Political translation
How social movement democracies survive
Doerr, Nicole

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Introduction

Concern for deliberative democracy is sweeping the social sciences, yet real deliberations tend to be far from ideal. Participants and observers who care about the social inequalities that plague many deliberative situations often advocate bringing in third parties to facilitate. But it matters which third parties intervene. I analyze the “best case” of a practice that evolved in several radical democracies and one mainstream local democracy to argue that third parties who both understand and advocate for the disadvantaged can frequently be deployed with significant positive effects.

Consider the following scenario, which I observed at a citizen assembly in a Californian city of 300,000 I will call Santa Brigida.¹

“I promise that everyone will be heard tonight,” said the facilitator opening the assembly, which took place at City Hall.² Progressive City Council members in Santa Brigida had organized this participatory meeting, as well as earlier citizen forums, to include residents’ voices in decision-making on local urban policy. However, just two hours after the facilitator opened the meeting, this promise had already been broken. When it became apparent that City Council members,

¹ Name changed.
² My fieldnotes, Santa Brigida City Hall meeting, June 7, 2010.
including the facilitator, lacked genuine interest in soliciting citizens’ concerns, participating residents expressed their anger publicly. One, Maria Silva,³ told the facilitator how she saw the problem:

“I, Maria, don’t feel listened to by you. I have children at home, and I couldn’t make dinner for them tonight; they are hungry. If you really wanted to listen, you could sit down at a round table and talk to us. I am so angry. You don’t listen to us.” While Maria’s speech (delivered in Spanish) reflected what many residents in the assembly felt, the response of the facilitator, who is bilingual but answered in English, seemed to disregard her concerns: “Maria, I ask you to calm down. General comments are not allowed until the end of this session. You must make concrete demands, otherwise we cannot include your concerns.” Council members nodded in agreement.

This scene took place in California, but it could easily have occurred in any number of cities throughout the United States or Europe, where policymakers in the past two decades have attempted to promote citizen “empowerment” through deliberative democracy. In an attempt at reforming mainstream models of representative democracy (where decisions are made by voting), local participatory citizen forums like the one in Santa Brigida are designed to include the proposals of community residents in the decision-making process and are based on a dialogical or consensus-oriented process of deliberation (Habermas 1984; Mansbridge 1983; Kitschelt 1993; Polletta 2002; della Porta 2005, Blee 2012; Wood 2012; Lang 2013, Lee 2015). Too often, however, as the case of Maria shows, those for whom these democratic forums are created end up feeling marginalized and misunderstood. Marginalization, in this context, occurs

³ All names changed.
within a formally inclusive deliberative process when arguments made by less privileged participants fail to affect outcomes. (Young 2003).

Marginalization can result from formal and informal power disparities among participants within ostensibly inclusive and empowering deliberative forums. At the Santa Brigida forum, social class differences and linguistic barriers divided elected representatives from participating community members—especially poor people, Spanish-speaking immigrants, and people of color, who, like Maria, felt neither heard nor understood by the official facilitator.4

When I began this research, I, like many researchers before me, predicted that those who protested about feeling marginalized within the democratic process would choose to leave the meetings where they felt excluded. But this was not the case in Santa Brigida. Following Maria’s speech about her frustration with the facilitator, two women in their early twenties distributed leaflets at the back of the assembly. They were local community organizers volunteering as linguistic interpreters/translators for Maria and other immigrant residents who were not native speakers of English, in order to help them understand and participate in the ongoing policy debates taking place at City Hall. One of these translators addressed a group of residents who were about to leave the meeting: “We have witnessed how unfair the deliberative process was tonight. Together with all local community associations and churches, we have organized an

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4 I use the broad term ‘immigrants’ to refer to different categories of legal and illegalized (im)migrants in the United States. The broad movement for immigrants’ rights in the United States includes different categories of resident immigrants, undocumented immigrants, refugees, and the families and advocates of these groups, including many (undocumented and documented) second-generation immigrants (Chavez 2008).
alternative people’s forum, the Santa Brigida Community Forum. Several City Council members have already agreed to participate. Please join us.”

