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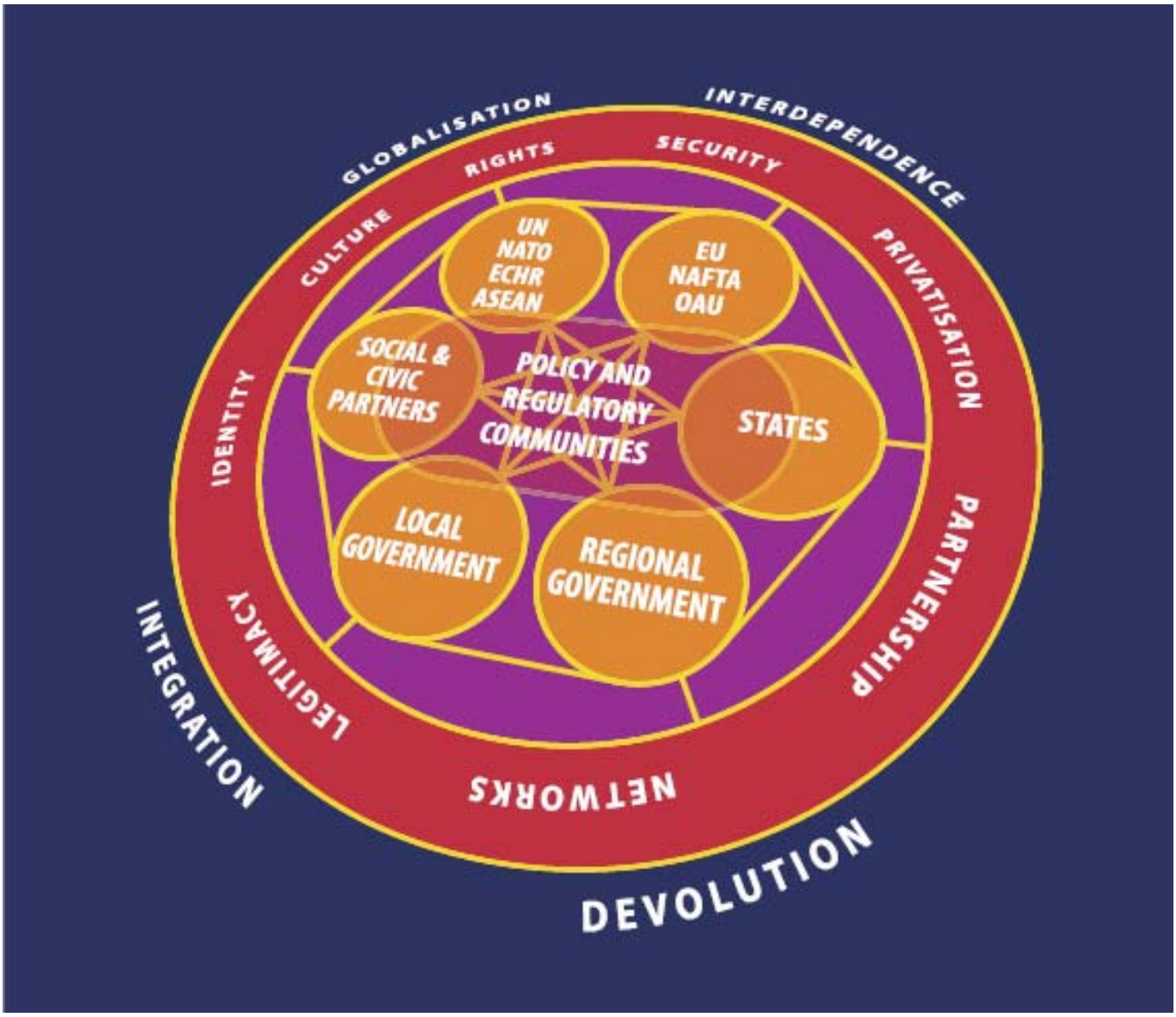

Accountability Through Thick and Thin:

Preliminary Explorations

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Preliminary Comment and Acknowledgement

The following is a written version – actually a revised elaboration – of a presentation made before colleagues at the Queen's University of Belfast on Thursday, December 4, 2003. I used the occasion of this Institute of Governance "Brown Bag Seminar" to unveil some ideas that had been subject to many hours of discussion over coffee with Masood Kahn, a Commonwealth Fellow at QUB and judge from Pakistan who brought a great deal of insight and enthusiasm to our exchanges.[1]

The model and speculations are offered here with the intention of generating comments, suggestions and feedback. I have already gained a great deal from ideas generated at and after the presentation, and I hope for even more reactions and ideas.

