anything" was a typical criticism from one of the moderators who said in an interview that she could not understand why the local grassroots activists were always criticizing the "organizers" that had made unpopular decisions on a European level.

On the other hand, a migrant activist expressed her annoyance with the structural "not-wanting-to-understand" and the career activists' ignorance: "It's as if we don't even exist. They sit with us in the same meeting, but don't listen when we speak." At the national meetings I attended, migrants were indeed often interrupted and their votes did not "count" for much in the consensus decisions, as is to be expected in Rancière's model (Rancière 1999: 120) One moderator openly took on this perspective in an interview: "There was not one meeting that I moderated where I changed my position because of some kind of

'deliberative process.' Those of us who are moderators speak with one another before each assembly about what we want and that's what is then decided." Therefore, the officially deliberative processes served to unofficially legitimize the existing unequal relations of domination, in which certain groups and career politicians had a greater influence than others.

Paradoxically, I found that the voices of the local grassroots activists and migrants "counted" less at the national forums than they did in the European ones – where there were constantly difficulties in communication due to the language diversity (Doerr 2012). In conflicts surrounding distribution, for example, the national forums made "consensus" decisions, which were then taken back when fought against on a European level – as such, those who had been marginalized on a national level always benefited from a change in the decision: local groups, migrants, feminists and anarchists. A British anarchist commented on this phenomenon by saying: "national forums are less democratic than the European ones. The translation breaks down the hegemony of a small group of insiders. It creates easier points of entry for new people." A grassroots activist from the German Left Party said: "On the national level, the fact that only a few of us dominated the forum practically suffocated the democracy. At European meetings, there's always the hope that new possibilities will open up." A migrant said: "At national meetings, I feel like a piece of driftwood in the ocean. I like the European meetings better. If there's something I don't understand, like today in French, my friends translate for me."

Why is it that the nameless have an advantage in European meetings? Theories of language and translation based on dialogue assume that extreme situations of multilingual communication – precisely due to misunderstandings based on language – are

enormously advantageous "extraordinary speech situations" for democratic dialogue (Nanz 2006; Kantner 2004). However, as an observer, I unfortunately also noticed that when moderating, seasoned career politicians ignored "those with no name" at the European forums just as much as at the national forums. The model of multilingual translation, introduced by a team of volunteer simultaneous interpreters called Babels, enabled decision-making processes in five or more languages. However, in the coffee breaks at the European forums the moderators continued to ignore the nameless, just as they had at the national forums. A migrant woman spoke about this:

> "In one of the coffee breaks, I tried to speak to a moderator from the French organizing committee about an important question: a speaker representing the migrants living in Germany had simply been scratched off the list of speakers at the European meeting. But she just shook her head and said that she couldn't understand me. My English is really bad. Then she turned her back on me and just continued talking to another person. She just left me standing there. I was outraged! I told [others] about this problem."

As this quote suggests, the European forum offered migrants a stage to speak about disagreement. This was made possible by the volunteer Babels interpreters: while the ignorance of the moderators at the national forums resulted in the frustrated withdrawal (Rancière 1999: 74) of the grassroots activists, the fact that the multiple languages were spoken enabled the marginalized to be heard – but only when the Babels interpreters rebelled to make the disagreement visible.

The Translators' Rebellion: Disagreement in Decision-Making on a European Level

The Babels simultaneous translators at the European-wide ESF meetings were grassroots activists themselves, who had repeatedly been ignored by the moderators at the national meetings. Some of them were migrants, others grassroots activists, feminists and anarchists. In Rancière's terms, this ethnically and nationally heterogeneous group of translators had the potential to create a collective form of political subjectification: the translators were a "third people" that was neither identical to the career activists, nor to a single ethnic, linguistic or ideological group among the participants. Also – only in the form of a collective – the Babels had the knowledge of many languages and the knowledge to alter the unequal distribution of power, to which only a few had access, and to change the order of the discussion. What gave the translators the power to make change possible?

As language translators, the Babels were in a strategically advantageous position that, in a sense, allowed them to interrupt the moderator at any time – for example, in order to avoid language conflicts or intercultural misunderstandings. However, in situations of disagreement, the Babels transgressed the boundaries of their prescribed role and made strategic use of their role of bridging the "gaps." Beyond merely providing neutral language translation, the Babels "interrupted" the moderators whenever these European "elites," working in cahoots with one another, were unable to understand or did not want to listen to the grassroots movements.

Shortly after the scene of disagreement mentioned above unfolded and another grassroots activist and migrant was marginalized, the volunteer translators took the microphone and announced that

they were going on strike: “We, the Babels volunteer interpreters are going to stop translating until some things change around here. It cannot be that the moderators only speak with [those who they know well], while excluding [migrants and people from other countries].”