This was not the first intervention by volunteer translators at a Santa Brigida City Hall meeting. While most of the City Council members, including the facilitator at the official town hall meeting, were in theory committed to an egalitarian and inclusive process, the community organizers who had volunteered for translation became increasingly aware of how both subtle and more blatant dynamics at those meetings marginalized the voices of many of those for whom they were translating. Working frequently with politicians, volunteer translators became aware of their own invisible power positions in these forums. They also discovered the unique power of translators to disrupt the deliberative process without being perceived as out of order, as their official job was to witness and address linguistic miscommunications.

As witnesses and in reaction to the failure of the City Hall meetings, community organizers who had worked there as voluntary translators mobilized outraged citizens, other residents, and church groups to establish a Community Forum that would be chaired and facilitated by the residents. At City Hall, City Council members had dominated discussion periods with lengthy statements, making it hard for residents to influence decision-making. At the newly created Community Forum, one of the translators politely interrupted a politician to prevent such dynamics from being repeated: “Excuse me, but you have not answered several questions asked by people here tonight,” she stated in English. Another translator then provided a Spanish

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5 My fieldnotes.
6 My fieldnotes.
translation and requested that politicians make concrete concessions to community members.

The translators’ collective intervention echoed the voices of residents holding protest banners. At this alternative Community Forum, politicians changed their previously agreed-upon policy proposals following the residents’ and translators' collective interventions.

My analysis explains how and why Santa Brigida community translators acted as they did, and how linguistic diversity prompted both their insights and the changes they made in the deliberative process. I analyze political translation, distinct from linguistic translation, as a disruptive and communicative practice developed by activists and grassroots community organizers to address the inequities that hinder democratic deliberation, and to entreat powerful groups to work more inclusively with disempowered ones. The insights I derive from the conscious efforts and effects of those who took on the explicit role of political translators in these local forums apply to other situations in which inequalities in communication threaten to undo a democracy.

The Neglected Power of the Third: Political Translators

Theorists have conceptualized deliberative or communicative democracy as based on direct, egalitarian dialogue that seeks to avoid asymmetrical power. In doing so, they have neglected the powerful informal third position of supposedly neutral facilitators—an omission that has kept us from imagining alternative democratic models. The notion of political translation provides a model for democracy that breaks with the reigning theory of neutral facilitation by adding a specific advocacy role, which I call a disruptive third position within political deliberation, in order to foster a more equal and inclusive decision-making process.
At the core of political translation is the translator’s unique position as a witnessing third party between facilitators and conflicting parties. As seen in Maria’s case, translators do not seek to act as impartial facilitators; nor are their interventions neutral. Through their witnessing of differences and disagreements between local residents and political elites, including facilitators, the translators in the Santa Brigida case gained a fairly limited yet significant influence over the outcome of the proceedings. They also had the capacity to influence through persuasion, because they understood both the values of the privileged groups and the needs of marginalized ones. Translators used their unique position as a disruptive third to influence through persuasion, by directing attention to power imbalances and drawing on the egalitarian commitments of those who otherwise would be unlikely to recognize their own structural privilege.

For residents and community organizers in Santa Brigida, translation has become a model for grassroots democracy and political activism that changes the way in which local deliberation is organized and facilitated. Based on community organizers’ and activists’ practices as presented in the following chapters, I posit political translation as a twofold model of radical democracy that transcends our conventional understanding of linguistic interpretation in the context of deliberative citizen forums. First, political translators such as the community organizers in Santa Brigida come together as a group to resist domination in the context of officially inclusive, deliberative or discursive democracy. Rather than boycotting meetings, they openly intervene to challenge cultural and linguistic power asymmetries, within both official community meetings like the one in Santa Brigida and radical democratic meetings created by protesters and social movement groups. Second, political translators also directly intervene within discourse or
negotiation to challenge the marginalization that dominant politicians often impose upon disadvantaged community members.