This is part of a more general project on "The Promises of Accountability" which has already produced work on accountability and the promises of ethical behavior (Dubnick 2003a) and enhanced administrative performance (Dubnick 2003b). The promise of democracy, however, stands as a significant challenge requiring a reconceptualization of basic terminology and assumptions from the outset. I welcome any assistance in this regard. Please contact me with your thoughts at dubnickmj@yahoo.com.

Applications of Thick and Thin

The attribution "thick and thin" has been in vogue among social scientists for several decades, tracing back at least to its use by Clifford Geertz who revolutionized (and some would argue, saved) the study of cultures by establishing the methodological foundation for "thick description" (Geertz 1974; Shankman 1984).[2] In line with that tradition, Folger and Trujillo recently complemented Geertz's effort by touting the virtues of "thinness" in theorizing (Folger and Turillo 1999), thus keeping with the theme of

[1] Judge Kahn departed for home two days after this presentation, but not without leaving me his own version of the thick/thin model offered below. It seems that he had dreamt about the concepts on the night of presentation – and I am certain the ideas kept him alert and awake during the two day trip home.

[2] Geertz, in turn, refers to an earlier use of thick and thin description by Gilbert Ryle; see Ryle 1968/1971.

thick/thin-ness as a means for characterizing the *how*, as opposed to the *what*, of an analytic process.

This approach is in contrast with the more substantive use of thick and thin in the physical sciences and common usage where they are applied to describe such objective conditions as density, depth and viscosity. And it was perhaps inevitable that the terms would be applied more substantively to social phenomena by attaching the adjectives to key concepts in ways that allow us to make meaningful differentiations to otherwise ambiguous ideas. Three important examples[3] have been Jon Elster's critique of "thin rationality" (Elster 1983), Michael Walzer's discussion of thick and thin morality (Walzer 1994), and Benjamin Barber's analysis of "strong" and thin democracies (Barber 1984).[4] In each instance, the somewhat "fuzzy" dichotomy of thick and thin is applied to the focal concept as a means of making distinctions that are simultaneously based on differences of degree as well as quality. In all three cases, thin-ness is related to the minimal and/or core conditions for the concept's realization. Thin rationality, for example, represents the core process of making reasoned choices but does not address the *reasons for* those choices – which is the factor that leads to "thick rationality" (see Yee 1997; Jones 2002). For Walzer, thin morality is "core" because it is universal rather than particular, broadly applied to humans rather than specifically adapted to social circumstances. In that sense, it is thin in the minimalist sense, and it gets its thickness ("maximalized") within the context of social and cultural relationships (Walzer 1994, chapter 1). Barber posits a view of electoral-based liberal democracy as "thin" and

[3] In a unique application of the thick/thin distinction not examined here, see Light 1995.

[4] Each of these has its roots in the works of others. Elster's approach can be derived from Herbert Simon's work on "bounded rationality"; Walzer's is derived from the Rawlsian application of a "thin theory of the good"; and Barber's distinction can be linked back to John Dewey's critique of "head counting" democracy (Dewey 1954).

"weak" while arguing for a more communitarian ideal based on active engagement and participation in local affairs. While implied in discussions about deliberative democracy (Bohman 1998), the distinction has been more central to work in education (Gandin and Apple 2002) and e-Democracy (Barber 1998/1999; Barber 2001; Grönlund 2003).

A Cautionary Approach

The concept of accountability can benefit from a similar exercise, not merely as a means for elaborating variations of this term, but also to highlight what is often overlooked in its increasingly casual usage. There is a need for caution, however, since the idea of accountability has become so distorted in recent years that one is likely to base the ideas of 'thick' and 'thin' accountability' on incorrect grounds. The contemporary view of accountability has become narrowed to a point where it is regarded as synonymous with 'answerability,' one result being that the expansion and extension of answerability is mistakenly regarded as an enhancement of accountability.

