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Democratic Transformations: Eight Conflicts in the Negotiation of American Identity by Kerry T. Burch

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Book Review: Kerry T. Burch, *Democratic Transformations: Eight Conflicts in the Negotiation of American Identity*. Continuum, 2012.

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Despite that fact that the subtitle of the book informs one directly of its content, more so than the primary title, this titular confusion is irrelevant, for this is an excellent work. *Democratic Transformations* [hereafter DT] is eminently readable, both in terms of the writing, and in terms of its substantive depth. And the depth is considerable.

Each of the eight conflicts is a mini-book. The title of each is a reference to a central idea or concept, often attributed to a specific figure but articulated by subsequent others as it becomes free from any particular authorship. The range of these unit ideas roughly follows a timeline, from the Revolutionary period to more contemporary issues. The topics that comprise the eight conflicts are recognizable epithets, and if they are not immediately familiar, Burch's breadth of knowledge and direct, understandable writing style draws the reader into each. More accurately, Burch commands the attention of the reader, doing so by framing the idea within its broader narrative structure.

Whether it be the "pursuit of happiness" and Thomas Jefferson, the "moral equivalent of war" and William James, or the "military-industrial conflict" and Eisenhower, the strategy becomes familiar and informative. The familiarity of Burch's strategy is to highlight how the idea or epithet was a generalized symbol of conflicts that were turning points in the evolution of American identity. Thus, while the pursuit of happiness may have begun with Jefferson, it reappears in the writings of diverse thinkers. Here one encounters the strength of Burch's grasp of the idea's generalizability, for Jefferson soon fades and is replaced but reaffirmed by references to Carl Becker, Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, and others. The same is evident for subsequent topics. For all, a central figure is the inaugural voice of the idea or phrase, but it is its genealogical resilience that makes it one of the democratic transformations of the title.

The strategy is informative because the knowledge gained is cumulative. The reader learns about the idea and its central figure, but the reading of DT is not simply serial, moving from chapter 1 to 8. Indeed the reading is an intellectual ride across American history and its recurrent search for its identity. But it is far more complex. One discerns that Burch's strategy is dialectical, for although the ideas roughly follow a linear timeline, they are recurrent themes that are reminiscent of previous themes, updating the current conflict by means of obscuring its historical roots. Thus, de Tocqueville's tyranny of the majority is linked to inhibitions that curtail both thoughts and voices about contemporary conflicts – such as the Iraq war (p. 33). The symbols of democratic

transformation may fade from the collective memory with the passage of time, but in Burch's view, they are intentionally obscured as well.

Here is where education and the classroom enter the picture, a crucial and consequential space wherein this dynamic of intellectual inhibition is enacted. This is a key thread that runs through all eight conflicts and is the essential goal and achievement of the book. The larger, generalizable meaning of each idea is reproduced, as it were, in the microcosm of the classroom, and in more concrete terms, in the teacher-student(s) interactions. This is the real heart of critical pedagogy, and Kerry Burch's *Democratic Transformations* is a superb contribution to the scholarly literature that sustains it, in both theory and practice.