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Examination of Contemporary Democracy

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## THE RHETORIC OF *khôra* AND THE SPACE OF THE SELF-EXAMINATION OF CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY

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### *Abstract*

This paper examines the Greek concept of *khôra*, as presented in Plato's *Timaeus*, in its function as a prerequisite and spatial image of contemporary democracy, with regard to the interrelation between the notions of space and freedom. The topography of liberty is considered in the light of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom*, Jacques Derrida's essays *Khôra* and *Rogue*, Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Michel Foucault's *Fearless Speech*, Julia Kristeva's *Polylogue*, as well as the images of contemporary democracy depicted by Geoffrey Bennington, Jonathan Culler, Samuel Weber, Stanisław Kijaczko, and Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński. The artistic context of Ann Hamilton's *The Event of a Thread* and Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mirror Chamber* give additional evidence to the argument. *Khôra* resists description and understanding, relying on a peculiarly uncommon combination of qualities and characteristics exhibiting both flexibility and resistance. One may claim that the flexibility and universality of *khôra* give rise to law and order in general; therefore it might be viewed as a prefiguration of democracy. Its structure – the machinery based on chance and on a free play of multiple elements – is never complete and her final architecture resembles the workings of a democratic system based on various parts acting and interacting freely in the flexible, undefined receptacle of a society.

**Keywords:** *khôra, democracy, art, free play, spacing, plurality, becoming, novelty.*

In *The Experience of Freedom*, meditating upon the topography of liberty, Jean-Luc Nancy concludes that the vastness of space (as a metaphorical, mental, emotional, ideological, and dimensional figure) constitutes the

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essence of freedom. Moreover, it also determines the vectors of what he calls the ethics of freedom. The opening of space allows for “the spaciousity of being where freedom is opened rather than engulfed” (Nancy 1993, 146). In this sense, in any democratic state, being discloses to us our own freedom for open encounter. The distance that creates an open zone of individual habitation, but also allows for mental distancing oneself towards thinking and the ego, finds adequate form in Derrida’s concept of *différance* – the unavoidable delay in the movement of meaning in the intervals between signifiers, and in a space beyond the binary. In this light, a trace is always a figure of *différance*, the spacing between the present and the future, an inherent contradiction, the absence of presence on the path to freedom of thought in contemporary societies. Nancy clarifies the interrelation between the concepts of space and freedom:

“This spaciality, or spaciousity, is the space of freedom, inasmuch as freedom is, at every moment, the freedom of a free space. Which means that it constitutes the spatializing or spacing essence of freedom. Spacing is the general “form” – which precisely has no form, but gives room for forms and formations, and which is not general, but which gives room for singularities – of existence: the spacing, exposure, retrenchment and cutting (decision) of singularity, the areality (which is, as we have indicated elsewhere, the character of air) of singularity in its difference which it is its limit, to others, and to itself: for example, a mouth opened in a cry.” (Nancy 1993, 145)

With regard to expressive plastic metaphors or figures depicting freedom, summarizing the discussion of democracy in the *Republic* in *Rogue*, Derrida makes an interesting visual comparison. He defines democracy (democracy to come, to use his own terms) in terms of a beautiful, aesthetically intriguing garment.

“Democracy seems [. . .] the most beautiful (kalliste), the most seductive of constitutions (politeion) (Republic, 557c): Its beauty resembles that of a multi- and brightly colored (poikilon) garment. [. . .] The same attribute defines at once the vivid colors and diversity, a changing, variable, whimsical character, complicated, sometimes obscure, ambiguous”. (Derrida 2005, 26)

Both trains of thought, democracy as a free play of space or place of spacing and democracy as a seductive cloth, are reconciled in Ann

Hamilton's *The Event of a Thread*. This artwork was exhibited in 2012 in Park Avenue Armory in New York. It was composed of a gigantic free-flowing silk cloth hanging down and swinging from the summit of an enormously spacious gallery. The installation allowed for as much free play as possible, encouraging the viewers to swing, dance, interact with the fabric, explore the space, lie down, play, move, and listen to texts by Aristotle, Charles Darwin, Ralph Waldo Emerson etc. Many swings pulled at the curtain in the center, causing it to move. Each movement of a swing caused the whole installation to move. Each individual pull on the threads caused the gigantic fabric to undulate and wave.