This cautionary point is critical to the distinction I construct below, and it was articulated most recently by Michael Harmon in his critique of the major debates over administrative responsibility that have defined American public administrative thought in the 20th century (Harmon 1995; Harmon 1996). Harmon contends that underlying the divisions represented by those debates – between Carl J. Friedrich and Herman Finer in the early 1940s (Friedrich 1940; Finer 1941), Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo after World War II (Simon 1948; Simon, Drucker, and Waldo 1952; Waldo 1952), and (most recently) represented by the contrasting positions of John Burke and Terry Cooper (Cooper 1982; Burke 1986) – is a common rationalist perspective on administrative

responsibility that assumes it necessary to counter, deny or suppress the *personal* responsibility of the public administrator in favor of deference to the authoritative priorities of the collective will.[5] ~~Relying on the "responsibility ethics" approach of Reinhold Niebuhr,[6]~~ Harmon posits that the rationalist stress on answerability (to authority) and efforts to deny the human urge to engage in the "making" of responsible action results in the pathological behavior associated with modern bureaucracy and the administrative state.[7]

Shifting the focus of discussion from the level of the individual administrator to systems of governance,[8] similar observations can be made for the concept of accountability. Most discussions of accountability have focused almost exclusively on a narrow ahistorical view that relies almost entirely on answerability. While answerability is an important aspect of accountability in its common, everyday use, it is a conceptually "thin" version of the term that reduces it to a form of generic behavior that is meaningless out of context. Accountability-as-answerability is merely (at its "core"; see Mulgan 2000) account-giving behavior. As such, acts of accountability have been effectively articulated and scrutinized as linguistic "performatives"; that is, as statements that constitute actions in the form of reporting, excuse-making, explaining, act-justifying, apologizing, etc.

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[5] Quite inadvertently (they make no reference to Harmon's views on responsibility), Bertelli and Lynn have shown that this narrowed view of managerial (i.e., administrative) responsibility has pervasive and deep roots in the American administrative tradition (Bertelli and Lynn 2003).

[6] ~~The central role of "paradox" in Harmon's work owes much to Niebuhr's challenging approach to ethical behavior. See Malotky 2003 for an attempt to articulate the Niebuhrian perspective.~~

[7] A somewhat similar critique of the distorting impact of modern administration on personal responsibility emerges from Hannah Arendt's analysis of the "banality of evil"; see Arendt 1976; Arendt 2003. For Arendt, responsible behavior is rooted in the human capacity to think and make judgments based on personal reflection. For her, it was the "thoughtlessness" of Eichmann and other administrators that was at the root of their capacity to engage in horrific (i.e., evil) behavior.

[8] The relationship between responsibility and accountability is an ambiguous one in the literature. While some analysts treat the terms as synonymous, many more regard accountability as a component or subordinated to responsibility. My own perspective, elaborated elsewhere, regards accountability as a central idea in defining modern governance, thus establishing it as the pinnacle (genus) for a class of subordinate concepts (species) of which responsibility is (an albeit important) one. See Dubnick 1998; Dubnick 2002.

These performatives have no value unto themselves – they are merely the vehicles in which meaning is carried in a social relationship that demands or warrants account-giving. They are functionally valuable, but have no inherent content, and any meaningfulness they possess is derived from the context – the stage – in which they are performed.

It is this thin notion of accountability that dominates most discussions today, whatever the context or subject. In both the public and private sectors, the idea of being accountable is expressed almost exclusively in terms of being answerable or responsive to some entity – whether to specific officials, to stakeholders, or to the general population (in the form of voters or consumers). The question of what one is answerable for now runs the range from justice and transparency to appropriate behavior and performance. Within this more general context, the key issue regarding accountability is expressed in terms of answerability as well – that is, whether the degree of answerability is sufficient. The typical assessment is usually negative, reflecting what seems to be an ever higher and broader set of expectations. As a consequence, there is continuous and insatiable appetite for even more accountability. The result, however, is <u>not</u> a thickening of accountability, but an expansion and extension (a thickening, if you will) of answerability.

Reasserting the Moral Dimension

What this contemporary preoccupation with answerability has obscured is the more substantial understanding of accountability that has been central to the historical development of modern governance, one based on moral commitments and obligations.

