On the Meanings of Democracy

Jean-Luc Nancy

Questioning the frailty of democracy is a function of the very confirmation of 'democratic certainty' becoming generalized. Once the assurance is given, in all forms of discourse, that 'democracy' is the only kind of political regime that is acceptable to an adult, emancipated population, which is an end in itself, then the very idea of democracy fades and becomes blurred and confusing.

At the outset it should be stated that, in Europe, it was this widespread lack of clarity which gave rise to a range of different regimes, dubbed 'totalitarian', that our century has put to the test. Unlike those who, in the 1920s and 1930s, could believe in a demand for radical reformation of the public, common domain, we can no longer ignore the pitfalls or dangers which are concealed behind the perplexities of democracy.

For all that, it is impossible to be simply a 'democrat' without questioning what this really means, since the term continues to present difficulties nearly every step of the way, regardless of the direction taken. Ignoring these difficulties, which is the line constantly taken in political discourse, is as dangerous as rejecting democracy completely—it prohibits thought, thus masking those same pitfalls and dangers, and even others.

What is proposed here is merely a minimal argument or blueprint for an enquiry into the possible meanings of 'democracy':

1. When the word is taken to describe the exercising of political power by the people, then either:

The 'people' refers to part of the social group as distinct from at least one other reputedly superior part which dominates it. In this case democracy is not a regime in itself, but rather an uprising against the regime (or at least against the government). It is a revolt born of poverty and of what is considered unbearable for mind and body, a revolt born of hunger and fear. From being passive subjects, the dominated become active subjects. The legitimacy of the revolt is absolute. This legitimacy, however, applies only to the

revolt itself and is insufficient to create a regime. In revolt there are democrats, as opposed to democracy. Revolt exists only as an act in itself, in its own time and place. It is not by mere chance that, in the experience of modern politics, the idea of 'permanent revolution' could form an endless stream of what might be termed both demand and escape. In the short term, the cause of the revolt designates both an absolute dignity, imprescriptible and indivisible—a value which is measurable only in itself, and, in the long term, that same absolute value viewed as an infinite opening that no quality, no law, no institution or even identity could reclose. Democratic politics is, then, politics which rebounds sporadically back to the 'break' at the moment of revolt. Such politics can only determine the situation and circumstances which cause that break to widen, as events occur.

Or:

'People' is taken to mean 'the whole', the body of social reality. Instead of differential thought, this is integral thought. The political sovereignty of the people signifies, then, above all their self-constitution as a people. This self-constitution obviously precedes any political constitution for which the people are 'constituting' and not 'constituted' elements. Here the people-subject is affirmed not as a player or force, but firstly as the very substance: the raw reality whose own existence and movement come from within. The history of modern thought shows in turn either the impossibility of generating a political system which would in itself be self-generation of the people ('direct' democracy, the infinite presupposition of a common will and organic-ness, which Rousseau considered appropriate only for the gods), or the resolution of the democratic dilemma through dissolution of the total political sphere as a specific sphere as it disappears within the entire self-generating, social existence (Marx).

Once this first hypothesis has been taken into consideration in its entirety, as our history seems to have done, there follow two possible modalities of what could be termed a political system of negativity: either a sporadic, scattered, system of unusual configurations of the 'break', implying among other things abstaining from participation in the institutions of democracy (parliamentary and republican); or a notion of democracy based on the impossibility of truly incarnating

its essence or representing its spirit, and yet retaining the need to keep this impossibility 'democratically' open. In both cases, the political system is essentially affirmed as withdrawal, specifically because the political authority as an authority subsumptive of nature and destiny, project and identity, for something like a 'people' must be kept in withdrawal from itself, the negative index of a constantly reversed presence. We are dealing here with a negative theology model; and as such, it is simply a matter of a political system viewed as onto-theo-political (or theologico-political), the symbol being merely inverted. (The question posed can be formulated thus: have revolutions accomplished anything other than the inversion of the theologico-political transcendence symbol?)

2. Or, by 'democracy' we are targeting not so much political specificity as 'civil society' or the 'social bond' considered from the perspective of an *ethos*, or sense of democracy, that is from the standpoint of the regulatory idea, represented by the motto, 'liberty, equality, fraternity'—whatever the exact interpretation we might give this. In this instance, democracy is a description and/or assessment of common being, founded on the mutual recognition of fellow men and on the independence of each group in sharing this recognition. The model for such a group is to be found in the 'commune' (as used by Tocqueville) or 'community' (as used by Marx). It is possible to conceive of 'commun(e)ity' in the following two ways:

With the first concept (perceived by Tocqueville as being more American), the commune is not yet part of the political order: it is beyond the state, and can be represented as subsisting without or beneath the state; its liberty is more a franchise within the state than a self-constituting liberty. It is localized and restricted and does not engage power as such. It operates internally, and external to it are as much other communes as the state itself. The state appears then less as an authority of subsumption and identification than as a separate authority, the responsibility of another sphere (imperial or federal power model).