My analysis counters the conventional notion of a “neutral” facilitator role in three ways: first, it shows that in the context of all of the cases I studied, deliberative groups with only “neutral” facilitators tended to fail. Second, it shows that the political translators succeeded by acquiring both an oppositional consciousness and effective political power through their positions as witnessing third parties and their ability to act at least somewhat independently of dominant interests. Third, it documents three conditions that make political translation effective: a context of cultural and linguistic differences, a commitment to equality among some privileged group members, and, most importantly, the translators' development of a disruptive third position.

Political Translation and Social Movements

Translators’ political role has been described by theorists of comparative literature, culture, feminism, language, and Marxist philosophy (Venuti 1992; Sakai 1997; Tymocko 1999; Gentzler and Tymocko 2002; Gentzler 2008; Apter 2006; Boéri 2010; Baker 2016; Butler 1999; Conway 2011; Nanz 2006; Santos 2005; Mezzadra 2007). Translators’ critical interventions in public discourse vary depending on the specific context of interaction (Gentzler 2007). In historical revolutionary moments and postcolonial contexts, literary translators have taken on an important role by translating and spreading new terms and subversive political meanings to popular audiences (Tymoczko 1999, 2007; Boéri 2010; Baker 2016). With the rise of popular influence on power holders through digital and social media, activists in the Egyptian revolution
have used linguistic translation and subtitling as a way to broadcast independent news and alternative meanings to transnational audiences of supporters (Baker 2016).

Belying an abstract, normative conception of a neutral, impartial translation, empirical research reveals a degree of agency as well as situated moral judgments on the part of interpreters operating in power-dominated arenas for public dialogue. For example, in asylum interviews or in court hearings involving detained undocumented immigrants, translators may find themselves in the ethically challenging position of being the only individuals to fully grasp the failures of mutual dialogue that arise from prejudices involving categories such as gender, race, or class, among others (Inghilleri 2012). While professional interpreters' training prepares them to act as impartial mediators to ensure that speakers and hearers understand each other, impartiality and neutrality may in reality limit translators’ capacity to transmit the truth across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Inghilleri 2012).

An increasing number of professional linguistic translators and interpreters currently use their language skills to engage in social protest, engendering a need for research on how translators can influence political processes of discourse, deliberation, and democratic decision-making. This is a rich and generative field, within which I have pursued one rather particular line of inquiry. Following translation theorist Moira Inghilleri, I use the notions of translating and interpreting interchangeably in this book to emphasize the cultural component of the work of both interpreters and translators (Inghilleri 2012). Rather than focus on political ramifications of linguistic translation or interpreting per se, I look at political translation as a particular cultural act, one among a broad set of practices whose goal is to address gender-, class-, and race-based
marginalization—even within groups whose members speak the same language. For example, I will show that US global justice activists used the concept of translation to describe their radical democratic contributions to building a broader US American Left coalition connecting climate justice activists and NGOs close to the Democratic Party with undocumented immigrants, excluded workers, LGBT leaders of color, and minority leaders.

Political translation presents a new way to theorize the political role of activists who engage in deliberative politics. Activists bring to deliberative forums a critical awareness that counterbalances the subtle and overt influences that economic and political interests exert on public decision-makers (Polletta 2015). From an activist perspective, though, deliberative forums actually risk coopting and delegitimizing protest: for example, if a facilitator marginalizes the perspective of already disenfranchised groups (Young 2003). Moreover, the presence of political activists within citizen forums is contested. Some deliberative democrats argue that protest is necessary if deliberation fails to be inclusive, if it is biased or unfair, and if it does little but reproduce elite discourse that marginalized participants perceive as illegitimate (Smith 2004; Habermas 1981). Others, however, fear that protesters could impede the deliberative process if they only advocate for their own political ideas—failing to engage in serious dialogue with other groups (Talisse 2001).

Addressing some of these open questions, political translation provides a perspective for activists to engage within deliberative politics without being perceived as threat to the norms of deliberation and yet in a way that challenges inequity within public discourse. Activists who intervene as political translators do more than protesters speaking for social justice. By
translating on behalf of other groups or individuals, activists transcend their own group’s particular position. They acquire a new role within deliberative forums through their position of a witnessing third party.