From this view, *beyond simple answerability, accountability is related to a substantive set of expectations reflecting one's standing within a moral community.*[9] In contrast to account giving, this accountability-as-moral-commitment reflects the existence of values, standards, relevant rules and norms associate with given roles, tasks and situations. For example, although there may be answerability mechanisms and structures in place, the accountability of a medical professional relies as much – if not more – on expectations established by and for the professional community of health care providers. This accountability takes the form of an ongoing commitment that manifests itself through various mechanisms including professional education and socialization, various forms of ongoing and often implicit peer pressure, continuous training, the assumption of public expectations, etc. (McKinlay and Marceau 2002). They are factors associated with an individual's self-identity within social contexts, and especially with a sense of one's blameworthiness (Dubnick 1996, esp. pp. 413-417)[10] and praiseworthiness (Hart and Smith 1988). These reflect what Robert Nozick terms the "moral pushes and moral pulls" of ethical lives (Nozick 1981), and are as relevant in shaping the form and direction of behavior as any formal or informal pressures for account giving.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1 provides a visual articulation of the resulting view of accountability with this moral dimension factored in. It highlights the contention that accountability must be more broadly understood than is the current fashion; the moral commitments and obligations are as significant (if not more) as the account giving that is so often stressed.

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[9] This point is developed more fully in Dubnick 2002, accessible at http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~dubnick/papers/salvation.htm.

[10] See http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~dubnick/papers/dubnick2003a/dubnick2003apw.htm.

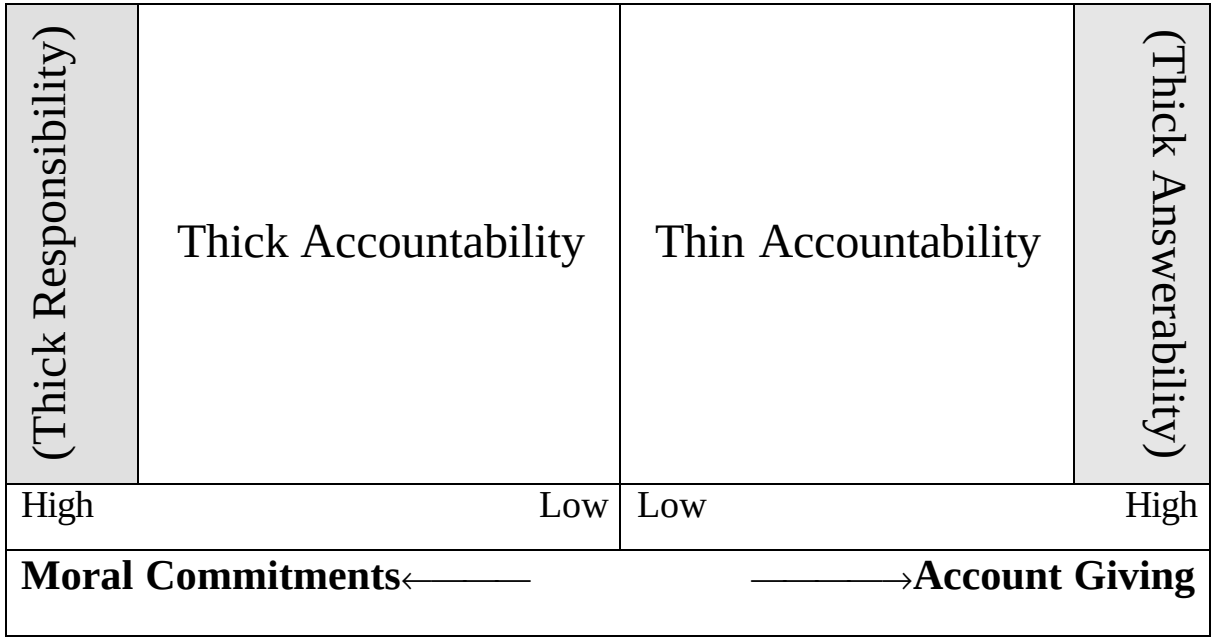

Figure 1:

THICK AND THIN ACCOUNTABILITY

As important, it posits an inherent tension between the two dimensions of accountability, with the greater reliance on one generating a qualitative shift in the nature of accountability that is implied in the attribution of relative thickness (reliance on moral commitment) and thinness (reliance on account giving).