This mechanism resembled that of *khôra*, a secret place of formation, which Plato describes as follows:

"Filled with potencies that are neither similar nor balanced, in no part of herself is she equally balanced, sways unevenly in every part, and is herself shaken by these forms and shakes them in turn as she is moved." (Timaeus, 52e)

The crowd of free-playing visitors to Ann Hamilton's exhibition was fully absorbed by the experience of the sublime and impressive space, filled with the free, dream-like energy of the moving cloth. The enormous dimensions of the flexible fabric almost exceeded the perceptive capacity of the viewers. Its continuous play resulted from various movements of the interconnected threads. The space between the spectators and the metaphorical territory of their interaction were constituted by the *khôra*-like free play of the inclusive zone of multiplicity, in which everyone had the right to act freely and express their freedom. The entire composition was the sum of the plurality of individual, interacting forces, desires, and impulses, the mutual resonances between the public and the space, forming a true figure of democracy, which, according to Nancy, relies on spatializing the essence of freedom.



Ann Hamilton, *The Event of a Thread*, 2012

Geffrey Bennington in *For Better for Worse (There again)* rethinks democracy in terms of plurality, naming plurality or multiplicity the principle or the constitutive feature of the polis and democracy itself. He claims that “democracy has a privilege, in that in a sense it names *just this plurality or dispersion itself*, in a way that other regime names do not” (Bennington 2008, 98). Plurality affects the shape of democracy, giving rise to many possible forms of cohabitation and solidarity. Flexibility of political and social phenomena constitutes the essence of this concept of democracy based on the free expression and the play of multiplicity. This draws upon another original Greek concept of free space and spacing, that is, *khôra*.

*Khôra*, therefore, as I claim in this paper, may constitute a substitute for polis in her function as a prerequisite and spatial image of contemporary democracy.

In Plato’s *Timaeus*, *khôra* is a third type of being, not rational and framed by logic and logos, not material in the sense of sensual perception, dark and obscure, close to the logic and of what Lyotard calls *dream-works*. At the same time, it is a mechanism of secret power

that, while preserving its neutral state, regulates everything according to the mode of being peculiar to the substance that affects it. It is both resistant and plastic. It acts as a membrane that produces sound and meaning with its vibrations, just like the fabric in Ann Hamilton's art installation. In this way, *khôra* is the deep spherical skin of the universe, which both forms and is being formed. She is a guarantee and an embodiment of the orderliness of the world, being a physical and metaphorical base and a cradle of being, a field in which the visible and the tangible, copied from their eternal models, may assume their shape. With maternal care, it transforms the preexistent chaos of the universe into an aesthetic and mathematical order. Plato uses the agricultural model of a hand mill to depict the ongoing process of creating order through constant movements or shakes of the membrane-receptacle, which help to separate and arrange the preexistent chaos into the harmony of elements: fire, water, earth, and air. Its function is to shape entities, transforming traces of elements into their final, complete form. It provides a spatial localization, space, substratum, or 'seat' for different configurations of seeds of matter that drop into and come out of it. *Khôra* thus sets in motion a constant evolution of forming and cleaning. This somehow mechanical progression is depicted by Plato in the following manner:

"Filled with potencies that are neither similar nor balanced, in no part of herself is she equally balanced, but sways unevenly in every part, and is herself shaken by these forms and shakes them in turn as she is moved. And the forms, as they are moved, fly continually in various directions and are dissipated; just as the particles that are shaken and winnowed by the sieves and other instruments used for the cleansing of corn fall in one place if they are solid and heavy, but fly off and settle elsewhere if they are spongy and light. So it was also with the Four Kinds when shaken by the Recipient: her motion, like an instrument which causes shaking, was separating farthest from one another the dissimilar, and pushing most closely together the similar; wherefore also these Kinds occupied different places even before that the Universe was organized and generated out of them."  
(*Timaeus*, 52e-53a)

This third type of being has some characteristics of a plastic substance and the process of artistic creation, as well as a global and social dimension. It is devoid of qualities, yet so powerful that it gives shape to the existing universe through the process of differentiating.