Political translation draws on two different conceptions of power in communication: the liberal assumption that deliberation will inevitably lead to fair and equitable decisions through mutual persuasion, and the radical perspective that posits a need to disrupt existing power structures in order to make such outcomes possible. Behind these contrasting conceptions of power lie two different notions of equality: unlike the liberal point of view, the radical position assumes that playing fields require leveling before all factions can participate equally. Political translators act from a liberal perspective when they echo and support arguments made by marginalized group members; they take a more radical approach when they collectively disrupt and interrupt deliberations in which dominant groups marginalize disadvantaged group members.

As political translators, activists challenge the ideals of neutrality and impartiality in situations that many participants in a meeting perceive as unfair, in which a dominant group systematically ignores demands for equality and justice made by another, less privileged group. I call such situations positional misunderstandings. At their core lie material differences of interest entangled with inequality. I will address this problem in greater depth later in this introduction.

The positional misunderstanding between Maria and the facilitator at Santa Brigida's local democratic forum reflects a larger debate about inequality and democratic participation that divides institutional leaders and engaged citizens. While deliberative democracy has become the
mainstream model for policymakers and progressive institutions aiming to enhance citizen
dialogue, the democratic outcomes of deliberative reforms have been contested
(Fraser 2007; Lee et al. 2015). Those who have studied the diffusion of deliberative models from
small, local citizen forums to broader national political arenas are concerned about the
instrumentalization and increasing commercialization of such practices (Lee et al 2015). Today,
deliberation is a key model for negotiation used by mainstream political institutions such as the
European Union, as well as by development companies, multinational corporations, and
international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, which adopt
deliberative models as a way of enhancing transparency and accountability (see, critically,
Critical research suggests that the mainstreaming of deliberative democracy may not facilitate
“empowerment”; rather, it may serve as a tool for power-holders to legitimate themselves (Nanz
and Steffek 2004; Deitelhoff 2012; Lang 2013; Eliasoph 2015; Lee et al 2015; McQuarrie
2015;).

My critique in this book is different. I do not address the intentional manipulation of deliberative
democratic forms of participation by dominant interests. Rather, I look at places where
deliberation goes wrong even when people genuinely attempt to make it work. To understand the
puzzle that positional misunderstandings create, I analyze mainstream deliberative settings
created by policymakers as well as alternative forums for radical democracy and consensus-
based decision-making created by protesters, community organizers, or local residents such as
Maria. In many of these groups, facilitators were supposedly motivated to include everyone in
the process and clearly sympathetic to the concerns of those included in the democratic
deliberation process. Nevertheless, these facilitators marginalized, often preconsciously, the people they sought to include.

In Santa Brigida, the problem was even greater than the facilitator’s failure to help participants. In fact, the misunderstanding between the facilitator and residents in Santa Brigida involved linguistic and cultural barriers that prevented the emergence of an inclusive democratic debate between City Council members and residents. Democratic theories have assumed that a shared language is a necessary background condition for democratic discourse. Yet in Santa Brigida, only the official facilitator and City Council members spoke English, while the majority of residents had to rely on volunteer translators.

Santa Brigida's efforts at democratic deliberation point to a broader concern about political communication. How can people work together across cultural difference in increasingly multilingual, multicultural societies? Regarding the case of Europe and of multilingual nation states, cosmopolitan and deliberative theorists have advanced English as a shared language, a ‘lingua franca’ for transnational democratic communication (Habermas 1996; Archibugi 2005; Dryzek 2009; Van Parijs 2011). However, from a multicultural and communitarian perspective, civic deliberation, in order to be truly democratic and inclusive, needs to take place in people’s authentic language, their local vernacular (Kymlicka 2001); otherwise public discourse reifies cultural misrecognition and linguistic colonialism (Taylor 1997).

Bridging this disagreement, I suggest that whether a single global language or multiple local languages are involved in deliberations, the need to uncover inequality and bridge difference
remains. People have unquestioned, pre-reflective ways of understanding or misunderstanding each other that can determine how culture enables and restricts cooperation in heterogeneous groups (Lichterman 1996; Polletta 2002, 2008). With political translation, I present a practice that produced dramatic results in improving the inclusivity and effectiveness of decision-making practices in diverse movement groups and local democratic settings. Political translation can turn real differences among deliberating groups into a resource for deepening democracy.