As both a clarification and extension of the distinctions made here, the figure also includes two additional concepts emerging from the preceding analysis. The current obsession with accountability in governance reform (as key means for dealing with the ever growing "crisis of trust" in both the public and private sectors; see O'Neill 2002) is indifferent to the role that moral commitments in accountability. The resulting proliferation of reforms, while justified under the rubric of accountability, is in actuality producing an ever thinner form of accountability that at some point is transformed into something entirely different – a development that I term "thick answerability." Given its "performative" nature, thick answerability is vacuous at best and counter productive at its worse (Dubnick 2003b).

At the other extreme stands "thick responsibility," reflecting the idea that accountability can in fact be achieved through deference to the moral commitments and capacities of some empowered individual. A Hobbesian-like trust in authority has proven to be a disastrous path for groups and nations to follow; nevertheless, we tend to assume this position more frequently than we might think in our personal lives when it comes to relying on those professionals and experts who provide everything from health care to financial and physical security (e.g., see Makoul 1998). The most common manifestation of this position is an assumption that there are certain professions and professionals who are to be trusted because they have a morally-based sense of obligation and responsibility

to serve in the best interest of their charges (whether perceived as citizens, customers or clients). Where this is accompanied by almost no obvious form of account giving, we can label it as thick responsibility; but in the establishment of even the most minimal of account-giving mechanisms – whether in the form of peer review, a system of legal liability, etc. – we cross the line into "thick accountability" where we find a wide range of governance strategies and theories. Governance theories from Edmund Burke's views on "trusteeship" representation[11] to Carl J. Friedrich's perspective on "administrative responsibility" (Friedrich 1940) fall into this category. Among students of American public administration, the call for public sector managers to assume a professional commitment to justice and social equity,[12] constitutional values and norms,[13] stewardship (Morgan et al. 1996), or even a more general "public service ethic" (Denhardt 1993; Denhardt and Denhardt 2000) can be linked to this "thick accountability" position. What these views have in common is a belief in the necessity or desirability of moral commitments within the context of systems that impose a reasonable check though some degree of account giving, e.g. intermittent elections, general audits, ministerial oversight, etc.

Under this logic, as reforms and practices move in the direction of relying on more account-giving mechanisms proliferate, accountability thins, but answerability thickens. At some critical point in that shift we cross the line into thick answerability where the performative burdens of account giving overwhelm the accountability efforts.

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[11] Most famously expressed in Burke's 1774 "Speech to the Electors of Bristol at the Conclusion of the Poll," which can be found in many collections of his writings.

[12] A position associated with the "New Public Administration" movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Marini 1971), but most often linked with the work of H. George Frederickson; see Frederickson 1997.

[13] See especially the work of John Rohr; (Rohr 1986; Rohr 1998). Also see Rosenbloom, Carroll, and Carroll 2000.

At this point we are faced with the possibility that governance will degenerate into mere performance[14] or, as has been the case with our obsession with ethical codes and anti-conflict-of-interest requirements, render it incapable of effective action (Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996; Morgan and Reynolds 1997).

Speculating About Democratic-Accountability Relationships

This reframing of accountability can prove useful not merely in helping us appreciate the overlooked moral dimension of accountability, but also in providing a potentially useful analytic tool in exploring the widely assumed positive relationship between accountability and democracy. For this purpose I offer Figure 2, which lays out the logical possibilities once you transpose thick and thin varieties of each variable.

Attempting this concept driven "thought experiment" is problematic for a number of reasons, not the least being the conceptual weakness of the thick/thin democracy distinction. Democracy has been described, defined, modeled, characterized, factored, assessed, classified and in numerous others ways used and abused for as long as we have been engaged in political theory-making. This is neither the place (and I am certainly not the person) to attempt a definitive articulation or defense of any specific views on democracy (see Dryzek and Berejikian 1993; Collier and Levitsky 1997). Nevertheless, the existence of widely held assumptions regarding the positive relationship between democracy and accountability demand our attention, even at the most superficial level.

FIGURE 2 HERE

[14] The literature on this point is substantial. For a recent critique, see Dubnick 2003b, found at http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/%7Edubnick/papers/APSA-EGPA2003.pdf.