Translators Interrupt Unequal Relations, Connecting the Unconnected

Symbolically, the translators on strike interrupted the unequal relations between the career activists and the grassroots activists; they declared solidarity with those excluded, a group they differed from themselves. I would like to highlight the specificity of the translators’ position: they acted as a collective, they had the knowledge of the languages and were well versed in the themes negotiated, they were well aware of the dual power within translation, that is, not only breaking down cultural barriers, but also radically *shifting* the symbolic-cultural boundaries of power (Calhoun 1995: 82). The moment the translators went on strike, they left their role as neutral language translators and intercultural mediators. The unpaid translators went beyond their prescribed role to engage in the risky politics of translation.

The key to the translators’ power was having the advantageous role of being able to simultaneously bridge gaps and interrupt uneven social relations in the “third person.” They did not stop performing this activity when they went on strike, instead they entered into dialogue with the ESF moderators, demanded the grassroots activists be recognized and convinced the elite to also see the political role of the translators themselves, who, until then, had been misconceived as mere service providers. One of the Babels translators said: “As a simultaneous interpreter, you have power and you have no power. Here at ESF, they treat you like the lady

who brings the coffee. But the ESF elite is dependent on our technical expertise."

Therefore, the disagreement was not only between the "ESF elite" and the "grassroots," it extended further. The career activists did not even "hear" the voices of those providing services, they were unable to recognize the true political intention of the translators, as another Babels translator remarked: "What makes the activist heart of Babels ache is that our work is misunderstood and disregarded. We're treated like service personnel, as if we're paid. But the reason we do this is so that every voice here is heard." A moderator acknowledged this misunderstanding by pointing to the costs for the technical equipment for the translations: "The translations by the Babels volunteers are not always good. In one of the meetings, the software for the simultaneous interpretation broke down completely. I was so angry. I wanted my money back."

For the ESF "elites," the Babels were simultaneous interpreters who were to simply perform their services in a professional manner. The fact of the matter, however, was that the Babels worked at the ESF on a volunteer basis, offering free translations, in order to make it possible for the nameless to speak. For Rancière, this situation demonstrates the double misunderstanding (Rancière 1999: x) of a classical case of disagreement, at the core of which lies the (unequal) *relation* between the translators and the elites. The elites only "heard" the voices of Babels as a service. This relation is not surprising, as it draws on a historical and traditionally paternalistic understanding of translation work, in which translators were often slaves, servants of a master to whom they were accountable and were made to pay dearly if there was any doubt that their translations were indeed "correct" (Bellos 2011). The Babels translators, however, were not slaves but volunteers.

They worked without pay, but that is exactly what made them autonomous political translators/interpreters.

Unlike the example of the slave rebellion in Rancière, the translators set out to build new and more democratic relations between parts that have thus far not been seen in relationship (Rancière 1999: 40): they demonstrated to the political elite at the European Social Forum that the grassroots activists actually "spoke." One of the translators on strike, for example, said: "I spoke with [one of the high-powered moderators]; I explained to her that those in power had to include the smaller groups." This example shows that these demonstrative and effective interventions by the translators radically altered the moderators' position, thereby also changing the power imbalance and the decisions made (Doerr 2012). The strike and the translators' persuasive actions illustrate the political subjectification of a group that began as language translators and emerged as a politically speaking "third people," which utilized collective intelligence to prove to those in power, in their own language, that the grassroots consisted of "speaking beings" (Rancière 1999: 27).

My empirical case study of the ESF indicates that the possibility of democratic translation exists not only locally, but also on a European level, at transnational meetings with unequal power relations. Unlike Habermas's cognitive model of an ideal speech situation, this empirical model of democratic translation precludes neither unequal power relations nor structural misunderstandings. Instead, the disagreement and democratic crisis of the deliberation process that arose in the European meetings were the beginning of a democratic rebellion and brought forth a new model of political translation. Like in San Antonio, the ESF was a multilingual setting that brought together career politicians and grassroots activists from diverse groups. Again, with this exemplary

demonstration, I have shown that a multilingual situation in itself is not enough for democratic translation to take place; without the interruption and arguments by the "third people" of political translators, the decisions made at the European meetings would have mirrored the same exclusive decisions made at the national meetings.

Inventing Spaces of Translation Beyond Language: Gender, Race and Class

Certainly, on a transnational or local level, there may be advantageous spaces that make political translation possible – however, current research on the public sphere and globalization assumes that national level of decision-making will continue to remain significant. With this in mind, would it be possible to conceive of a model of political translation within traditionally monolingual, national public spheres that do not necessarily call for the position of language translators? In my third case study, I investigate this question by looking at the U.S. Social Forum – an anti-globalization public sphere on a national level, with a model very similar to the radical consensus democracy employed by the European Social Forum. However, unlike the European Forum, the rebellion of the translators in the U.S. led to the introduction of a model that that aimed to extend the concept of translation beyond language to incorporate gender, ethnic and social diversity.