This principle reappears in the work of Freud's model of the subconscious and in the figure of Derridean *différance*. The social ontology of democracy, which includes the formation and the inscription of the community's will, finds its analogy in Plato's insistence on the plastic, receptive, and flexible nature of *khôra* – one of three types of being that is the constant coming into being. The political aspect of *khôra* as a supplement for polis is reaffirmed by Stanisław Kijaczka and Jan Krasicki in *Chôra i agora. U filozoficznych korzeni kultury europejskiej*. *Khôra* is both an empty and filled room, a container from which the idea of the republic is extracted or upon which the idea of social solidarity is founded. While agora represents public visibility and stability of the social law, *khôra* defines what transcends human perception and conceptualization due to the lack of reliable legitimizing criteria. This figure stands for the liberating experience of emancipation from oneself and rejection of the present state of being. In this light, democracy is a constant state of becoming, which is an instrument that gives rise to legitimizing processes by causing constant shaping, re-separation, and transformation. *Khôra* resists description and understanding, however she is a necessary and creative element of the origin of the world, according to Plato. This unique, original place and its dynamism allowed the primordial order of elements to take shape. *Khôra* relies on a peculiar uncommon combination of qualities and characteristics exhibiting both flexibility and resistance – her inherent and significant attributes – which are then paradoxically transformed into the methodical structure and assortment of elements in the universe. Therefore, one may claim that *khôra's* flexibility and universality give rise to law and order in general, as well as, according to Kijaczko, the political order of the state; therefore it might be viewed as a prefiguration of democracy. It functions based on a free play of elements by chance rather than on an imposed command or stringent structure. In this way, the workings of the apparatus of *khôra* are founded upon “a multiplicity of expulsion, ensuring its infinite renewal” (Kristeva 1988, 134). Moreover, it puts the free play of diverse particles in motion: “her motion, like an instrument which causes shaking, was separating farthest from one another the dissimilar, and pushing most closely together the similar” (*Timaeus*, 53a), herself remaining undefinable, invisible, and formless. Its structure

resembles the workings of a democratic system based on a free play of various parts in the flexible, undefined receptacle of a society, with its diversity of attitudes and expectations, ongoing, constant interexchange of opinions, conflicting parties, competitive interests, and temporary compromises. Moreover, the dynamism within *khôra* resembles that of social movements and the formation of political parties. Being based on a chaotic vibration, this technique leaves some space for unpredictable moves and formations, which in the case of a society should remain as flexible and open-ended as possible.

Let us emphasize that *khôra* is undeniably a term with blurred edges. It is defined in terms of space. *Khôra* “provides room for all things that have birth, itself being apprehensible by a kind of bastard reasoning by the aid of non-sensation, barely an object of belief; for when we regard this we dimly dream and affirm that it is somehow necessary that all that exists should exist in some spot and occupying some place, and that which is neither on earth nor anywhere in the Heaven is nothing” (*Timaeus*, 53a). However, this territory might resemble the space that the subconscious occupies within our *psyche*. It is a place of some archaic, secret, unknown, yet essential processes that lead to the formation of conscious logical structures by constant renewal of the signifying movements, as Julia Kristeva claims. The exact location or the borders of this area are unknown and undefined. Therefore, with reference to the political sphere, *khôra* remains an attractive metaphor. The borders of contemporary democracies remain or should remain flexible and inclusive to provide place for order to form through the clashes of multiple opinions and options. The rationality of the democratic element is always a result of the free play and free movements of various historical, economic, and social narrations, taking place under the wise guidance and within the measure of a community. It is self-governed and self-defined, although it remains as open as possible. *Khôra* accepts all elements without discriminating between new traces that enter the system: “corn may fall in one place [... or – EB] fly off and settle elsewhere” (*Timaeus*, 52e). It treats all things and traces equally – “provides room for all things that have birth” (*Timaeus*, 52b) – and offers herself as a place of being for them. It is the third type of being according to Plato, which he defines in the very first words as being that essentially offers itself to all things.



Thus, at the very core meaning of *khôra*, there is a sense of offering – offering the space for the others.