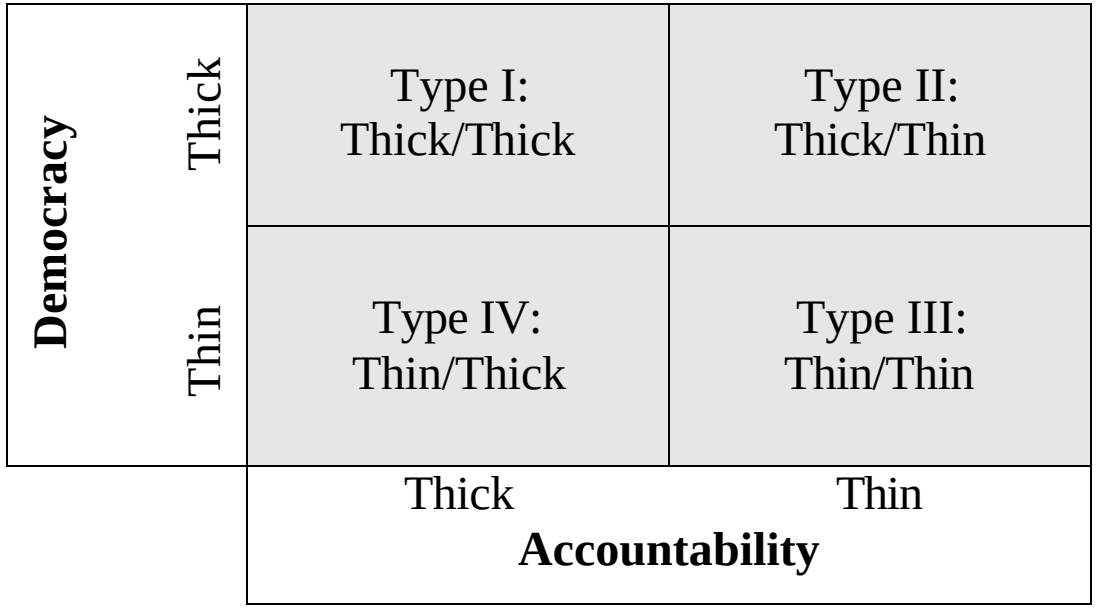

Figure 2:
DEMOCRACY/ACCOUNTABILITY RELATIONS

Transposing the thick/thin dimensions of democracy and accountability generates a useful typology (Figure 2) that can foster discussions of those assumptions. At the risk of oversimplifying, a different form of democracy has been applied in each of the cells; but it should be emphasized that these are intended as examples to both test and demonstrate the relevance and content of the typology. As presented above, accountabilities that rely more on moral commitments would fall to the left (thick) of the center divide, while those giving more weight to account giving would locate on the right (thin) side. On the democracy dimension, the division between the thin forms (bottom of the mid-line) and thick forms (top) is primarily between theories that focus on representation (thin) and those concerned with involvement and participation (thick).

Among thin democracy theories, the "classic" distinction is between those that stress the delegative nature of representation (Liberal Democracy) and those focused on the need to elect competent "trustees" (in the Burkean sense) of the electorate's interests (here labeled Representative Democracy) (see Krouse 1982). In no less "classic" expressions, administrative accountability theory is often divided between those who would put their trust in the moral commitments and competencies of dedicated and expert policymakers (Friedrich 1940) – and thus would suit the Representative Democracy model – and those who urge the necessity and wisdom of external oversight mechanisms that are central to Liberal Democracy (Finer 1941).

Among thick democratic theories, the salient division is between those that focus on involvement based on association and interests (Pluralist) and those that rely on the rational competence of the participant (Deliberative). Within the context of that division, questions of accountability become issues of bureaucratic representation. Within the

Deliberative Democracy model, accountability is a matter of assuring agential compliance with the decisions made by participating principals (see Chambers 2003), while the central concern in Pluralist Democracy is the commitment of the administrators to the interests they are serving,[15] and to the public interest in general (Herring 1936; Redford 1969; cf. Schubert 1957).