Interrupting and Re-Inventing National Public Spheres within Social Movements

Unlike the language translators at ESF, American career activists were the ones to introduce the praxis of political translation at the first U.S. national Social Forum – and, by doing so they rebelled against the World Social Forum's rules on deliberative consensual

democracy. The initiators of the first national U.S. Social Forum had backgrounds and experiences similar to Carla, who had founded the Community Forum in San Antonio: on a local level, they worked for immigrants, low-income people, people of color, women's organizations, antiracist and/or gay and lesbian groups. Unlike some "elites" from the European Social Forum, the U.S. Social Forum organizers were not professional activists who had built their careers by working for parties or trade unions, or still did. Like Carla, most of the U.S. Social Forum's initiators were young local community organizers with low income, who had noticed that the international World Social Forum was dominated by white trade unionists and politicians; and that young activists, such as themselves – people of color, women, gays and lesbians – had been pushed to the margins. However, as bilingual translators from immigrant families, the organizers of the U.S. Social Forum were aware of the dual power of political translation, as demonstrated in the example of the ESF, that is, the power to simultaneously build bridges and disrupt the existing power relations.

The Power of the Translators: Interrupting and Transgressing Boundaries

The U.S. Social Forum organizers, however, went a step further than the Babels translators: as well-versed simultaneous and volunteer translators for migrants or local community forums, the founders of the U.S. Social Forum were aware that translation practices had the potential to transform what may appear to be clear language boundaries into new, in-between spaces. They expanded political translation to include the political re-interpretation, interruption and transgression of boundaries like gender, race and class. Community organizers like Carla were aware, for example, of the dramaturgy of political translation,

which can open up a new space of possibility by changing the exclusionary set-up and rules of city hall meetings; by deciding on a specific set-up of the space itself, choosing moderators and using language translation, another space was created. By setting up the space of translation as theater, the USSF organizers applied this principle to the unequal representation of gender, race and class. The moderators at the European Social Form acknowledged that women and ethnic minorities had also been marginalized in terms of space at European Social Forums. One participant said: "[At the European meetings], it goes without saying that men occupy more space." This is exactly what the initiators of the U.S. Social Form wanted to change. Despite criticism from the ranks of the international leaders of the World Social Forum, they took translation a radical step further: the founders of the U.S. Social Forum set up a quota system for sexual and ethnic minorities, youth organizations and local grassroots activists, and created a national planning committee, in which the majority consisted neither of professional activists from influential national organizations nor of any specific ethnic or sexual group. This scandal of political re-interpretation caused heated debated among those who favored the deliberative model of the World Social Forum (Juris 2009). In doing so, the U.S. Social Forum's strategy of translation, and its spectacular success in terms of mobilization, impressed comparative democracy research on international social movements (Smith and Doerr 2011; Karides 2009; Pleyers 2011). Unlike the social forums I researched in Europe on a national level, the U.S. Social Forum managed to include low-income people, non-academics, migrants, ethnic and sexual minorities, both on a local grassroots level and in leadership positions nationally. In American activist circles, what was considered exceptionally unusual was that the organizers of the U.S. Social Forum not only sought to expand their leadership skills, but they also altered the

form of all the meetings: in order to change the idea that participatory democracy in the U.S. is a formation of political communication reserved for and dominated by white people (Polletta 2005), the American initiators trained all the volunteers and also the members of their national organizing committee in anti-racist and anti-sexist practices. The fact several of the American career activists found this practice extremely radical, but also admirable, demonstrates the potential of political translation to cause a public scandal, its capacity to interrupt and its symbolic power. By daring to politically translate race, class and gender into a new leadership model for social movements, the founders of the U.S. Social Forum invented a third people who brought together extremely diverse movements, signaling political subjectification as a movement, which the U.S. activists have not yet, or only rarely, seen in this form and on such a broad level.

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[1] Seyla Benhabib describes the ideal speech situation as follows: "(F)irst, each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication; second, each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations and explanations, and to challenge justifications... Third, all must have equal chances as actors to express their wishes, feelings and intention; and fourth, the speakers must act as if in context of action there is an equal distribution of chances to order and resist orders, to promise and to refuse, to be accountable for one's conduct and to demand accountability from others." (Benhabib 1986: 285).

[2] Rancière explicitly draws attention to the difference between his use of disagreement and cultural misunderstandings. He counters the argument that cultural diversity and social pluralism are the reason for the so-called increase in problems within political communication and democratic decision-making processes (Rancière 1999: x–xi).

[3] The name has been changed.

[4] The name has been changed.

[5] The name has been changed.

[6] The name has been changed.