The borders of *khôra* as a separate area in the universe remain invisible and difficult to draw or define, which should remain exemplary for contemporary democracies. The contrary processes of exposing and redrawing rigid borders, such as the US wall separating California and Mexico or the recent phenomenon of Brexit, should be considered a retrogression of the democratic order, the degeneration of the democratic topography, which may obstruct the processes of free-play formation. At the same time, *khôra* is also presented in reassuring images, such as those of a mother or a shelter – it is a place of becoming, birth and nurturing. Its dynamism does not give rise to conflicts or destruction. Instead, it is a space marked by certain sentimentality and a sense of security emerging through the process of differentiating, a definitely positive and constructing aspect. Therefore, *khôra* may serve as an example of a place that represents peaceful prosperity of a community based on the principle of openness to change, motherly, protective care, and inclusive tolerance, (“it provides room for all things that have birth” [*Timaeus*, 52b] with no exception or discrimination). It is a place where the Rortyan principle of fortuitous coincidences and contingencies that have led to the formation of European democracies could take place. In this sense, it is an image of the mechanisms of a well-formed and well-developed contemporary Western democracy with its recent evolution in the domains of human rights, health care, and social benefits systems. According to some very optimistic diagnoses of the current political and economic state of Europe, it has never enjoyed such beneficial and peaceful times as it does today. As Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński claimed, one should appreciate that the present legal regulations and the development of science and medicine protect security and health of an average citizen much better than ever before in the history. Western communities focus on ethical awareness which has led to the establishment of various forms of international solidarity – institutional and non-institutional in order to guard against any acts of discrimination of minorities as well as to effectively and instantly engage in providing financial and humanitarian help to those in need at a global scale (Skowroński 2008, 48). However, the Rortyan

we-they dialogue, which should be constantly renewed and recreated in any language of a community based on humanitarian principles, has been recently put to the test by the immigration crisis. This has shown that reevaluating the notion of 'we' in the consciousness of Western societies still causes difficulties and it tends to be defined locally and ethnocentrically. Therefore, Plato's *khôra* as an open space of permanent change and formation, a shelter that "provides room for all things that have birth" (*Timaeus*, 52b), remains a political and economic ideal of democracy. *Khôra* in Plato's definition has an inherent quality of utopia inscribed on her very structure. It is "barely an object of belief; for when we regard this we dimly dream" (*Timaeus*, 52b). However, some sense of hope, inherent in this concept, always allows room for any future transgressions and aberrations. Being an object of belief and dream, it can never belong to the present absolutely; she constantly shifts towards the narration of ideology and the movement towards progress, self-creation and self-fascination. It is a very dynamic vision which bears some characteristics of the concept of the sublime, due to its immensity, obscurity, and unpredictability. Its essential structure is, therefore, as Plato claims, difficult to understand and dark, described as "a kind invisible and unshaped, all-receptive, and in some most perplexing and most baffling way partaking of the intelligible" (*Timaeus*, 51a).

Paradoxically, the vision of a society – the republic – described in *Timaeus* was rather undemocratic. The traditional philosophical models of society depicted in the canonical continental philosophical papers discussed today with reference to common European philosophical heritage are not based on today's democratic standards, as Skowroński claims (Skowroński 2008, 45). In Plato's *Timaeus* and the *Republic* the structure of the state was based on division into separate classes with the aim of serving the state and other more privileged groups. However, movement between the classes was possible and women were treated as equal to men. In a preliminary conversation with Timaeus, Socrates claims: "moreover, we went on to say about women that their natures must be attuned into accord with the men, and that the occupations assigned to them, both in war and in all other activities of life, should in every case be the same for all alike" (*Timaeus*, 18c). As Jill Gentile and Michael Macron argue, the democratic space as such is on principle

governed by a feminine law, the same one that makes Plato use feminine pronouns in order to refer to *khôra*. Samuel Weber makes a similar point, noting that Derrida emphasizes the importance of the feminine quality that Plato attributes to democracy, “a quality that he both associates with desire and also mistrusts; such femininity diverges from the masculine, patriarchal, and fraternal perspective that will dominate theories of democracy and politics throughout most of the history of Western thought” (Weber 2008, 125).

*Khôra* is the transitory state, a ligature between the general and the particular. In this sense, it prefigures the role of philosophy in imposing order, meaning and value upon the chaos of various experiences and arguments. Therefore, it partakes in the old dilemma as to whether philosophy should pose its preliminary questions and assumptions to assist people in everyday life with its changing current circumstances, cultural and local background, limitations and hopes – a vision recently revived by neopragmatists such as Skowroński – or be concerned with the general ideas and the eternal truth. Significantly, Plato defines *khôra* as the third type of being – a negotiator between two other types of being. The first one – the intelligible, non-material model – is The Ideal Universe, the second is its visible and tangible imitation. The third type is the space of becoming of the visible universe, the “receptacle (*hupodochê*) of all becoming” (*Timaeus*, 49a)