With the second concept (more European and diversified into socialist or fascist versions), it is the community which takes over the negativity as formulated above. The community's interiority or subjectivity takes on the subsumptive role of the state as identifier, and it is within this that the state becomes increasingly effaced or sublimated. A positive onto-theologico-political system is thus reconstituted, but it is now characteristically immanent and no longer transcendent.

3. It appears, therefore, that the question of democracy can be summarized thus: does the word suggest after all theologico-political renewal beneath a negative-transcendent or positive-immanent metamorphosis, or does it imply a real break with the theologico-political? (A form of the debate on 'secularization', which pitted Carl Schmitt against Hans Blumberg, is evident here. In a more general sense, this is a debate on the essence or meaning of modernity.)

If, as I think is the case, it is a question of rupture, it is nevertheless appropriate to determine to what extent this has not yet completely occurred. In fact, not only is the 'European' concept of democracy still often weighed down by political theology (positive or negative), but the 'American' version unleashes simultaneously both the forces of inequality which are no longer moderated by any 'internal' principle of the 'people' and the forces of community-centred attitudes of withdrawal which are in themselves sterilizing in their incompatibility. There remains, then, at least one meaning of 'democracy' (or whatever it should be called) which has not yet been articulated. (In this context the adjectives 'European' and 'American' are formal indicators: genuine elements are to be found fairly much everywhere. However, it is not ingenuous to think that, in spite of all her faults, Europe might be the place where a new meaning of 'democracy' could truly be put to the test.)

The task before us is, therefore, clearly neither the destruction of democracy, nor its undefined improvement, but above all to decide on the 'rupture' in question and so on 'modernity' (or 'postmodernity' as it is known). Deciding will have to involve another decision on the nature, scope and place of politics. Should politics still be thought of as being under the protection of the theologico-political (nowadays known simply as 'politics')? Or should politics be thought of as essentially a *withdrawal* from this 'political system' (essential, substantial and subsumptive of all being-in-common)? This withdrawal would not be a retreat but rather a retracing of all that being-in-common involves (being-together or being-with). Unusually, it might be a question of discovering if the political sphere should not remain apart from the 'public' sphere, that it neither impoverishes nor overshadows. Politics is not responsible for the identity or destiny of what is public, but for regulating—however minutely—justice (this then concerns power). The public element brings existence into play (this then concerns meaning). The issue is, then, the gap between meaning and power. The one certainly does not exclude the other, but cannot be substituted for it either. (This does not affect the legitimacy of revolt,

but moves its ultimate boundaries). The theologico-political subsumes power and intent, justice and existence together and absorbs the public element within the political, or vice versa. We practically no longer know what 'public' and 'political' mean. This is what makes 'democracy' confusing. It is, therefore, a matter of thinking through the space that separates public from political; one does not belong to one in the same way as one belongs to the other, and not 'everything' is 'political'. Not everything is 'public' either, since the latter is neither a thing nor a whole. Between power and meaning there is proximity and distance; there are relationships of power and of meaning all in one.

Perhaps this is a new kind of relationship that man has with himself, one which would not be 'an end in itself' (if that really is the basis of 'democracy') but which would include moving apart in order to go beyond.

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Abstracts

On the Meanings of Democracy
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'On the Meanings of Democracy' points to the fragility and contested meanings of 'democracy'. Once 'the assurance is given that "democracy" is the only kind of political regime that is acceptable to an adult, emancipated population which is an end in itself, the very idea of democracy fades and becomes blurred and confusing'. Such 'widespread lack of clarity' gave rise to Europe's 'totalitarian' regimes. It is claimed that 'it is impossible to be simply a "democrat" without questioning what this really means', and that to ignore the conceptual difficulties is as 'dangerous as rejecting democracy completely'. A 'minimal argument or blueprint for an enquiry into the possible meanings' of the term is proposed. The implications of taking 'democracy', the word, 'to describe the exercising of political power by the people' are explored. The 'people' as a social group distinct from some 'other reputedly superior part, which dominates it', is distinguished from the 'people' taken to mean 'the whole'. In the first sense, 'democracy' is not a regime but an uprising against a regime or government. In the second sense, the 'political sovereignty of the people' signifies their 'self-constitution as a people'. Accounts of democracy that focus not so much on its 'political specificity' as on 'civil society' or the 'social bond' are then explored. The author concludes with a reflection on the relationship between democracy, 'modernity' and the scope, nature and place of politics.

Keywords: democracy; modernity; revolt; public; political

Democratic Polities and Anti-democratic Politics
David Plotke

What if anything should democratic polities do with respect to political forces and citizens who oppose democratic practices? One strategy is toleration, understood as non-interference. A second approach is repression, aimed at marginalizing or breaking up non-democratic political forces. I argue for a third approach: democratic states and citizens should respond to non-democratic political forces and ideas