What is striking in any examination of the literature associated with these and associated models/theories is that while all are constructed on the assumption of a close and positive relationship between accountability and democracy, each also implies (in logic as well as practice) a critical flaw in that relationship that is likely to lead to instability and the deterioration of the regime that adopts it. These are shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3 HERE

The thin/thin cell (exemplified by Liberal Democracy) has been established as an international standard of sorts for seeming to balance a number of contradictions and paradoxes that plague modern democracies (Mouffe 2000; Manent 2003). But its value as a solution to a variety of contrasting demands (e.g., liberty and equality, mass participation and elite competence, etc.) also renders it unstable over time (Schmitter 1995) and inappropriate (and therefore, not transferable) in many contexts (cf. Abizadeh 2002). Its inherent thinness as a democracy means it is often incapable of generating the political will necessary to deal with important collective issues or immediate crises. Without strong directions or guidance, thinly accountable governance is also likely to wallow in the face of critical challenges. As a result, the situation will foster opportunities

[15] The literature on representative democracy is extensive, and the accountability issue is one among several that many scholars address. See, for example, Krislov 1974; Krislov and Rosenbloom 1981; Mosher 1982; Rourke 1984; Coleman, Brudney, and Kellough 1998; Sowa and Selden 2003.

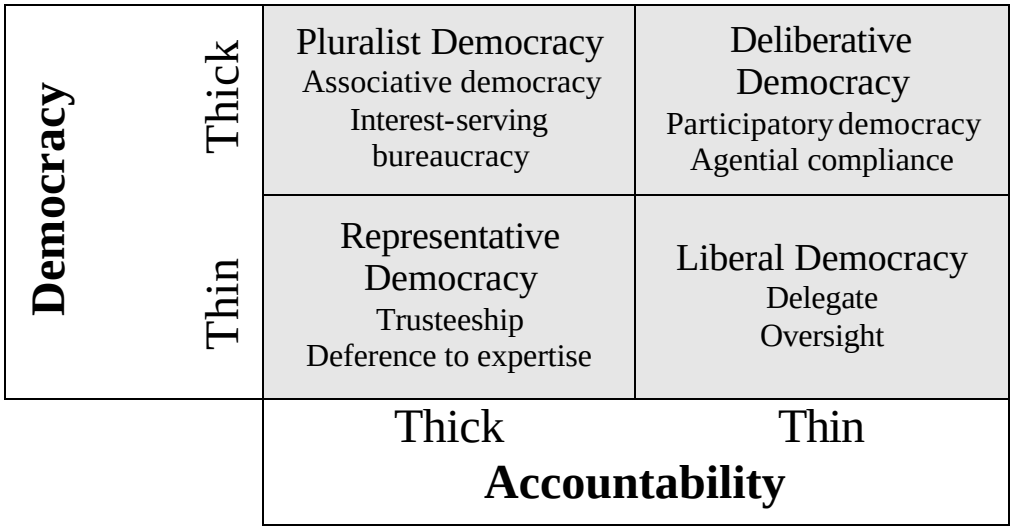

Figure 3
DEMOCRATIC MODELS: THICK AND THIN

for corrupt behaviors and demagoguery, ultimately transforming Liberal Democracies into 'illiberal' democracies (Diamond 2002; Zakaria 2003) or worse (e.g., competitive authoritarianism; see Levitsky and Way 2002; Schedler 2002).

The relationship is equally problematic at the other extreme of thick/thick. Advocates of Pluralist Democracy (and its corporatist variants) regard actual or latent involvement in associations and groups as key to the development and success of the modern democratic state (see Dahl 1967 for the best known text using this approach).[16] Yet within its logic are found contradictions that can result in a range of difficulties from private capture of state power (e.g., balkanization of authority in the service of narrow interests) (McConnell 1966; Lowi 1969; Lowi 1979; Olson 1982) to "demosclerosis" (Durant 1995; Rauch 1995; Rauch 2000) and the potential for fiscal and political gridlock (Lipset 1995; Osborne 1998). Once in crisis, the options involve either a move toward thickening the democratic aspect through activating dormant plebiscitary mechanisms (e.g., the use of initiative and referenda; see Smith and Lubinski 2002) or a thickening of accountability through the declaration of political bankruptcy that results in the appointment (at least for the short term) of an authoritative overseer (e.g., the case of New York City during its 1970s fiscal crises; Bailey 1984).