“This being so, we must agree that One Kind is the self-identical Form, ungenerated and indestructible, neither receiving into itself any other from any quarter nor itself passing any whither into another, invisible and in all ways imperceptible by sense, it being the object which it is the province of Reason to contemplate; and a second Kind is that which is named after the former and similar thereto, an object perceptible by sense, generated, ever carried about, becoming in a place and out of it again perishing, apprehensible by Opinion with the aid of Sensation; and a third Kind is ever-existing Place.” (*Timaeus*, 52 a)

*Khôra*, in Derrida’s explanation, is an opening of Freud’s model of family relationships, being neither the original point of departure – the mother – nor the authority figure associated with the role of the father. Since she is always beyond the intelligible and the grasp of reason, she is always measured by the flexibility of the present and future form

imposed by the current approach and the will of the perceiver; she takes the form of the breath of the community it prefigures. Her form is a compromise between the narration of the origin myth and the current metamorphoses of sense, language, will and desire in the society. Speaking about *khôra* in terms of nostalgia and respect for the Other, the unrepresentable place of community, Derrida's tone becomes admiring and deferent. He draws argumentative circles around the topic, avoiding disclosing the secrecy of the term, similarly to in Nancy's description of adoration: "adoration simply means: attention to the movement of sense, to the possibility of address that would be utterly new, neither philosophical nor religious, neither practical nor political nor loving – but attentive" (Nancy 2013, 20). In his *Khôra*, Derrida's self-directed attentiveness presents *khôra* in terms of its substitutes: a woman, a semi-sacred place, or a rhetorical mechanism. However, he remains attentive to the resonances of the general sense of this term in *Timaeus*. The uncertain figure of *khôra* resists any completion or demands from both philosophers. Derrida and Plato plead guilty to their powerlessness in the face of its – or her – mystery, as *khôra* bears a strong mark of femininity. In this respect one could resort to the advice marking Freud's self-defeat in the face of femininity, from his eponymous essay: "if you want to know more about it, enquire from your own experiences of life, turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information" (Freud 1964, 135).

*Khôra's* essence lies in the lack of any definable essence, at least in a sense of the play of binary opposites. In this manner, it also subverts the difference between masculine and feminine elements, yes and no, the intelligible or sensorial that is of the logic of logos. It demands an aberration of sense and rhetoric, as Derrida points out, because to speak of *khôra's* qualities, Plato resorts to negative forms, since the positive would seem too affirmative and defined. *Khôra* is perplexing, baffling, and aporetic with respect to her part in the intelligible, because she is related to dream fantasies. Derrida's narration concerning *khôra* turns to the topic and the figure of an abyss, which is discussed elsewhere in his *The Truth in Painting* with respect to the concept of the *parergon*. In the philosophical realm, Derrida locates the figure of the abyss in the absolute separation between Kant's critiques – between the autonomous

domain of the concept of nature (as it appears through the sensory intuition by which nature is given to us) and the autonomous domain of the notion of freedom which surpasses sensory intuition. Abyss is also a result of a movement in a vicious circle, a hermeneutical circle, a circle of arguments, which finally come back to its own beginning. In Hegel's account, art is inscribed in a circle, because it is always perceived from the perspective of its own end and completion. It belongs to the past, claims Derrida. Therefore, philosophy of art is a circle in a ring of interrelated, joined circles. The abyss is an effect of the infinite inscription of circles. It is the logic of inclusion that describes the relation of an entity to her parts. It is also the logic of *khôra*, an abyss of inclusion, which encircles everything that becomes part of it. However, she does not possess, enslave or claim any right to anything. (Notably, the same regulations concerning surplus possession apply to the guardians of the state described in *Timaeus*. They were not allowed to own gold or money and supposed to practice moderation for the sake of the wellbeing of the community.) Like a perfect commune, *khôra* receives, but does not possess or own anything. Its existence, or rather non-existence, is discrete, resembling the free status of fantasy. Therefore, it accepts all narrations that surround it and are inscribed onto it.

If a contemporary society is a constellation of competitive, yet dissimilar, incoherent small narratives that do not form any systematic and stable structure, as Lyotard has it, *khôra* is nothing but a process of what is inscribed onto it, all narrations that concern it, but, Derrida continues, these topics are very specific baseless, groundless, and absent. *Khôra* is neither subject nor substance. Derrida defines it in terms of a recipient, the one that receives, gives place for, encircles and inscribes onto her own non-substance. Therefore, it may prefigure the image of an ideal human community based on the principle of forming ever new circles of solidarity with the Other.