**The Potential of Multilingual, Culturally Diverse Democracy in Social Movements**

I began my analysis of political translation by trying to understand how those groups that objected to marginalization within official deliberative forums would work within their own culturally diverse groups and grassroots democratic assemblies (della Porta 2005a, 2009, 2012; Polletta 2002; Blee 2012; Smith 2007; Wood 2012). Activists engaged in the global justice movement in Europe and the United States have used political translation to address positional misunderstandings in the context of radical democratic, consensus-oriented, deliberative democracy, set in multilingual meetings and transnational assemblies that involve people with a multiplicity of identities and linguistic backgrounds (della Porta 2005b; Doerr 2008, 2012). One particularly important model of egalitarian, grassroots-based democracy and deliberation is the World Social Forum (WSF). Created in 2001 by activists working on global justice, the WSF is the largest transnational face-to-face experiment in radical democracy at the time of this study (della Porta 2012; Juris 2008a, 2008b; Pleyers 2010; Smith et al. 2007, 2012; Smith 2007; Smith and Wiest 2012; Teivainen 2002; Whitaker 2004). For seven years, I studied decision-making and deliberation in the WSF’s regional Social Forums in Europe and the United States, which
involved thousands of citizens, immigrants, and multilingual speakers discussing social justice and global politics.

I assumed that deliberation in monolingual, national social and citizen forums in Europe and the United States would be more inclusive and more democratically successful than in groups facing linguistic disparities. Most studies of deliberative democracy would make such a prediction, assuming that a multiplicity of languages would obstruct the deliberative process. Drawing on ten years of fieldwork involving case studies of 40 social forum groups and local citizen forums in the United States, Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, however, I discovered that—as this book will show—linguistically and culturally diverse groups were actually more inclusive in their democratic processes and decision-making outcomes than homogeneous groups, and they also survived longer. The explanation for this counterintuitive finding lies in the process of political translation.

Even though linguistic difference is often seen as a hindrance to democratic deliberation, in the cases I studied, this difference was designated by all participating parties as an issue that needed to be addressed, and thus prompted efforts to discuss the potential problems it might cause. In attempting to address linguistic problems, the participants opened up an avenue for better understanding the positional misunderstandings that so often distort deliberation between members of privileged and disadvantaged groups. In all of the monolingual groups that I studied, positional misunderstandings led to internal crises and to the groups’ decisions to break into different factions. As a result of the explicit attention that both multilingual and highly diverse deliberative settings drew to cultural differences among participants, these settings also inspired
political translation, the collective practice of openly challenging and tackling positional misunderstandings within deliberative politics.

The political translation practices that this study uncovers have not been previously addressed by democratic theorists, and they bring to the foreground people’s grassroots engagement with positional misunderstandings and structural inequality in the context of cultural and linguistic diversity. Deliberative theorists have only started to explore immigrants’ and activists’ grassroots attempts to address the reality of multilingual policymaking in the context of local urban democracy and transnational political participation (Nanz 2006, 2009). Sociologists draw attention to the key role of social movement activists as translators who spread ideas from one national political context to another (Chabot 2012; Guiraudon 2001). My study will not specifically focus on translation as diffusion or adaptation of ideas across different contexts (Chabot 2012), nor do I conceive of translation as a counter-hegemonic normative ideal (Santos 2005). Rather, I will restrict my focus to the political practice of translation as used by community organizers in Santa Brigida and activists in social movements for their radical democratic practices. In comparing deliberation in meetings with or without political translation, I will begin to identify conditions under which heterogeneous groups may work together more democratically.