The thick/thin alternatives are likely to prove no more stable over time. For Representative Democracy, one source of difficult is found in maintaining the Burkean commitment to do what is best for the constituency (thick accountability) under a system

[16] The most developed and radical expression of the democratic form relevant to this cell is found in the work of Mary Parker Follett. She would take exception to the "pluralist" label since her perspective was critical of simplistic views of politics and democracy as group based. But she was even more critical of the institutional and majority rule views of democracy. "Politics must be vitalized by a new method," she argued. "'Representative government,' party organization, majority rule, with all their excrescences, are dead wood. In their stead must appear the organization of non-partisan groups for the begetting, the bringing into being, of common ideas, a common purpose and a collective will." (Follett 1998, p. 4)

where democracy is reduced (thinned) to simple choices (among candidates or parties) in an intermittent but potent event (elections). Put in principal-agent terms, it is a situation where empowered agents (those engaged in governance, including the representative and administrators) must fulfill two moral commitments: to govern competently and to demonstrate (in a convincing way) that it is doing so to principals (the electorate) who are provided with the capacity (limited as it is) to judge the work of the agents. Under ideal conditions, this situation would call for agents of integrity to "do the right thing" and principals who are willing to pass judgment based on the "they are doing the right thing" standard alone. The reality, however, is that these ideal conditions typically do not hold. On the agential side, actions become satisficing rather than optimizing (due to either the limited capacities[17] or the self-interests[18] of agents) or the efforts to convince the principal become a preoccupation that overwhelms and preempts effective governance (e.g., the "permanent campaign"; Heclo 1999; Heclo 2000). The consequences range from bloated (Niskanen 1994) and overloaded government (Rose 1980) to a pervasive rationalization and bureaucratization of the political system (Eisenstadt 1959; Jacoby 1973; Nachmias and Rosenbloom 1980; Frug 1984; Hummel 1994). This, in turn, leads to a growing distrust and reduced sense of confidence among the principals (Lipset and Schneider 1983; Dogan 1997; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton 2000), creating an urge among officials to invest even more in "selling" their efforts to the public (Collins and Butler 2003), and thus creating a spiraling effect that further undermines the promise of Representative Democracy.

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[17] Here the insights of Herbert Simon and others on "bounded rationality" come into play; see Jones 1999; Jones 2001; Jones 2002.

[18] See especially the work of William Niskanen: Niskanen 1971; Niskanen 1980; Niskanen 1994.

The thick democracy/thin accountability combination stressed in various forms of Deliberative Democracy generates its own dilemmas. With its focus on the need for decisionmakng that is inclusive and engaging and its assumption that answerability provides sufficient grounds for effectively implementing decisions, Deliberative Democracy opens itself to a number of problems (Shapiro 2002). Some of the difficulties are inherent in each side of the relationship. Thick democracy, for example, must deal with issues of jurisdictional scale: both inclusion and engagement require the creation of boundaries and rules that paradoxically generate exclusions and limited involvement (Mouffe 2000; Dryzek 2001; Young 2001; Hicks 2002; Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin 2003; Parkinson 2003). Thin accountability poses a similar issue, for answerability can be effective only if the agent is firmly (morally?) committed to carry out whatever decisions are rendered by the deliberative body (Bøhren 1998). The problematics of the Deliberate Democracy model are magnified by the relationships between democracy and accountability that necessarily emerge for the type to function. The establishment of jurisdictional boundaries and rules requires empowered administration (i.e., authority) for enforcement, if not for design (Warren 1996; Blaug 2002). But the boundaries and rules required for effective administration are not easily synchronized to those of thick democracy (Black 2000; Black 2001; Fung 2002). Additional dilemmas arise in attempts to solve these problems. Efforts to extend deliberation into implementation (Zifcak 1999; Hunold 2001) can result in conflicts with previous decisions and thus can undermine the value of pre-administrative deliberations. Positing substantive standards for administration (e.g., fairness, social equity, benevolence) requires a move in the direction of thick accountability that again threatens

to qualify the power of deliberative outcomes, especially if those standards are institutionalized and supported juridically.

From Fuzzy Concepts to Cases

The previous section was not intended to be more than an exploration of the logic and literature of the relationship between accountability and democracy based on an ambiguous typology that itself is constructed on fuzzy conceptualizations. Although seemingly designed to beg the conclusion that all is not well with the widespread "promise of democracy" that seems ingrained in discussions about accountability, it is intended more as a challenge aimed at both articulating and stimulating still further explorations – empirical as well as theoretical. In the process of working out this presentation, I applied the emerging lessons almost daily to a range of items in the news. In stories from the California recall election to the future of the Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement, this thick/thin analysis seemed to promise greater insight into the dynamics of accountability and democracy.

As noted in the outset, reactions and suggestions about the concepts and analysis presented here are most welcome.

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