The story of *khôra* constitutes an abyss – a chasm that opens up underneath the narration of *Timaeus*. The discourse on *khôra* differs sharply from the coherent and precise narration that surrounds it, notes Derrida, turning abruptly to the play of reflexes that resembles the discourse on political topography depicting the complex territorial power locations and relations in a society.

Derrida's conceptualization of *khôra* in political terms confirms the main argument of this paper, so it is worth referring to this paragraph directly:

"If there is indeed a chasm in the middle of the book, a sort of abyss 'in' which there is an attempt to think or say this abyssal chasm which would be *khôra*, the opening of a place 'in' which everything would, at the same time, come to take place and be reflected (for these are images which are inscribed there), is it insignificant that a *mise en abyme* regulates a certain order of composition of the discourse? And that it goes so far as to regulate even this mode of thinking or of saying which must be similar without being identical to the one which is practiced on the edges of the chasm? Is it insignificant that this *mise en abyme* affects the forms of discourse on places [places], notably political places, a politics of place entirely commanded by the consideration of sites [*lieux*] (jobs in the society, region, territory, country), as sites assigned to types or forms of discourse?" (Derrida 1995, 104)

In its most literal meaning, the term *khôra* depicts a spatial area belonging to the polis that remains outside the main parts of the city. It signifies the otherness that comes from the edges, that is at once distant and similar as the mirror image, but at the same time vital to constituting the identity of any community. *Khôra* as a preliminary stage of childhood development characterized by a psychological union with the maternal body, according to Julia Kristeva, precedes language acquisition and Lacan's mirror stage of identity formation. In *Timaeus* however, the discursive image of *khôra* arises in the complex process of building a narrative architecture of metaphors which inscribe the picture-icon onto ever new contexts. This simulacrum-like game resembles the play of reflexes in the famous *Mirror Chamber* designed by Leonardo da Vinci during his study of optics.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Mirror Chamber*

Da Vinci's installation, composed of eight mirror walls that form a closed space, amplifies the reflection of the visitor *ad infinitum*. It is an abyss based on the illusion of depth illuminated by the immanent reflection of light. It signifies the limitlessness of the act of both receiving and free play while remaining itself invisible, unrepresentable and immaterial. The architecture of this space allows for a complete perception of an enclosed object from all possible angles and perspectives. This multitude of perspectivism and the clash of all possible points of view resembles the mechanism of discussion and negotiations in a democratic society, in which each singular perspective and the individual "I" is always placed in the context of the social dialogue, criticism, and the interaction of various forces with their complex directions of movement. It is a space in which each singular "I" becomes "we", all that is private becomes public, in a mechanism that leaves no place for concealment. It is the political place of *parrhesia*,

which leaves no image unexposed and no word unspoken. In other words, it is the place of truth, unmasking and revealing. In Michel Foucault's definition of this term, drawn in *Fearless Speech*, *parrhesia* stands for frankness and courage in speaking the truth, the act which formed the fundamental basis of the political and critical tradition of Western societies. Foucault analyzes the complex conditions and requirements of any public act of truth-telling and its consequences for the power relations in a democratic society. *Parrhesia* stands beyond persuasive deception of rhetoric, its political strength is proportionate to its clarity and sincerity. In the *Introduction to Fearless Speech* Foucault states:

"The second important aspect of the evolution of *parrhesia* is related to the political field. As it appears in Euripides' plays and also in the texts of the Fourth Century B.C., *parrhesia* is an essential characteristic of Athenian democracy. Of course, we still have to investigate the role of *parrhesia* in the Athenian constitution. But we can say quite generally that *parrhesia* was a guideline for democracy as well as an ethical and personal attitude characteristic of the good citizen. Athenian democracy was defined very explicitly as a constitution (*politeia*) in which people enjoyed *demokratia*, *isegoria* (the equal right of speech), *isonomia* (the equal participation of all citizens in the exercise of power), and *parrhesia*. *Parrhesia*, which is a requisite for public speech, takes place between citizens as individuals, and also between citizens construed as an assembly. Moreover, the agora is the place where *parrhesia* appears." (Foucault 2001, 22)