**Political Translation versus Neutral Facilitation**

I will make several arguments regarding both positional misunderstandings and political translation within deliberation, based on one case of local mainstream democracy in California and on several radical democracies set in the World Social Forum process and its American and
European chapters. First, I will show that egalitarian democracy and deliberation often fail to fulfill their tasks because they do not address the problem of marginalization within the model of consensus-based democracy. Second, focusing on practices of political translation, I will show how social justice activists and community organizers in both the United States and in Europe have worked to institutionalize a disruptive third voice within deliberation that helps members of marginalized groups influence and alter perceived “unfair” processes of facilitation and decision-making. Third, I will show how the grassroots practice of political translation provides a better model for equal deliberation than is found in any model of neutral facilitation in the cases I discuss. I will argue that political translation helps to solve positional misunderstandings regarding race, gender, class and language differences or other cultural differences. These misunderstandings remain unseen within models of neutral facilitation and, in turn, impede democratic deliberation.

Political Translation: What This Book Will Cover

To examine how positional misunderstandings occur, I analyze case studies in which activists and community organizers employed political translation to counter the marginalization of disadvantaged groups in participatory styled proceedings and deliberative forums. In Chapter 1, I trace the conditions that led to the emergence, and subsequent influence, of a political translation collective in the multilingual, transnational arena of the European Social Forum (ESF). The ESF, as part of the broader World Social Forum, provides a good case for studying facilitation and positional misunderstandings involving citizens and immigrants from across Europe and the EU. ESF grassroots activists who were acting as volunteer linguistic translators witnessed and sought to address inequality caused by positional misunderstandings in multilingual European
assemblies. I compare deliberations that took place in multinational, multilingual ESF preparatory assembly meetings with those at the (monolingual) national preparatory meetings in Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

I argue that the relative inclusiveness of multinational, multilingual group processes arises from the oppositional consciousness, leverage, and communicative power created by a political translation collective that emerged as a result of the linguistic and cultural differences at the multinational ESF level. Building on their official role as the “Babels interpreters and translators” in the European meetings, volunteer translators collectively and publicly resisted unfair decisions and temporarily interrupted their linguistic service to represent the voices of marginalized participants. This collective drew on volunteer translators’ experiential knowledge of positional misunderstandings that are often preconscious in nature and occur based on subtle or more obvious power imbalances among the involved parties. Political translation drew on the Babels’ collective force as a heterogeneous multilingual and pluralist network, working to intervene as a disruptive third voice within the deliberation.  

Considering that linguistic diversity and overlapping cultural misunderstandings factored prominently into the political translation collective at the European Social Forum meetings, Chapter 2 assesses ways in which political translation could also be applicable in more homogeneous, traditionally monolingual political-debate environments. I begin with an analysis of the United States Social Forum (USSF), which is, at the time of this study, the most diverse face-to-face forum for civic deliberation on global justice and inequality within the United

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7 See footnote 5.
States, involving nearly 20,000 participants as of 2010. USSF organizers were global justice activists, many of them people of color, who had attended the WSF and recognized that they could use political translation as a tool to prevent marginalization based on race and other distinctions in settings that do not necessarily require linguistic translation.

In 2003, misunderstandings related to issues of race undermined the first attempt to organize a Social Forum in the United States, fomenting a political crisis that ended cooperation among local grassroots global justice groups that mobilized immigrants, minorities and poor people, professional national NGOs, and movement organizations. However, as occurred at multinational ESF meetings, this crisis inspired the development of a critical political translation collective. In an exceptional move, (minority) linguistic translators and cultural intermediaries, who had tried to reconnect the divided factions, came together from across the United States to accomplish something that the existing parties had been unable to achieve: the creation of a nationwide social movement coalition, the USSF. With almost a decade of data analysis, my ethnographic comparison shows how these political translators’ interruptions and critical interventions during USSF national preparatory meetings helped resolve internal crises over finances, ideology, and identity—discussions of a kind that dramatically failed in the various Social Forum cases I studied in Europe. Chapter 2, in short, shows how political translation helped movement coalitions both to survive internal communication breakdowns and collapse and to broaden their outreach to new members and organizations.