The analogy I have drawn between the figure of a receptacle and the model of da Vinci's *Mirror Chamber* suggests that the narration of *parrhesia* is also characteristic of *khôra*. *Khôra* is a conclusion of any precise and genuine reasoning, as Timaeus claims. It is a prerequisite for free speech and free participation in public life as it is based on the principle of involvement, tolerance, compromise, and unlimited admission. Moreover, its main distinguishing characteristics and fundamental assumptions are diversity and heterogeneity. In *Timaeus*, Plato emphasizes that "if the stamped copy is to assume diverse appearances of all sorts, that substance wherein it is set and stamped could not possibly be suited to its purpose unless it were itself devoid of all those forms which it is about to receive from any quarter." Therefore, the *Mirror Chamber* may adequately parallel a space that is devoid of all forms, yet may assume diverse appearances of all sorts. In this way the eight-sided mirror room



designed by Leonardo da Vinci becomes a figure of the all-encompassing democratic receptacle that is *khôra* – the recipient and the source of truth. In the opening paragraph of part two of his *Khôra*, Derrida confirms this diagnosis:

“*Mise en abyme* of the discourse on *khôra*, site [*lieu*] of politics, politics of sites [*lieux*], such would be, then, the structure of an overprinting without a base” (Derrida 1995, 104).

*Khôra* means a place that is occupied, settled and has its function. Analyzing the correlation of a place and the speech that belongs to it, Derrida claims that in *Timaeus* only those that have their own place, belong to a place, have the right to speak in a community.

“To give back, to leave, or to give the floor to the other amounts to saying: you have (a) place, have (a) place, come.” (Derrida 1995, 108)

Moreover, he notes that Socrates locates his own voice at a distance from his audience and those he speaks about. Therefore, he locates himself as if in a third type of space that is equivalent to *khôra*, which appears as the place of true speech, always ready to accept an act of discussion, as is Socrates himself. Derrida proposes the following paradoxical and provocative conclusion:

“Socrates is not *khôra*, but would look a lot like it/her it it/she were someone or something. In any case, he puts himself in its/her place, which is not just a place among others, but perhaps place itself, the irreplaceable place.” (Derrida 1995, 111)

At the same time Derrida casts doubt on the status of the discourse about the mode of being peculiar to *khôra*: it is neither true nor probable, he claims, because it is no longer the discourse about being. Instead he creates the concept of a narration-container, the memory as an imperfect selective, fragmentary receptacle for the events of live. Collective memory in this sense is a more universal, bigger vessel that includes all individual receptacles in its interior space. It is a global receptacle of the dynamism vibrating in Lyotard’s small narratives. Each of them is a reservoir or basin for another narration, in an endless process of containing and enclosing the discourse within. *Khôra*, in this sense, is an

image of an ideal addressee, a consumer of all possible stories inscribed on cultural history. All truth, myth and fiction, that Lyotard saw as marking the deterioration or decay of grand narratives, have become themselves a non-existent and crystal-clear mythical grand narrative that does not discriminate and allows for the free play of its bustling contents. It shelters and protects the variety of social discourses. It is not a space that is neutral towards the multiplicity of its enclosed happenings and stories. It exhibits definite positive qualities that stimulate their development. It is fertile ground for their growth and movement. It subverts and supplements the distinction between the figure of the mother and the model of the father, being both and neither in particular at the same time – a third kind of universal care provider. Of *khôra*, Plato asks “what essential property, then, are we to conceive it to possess?” His proposed answer is that “it should be the receptacle, and as it were the nurse, of all Becoming” (*Timaeus*, 49a). In this way, the mode of “nursing being” transcends the logic of opposition, the mode of the linear opposition-connection between two elements, a pair. The essential opposition and distinction in this schema point to one of the first dilemmas of pre-Socratic philosophy, that is, the relationship between and the paradox of one and many. Introducing *khôra* into the philosophical dispute necessitates reevaluation and reconsideration of the very basic ontological principles. This recognition of the need for locating a fresh starting point in a new reestablished spatial logic of the pre-beginning in necessity, which gives rise to three kinds of being, surfaces in *Timaeus* in the same chapter, in which the notion of *khôra* is introduced:

“For, in truth, this Cosmos in its origin was generated as a compound, from the combination of Necessity and Reason. And inasmuch as Reason was controlling Necessity by persuading her to conduct to the best end the most part of the things coming into existence, thus and thereby it came about, through Necessity yielding to intelligent persuasion, that this Universe of ours was being in this wise constructed at the beginning. Wherefore if one is to declare how it actually came into being on this wise, he must include also the form of the Errant Cause, in the way that it really acts. To this point, therefore, we must return, and taking once again a fresh starting point suitable to the matter we must make a fresh start in dealing therewith, just as we did with our previous subjects.” (*Timaeus* 48a-b)

The creativity of the free play of vocabularies composed of new words, their connotations, and their new metaphoric and semantic positions is ideologically creative, according to the contemporary American philosopher Richard Rorty. Democracy in this sense is a constantly changing play of creativity, based on the metaphoric, poetic, literary, artistic and philosophical uses of language. A similar vision of creativity as the basic principle of democracy was essential for the renowned German performance artist Joseph Beuys. This politically engaged artist supported democratic and green movements, including the anti-communist Solidarity movement in Poland, arguing that artistic potential of creativity is essential for a society and may save democracy from stagnation. Notably, he believed that public lectures and discussions constituted an important part of artistic activity; both Rorty and Beuys stress the vital role of language in the ideological and political development of democratic systems.

The essenceless *khôra* forms a fundamental paradigm that reflects Rorty's views on the self and the world. He argues that these concepts have no inner nature or essence, as there is no inner essence of reality. Instead, he sees the need for some flexible space of formation and interplay within a community that is equivalent to Plato's concept of *khôra*. It lies at the core of his use of the term contingency and his conception of the human psyche as a chain-like net of beliefs and desires.

*Khôra* is also a place where novelty is continuously formed, a receptacle where the new leaves its ever-changing trace and imprint. The constant permutations of *khôra* and democracy create new constellations of meanings and words, without any prior mechanisms of formation and design. Each process is readable only through the existing constellations of meanings – like new vocabulary, which Rorty states is describable only in its own terms. In this sense, it belongs more to a logic of poetic intuition peculiar to dream visions (to which Plato compares *khôra*) rather than to the logic of methodological proceedings. In this way, *khôra* remains a model for creative thinking, an absolutely shapeless and non-resistant matter of forming, a depository that prepares a place for the genius of theoretical thinking to be performed.

The main hope of the positive hero of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, the liberal ironist, is that it is possible to think of a


community in which the main principle is solidarity, along with private irony – an expression of self-creation through the free play of circumstances, intellectualism, and self-reflection. The ideal society should allow space, in the physical and metaphorical meaning of this word, for everyone to coexist peacefully. One of the main characteristics of this unlimited psychological and mental space of wellbeing should be its non-invasive character. This space should grant everyone the right to free expression of their needs as long as they do not limit or intrude upon, humiliate, or hurt the feelings of others. The main aim of the ironist is that it shares others' sensitivity and susceptibility to pain. Therefore, the liberal ironist respects the psychological barriers, the space of hopes and expectations of others that grant their sense of security. The metaphor of a friendly, all-encompassing, maternal, acquiescent space of safety resembles Plato's third type of being, *khôra* that "provides room for all things that have birth" (*Timaeus*, 52b) being "the Nurse of Becoming [...] submitting to all the other affections" (*Timaeus*, 52 d). At the same time, it is a place of genuine heterogeneity and the coexistence of diverse elements. Notably, like *khôra*, Rorty's ideal of the liberal ironist is described in feminine terms. Rorty's heroine hopes that her own vocabulary will not prove limiting. Its tactic is based on the ability to imaginatively and emotionally identify with others, resembling the way in which *khôra* assumes the shape of the elements with which it is in contact.

The dream of a contemporary multicultural society based on tolerance, coexistence and mutual respect in a global, united, and open space resembles utopia in an age which has experienced the sudden rise of nationalism and xenophobia. As British critic Paul Gilroy notes, "it now appears as though any desire to combine cultural diversity with a hospitable civic order (one that might, for example, be prepared to translate its own terms into other languages or see immigration as a potential asset rather than an obvious defeat) must be subjected to ridicule and abuse" (Gilroy 2005, 2). However, a critical perspective on the ancient figure of *khôra* could offer fresh insight and inspiration for new geopolitical rules. The figure of *khôra*, which celebrates and provides a hospitable place for difference (just as in Derrida's concept of *différance*), might accommodate the ancient dreams to contemporary

realities and “help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals to cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile” (Gilroy 2005, 3). In this sense, *khôra* would help to conceptualize the interconnectedness and peaceable dwelling of the diverse, as well as solidarity and the cosmopolitan order of society that is able, as *khôra* is, to comprehend universality and “to receive within itself all the kinds” in the name of what Gilroy calls “multicultural ethics and politics [...] remised upon an agonistic, planetary humanism” (Gilroy 2005, 4).

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