After comparing political translation collectives in multinational, multilingual and national monolingual settings in European and American contexts, I leave the arena of movement politics
to explore whether political translation could also be an effective tool for deliberative politics in institutional settings at the local level. In Chapter 3, I return to the dilemma that prevented the effective inclusion of immigrant residents such as Maria in Santa Brigida's community deliberations. In two similar yet contrasting examples of progressive American politics in this Californian city, I analyze the effectiveness of political translation involving either institutional insiders or independent civic translators. In the first case, a number of progressive City Council members in Santa Brigida wanted to empower residents by hosting a deliberation at City Hall on an urban planning project. Because they were bilingual in both English and Spanish (the native language of many residents), City Council members saw themselves as institutional political translators and acted, in essence, as facilitators promising to listen to local interested parties. Because many of those present at the meeting spoke only either English or Spanish, the council members paid for bilingual interpretation and also allowed community members to bring their own translators. Yet despite these provisions, decisionmakers and bilingual facilitators ignored almost all of the questions about the project raised by residents, not to mention any alternative proposals. At the end of deliberation, residents expressed frustration about being ignored, and left. This case shows how self-proclaimed institutional political translators failed when, after assuming positions of power, they started to systematically ignore residents’ demands.

The second comparative case, presented in Chapter 4, involved the same actors as in Chapter 3, but in this case the meetings were moved to an alternate setting: The Santa Brigida Community Forum, where the roles of representatives and political translators were distinguished as separate entities and local residents were empowered as a result of the interventions of political
translators. The forum was to be chaired and facilitated by the immigrant residents who were directly affected by the planning project under discussion, which had caused resident evictions. Residents themselves visibly took responsibility for all of the central roles as facilitators, chairs, and civic experts. Doing little more than changing informal role hierarchies and enabling critical interventions in the role of the disruptive third, this conscious political translation method dramatically changed the tenor of the deliberations, since no facilitator or official was able to interrupt residents’ speeches. While one would expect local democracy to be most inclusive if disadvantaged local residents have elected their own representatives, this comparison reveals the persistent need for grassroots political translators who are able to build a third, communicative space for radical democracy that interrupts the dualist power structure and asymmetric roles between decision makers and the less privileged.

In Chapter 5, I unite my findings based on the three case-study examinations. The theory of political translation that I advance here provides an empirical account of the conditions that foster the emergence of political translation collectives and their empowering potential for democracy. My central argument is that truly democratic deliberation including diverse groups depends on the institutionalization of a third position for political translation. The collectives of political translators that I saw emerge independently in both Europe and the United States sought not only to disrupt and challenge cultural and social hierarchies within existing deliberative models of neutral facilitation and cultural mediation, but also to use political translation as a foundational model for democracy—a democracy that stems from the need to reconcile inequality and misunderstandings based on differences.
In summary, my findings show that the structural conditions necessary for effective political translation are a) an existing stalemate or political deliberation crisis and neutral facilitation, b) a shared perception by political translators of positional misunderstandings as the origin of the crisis, and c) political translators’ willingness to collectively intervene. What defines linguistic and/or cultural translators as political translators is their ability to enact collective, conscious, disruptive interventions that challenge dominant social relations—a practice that contradicts the commitment to neutrality in facilitation and deliberation.

Political translators do not necessarily have to be linguistic interpreters. They can also work on translating race, gender, or class differences. Chapter 2 shows how a grassroots political translation collective that emerged in the context of the USSF challenged positional misunderstandings arising from differences of race, class, and gender in national coalition meetings involving professionalized NGOs and local, grassroots-based minority groups. In Chapter 4, political translators also challenge positional misunderstandings based on class differences. Notably, in all cases studied, political translation united isolated and marginalized participants from a variety of cultural groups into a powerful "third-voice" group: political translators who by dint of their witnessing positions could testify to hidden inequalities.

Still, as shown in Chapter 3, political translation will fail if some of its protagonists, even those who have experienced marginalization, assume leadership positions and claim to “speak for” disadvantaged participants despite having dominant positions in institutional power structures. The limitations of political translation are practical as well as strategic: its interventions complicate and lengthen meetings, and political translation may be difficult to implement in
homogeneous groups (Chapter 2). Taking these challenges into consideration, I assess political translation’s power to reconnect the arenas of social justice, deliberative democracy, and discursive practices at the intersections of discourse, protest and policy-making in increasingly multilingual, globalized societies.