

Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Daniel Bensaïd, Wendy Brown, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Kristin Ross and Slavoj Žižek

Democracy in What State? William McCuaig (tr.).

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Democracy in what state? What type of democracy? Is it more correct to speak of democracy in plural? Or is democracy only an emblem, an empty signifier? Today, for common people democracy is not so much a positive force for good government as a protection against extremely bad government. Today, people seem ambivalent about referendums and free general elections that, while conceding major decisions to the people as a whole, don't fully trust "the people" to make legislative decisions. Little by little globalization has transformed all into the ironic groundlessness of the spectacle and the aura of the phantasm; is the possibility of a true language for democracy vanishing?

Let us go to read and review this timely, stimulating and nourishing book, a collection of essays that encompasses eight contributions by a variety of intellectuals and thinkers on the meaning of the term 'democracy'. In the Introductory note, musing on the concept of democracy Giorgio Agamben writes 'Of what do we speak when we speak of democracy?' (1) In most cases the word 'democracy' refers, on the one hand, to the political and juridical field, on the other, to the technique of government, 'these two areas of conceptuality (the juridico-political and the economic-managerial) have overlapped with one another since the birth of politics, political thought, and democracy in the Greek polis or city-state, which makes it hard to tease them apart' (2). In his still provocative *Republic* Plato pointed out three types of government: monarchy (rule by a monarch), oligarchy (rule by a wealthy minority), and democracy (rule by the people as a whole—a "mob" as Plato saw it), and last he spoke of tyranny (rule by a despot answerable to no one but himself). Aristotle in *The Constitution of Athens* characterizes the "demagogy" of Pericles this way: *demotikoteran synebe genesthai ten politeian*, a Standard English translation runs 'the constitution became still more democratic' (2). In the modern age, according to Foucault, Rousseau with his *Social Contract* emphasized the dichotomy between the legislative power of the body of citizens (*sovereignty*) and the executive power of government (*government*), and adjusted his aim to reconcile juridical and constitutional terms like *contract*, *the general will*, and *sovereignty* with *an art of government*. Once more, what particularly interests is the distinction, basic for Rousseau, between *sovereignty* and *government*. For the umpteenth time we cannot help seeing the overwhelming preponderance of the government and economy over anything we could call popular sovereignty.

Alain Badiou's essay, titled 'The Democratic Emblem', retakes the term 'democracy', which in his view has become an untouchable emblem in a symbolic system. He asks himself how on earth a society that claims to be democratic can be guilty of economic and social horror. Shortly after he replies 'The only way to make truth out of the world we're living in is to dispel the aura of the word democracy and assume the burden of not being a democrat and so being heartily disapproved of by "everyone" (tout le monde)' (7). The emblem of democracy paradoxically seems to have denied democracy, 'if the world of the democrats is not the world of everyone, if tout le monde isn't really the whole world after all, then democracy, the emblem and custodian of the walls behind which the democrats seek their petty pleasures, is just a word for conservative oligarchy whose main (and often bellicose) business is to guard its own territory, as animals do,

under the usurped name *world*' (7-8). In the past democracy did not save the Greek polis; with the *République Française* democracy mostly limited itself in an invocation of republican values; democracy did not save the Soviet Union in the 20th century. The very beginning of such contradiction goes back as far as to Plato and Aristotle. Turning to Plato, Badiou explains the mentioned failures thus: 'Within a horizon in which everything is equivalent to everything else, no such thing as a world is discernible . . . this is what Plato has in mind when he says that democracy is a form of government 'diverting, anarchic and bizarre, which dispenses an equality of sorts indiscriminately among the equal and unequal' (10). Plato criticized the false democracy of his time. He preferred to restrict his project of the republic to the guardians of the city - excluding 80-90 percent of the adult Attican population. But Plato's aim, Badiou continues, was a kind of aristocratism for everybody. An aristocracy for everybody, he concludes, that was 'just a way of formulating the highest aspiration of communism, and we know that the work revolutionaries of the nineteenth century saw Plato as the first philosophical spokesman for communism' (15).

Bensaïd's essay, 'Permanent Scandal,' is a historical, ideological and critical roundup from the middle of the 1980s onwards. At the end of the 'cold war', liberal democracy appeared the absolute winner. The New International of global capitalism, the financial world, the media conglomerates established a sort of hegemony. Yet, the malaise in the market democracy and the specter of real and different democracy soon came up. What remained at stake was ever the aporia between the *contract, the general will, and the art of government*, the constituent power and the instituted democracy, and the principle in conformity with which sovereignty cannot be alienated. Hence the question: must the state wither away? Unfortunately, some central functions must continue to exist, at least as public functions under rigorous popular control. Today the rejection of the "party form" generally goes along with a strong preference for ad hoc coalitions and fluid, networklike, intermittent band affinity. Maybe this discourse is isomorphic to liberal rhetoric about free circulation and the liquid society. But, Bensaïd holds that democracy rests the 'ultimately attempt to extend, permanent land in never domain, access to political and civil equality and citizenship' (43).

Wendy Brown contribution begins with the Euro-Atlantic modernity in which modernity has made an excessive use of the term democracy: democracy of the uncounted, democratizing sovereignty, democracy workshop, pluralizing democracy, and so on. Neoliberalism as model of political rationality 'has launched a frontal assault on the fundamentals of liberal democracy, displacing its basic principle of constitutional, legal equality, political and civil liberty, political autonomy, and universal inclusion with market criteria of cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy'(47). Hence the statement: To rule themselves people must be true people and, at same time, must have access to the power(s) they would democratize.

'Finite and infinite democracy' is the title of the essay by Jean-Luc Nancy. For Jean-Luc Nancy, democracy today has become an exemplary case of the loss of the power. Put differently, democracy means everything and nothing, and 'it is incumbent on us to become, over time, capable of a demarcation just as clear and consistent between two different meanings, values, and outcomes jumbled together in the non signifying word democracy'(59). In the past democracy has been accompanied by a sort of civic religion, Nancy continues, Athens and Rome had their political religions. During the Middle Ages the conjunction of throne and altar was largely present, but always ambivalent, subject to association and dissociation. Today this kind of civic religion seems to be lacking. For Nancy the principal problem of democracy consists in its innate reluctance to use or to wield a power of exterior kind, that 'when used, makes starkly evident the absence of the kind of symbolism of which feudal allegiance and national unity and all religions, civic or not, were and

are such potent bearers (68). Hence the question: is a renewed relation between the power of society (as institution) and the individual possible? The power is inevitable; its lack begets chaos, nihilism. The question must be better located in 'a question of *commonality* or the *in-common* (*l'en-commun*) [...] *Commonality* is the regime of the world, of the circulation of meanings' (72). And it cannot be conceived without invoking the *necessity* in the thought of democracy itself.

With her essay 'Democracy for Sale' Kristin Ross starts by asking 'Am I a democrat?' 'what does it mean to be a democrat?' She hints at a historical event (Ireland, 2008) in which the Ireland, the only country to hold a popular referendum on a revised version of the European Constitution, voted to reject it (by the way, the European Constitution had been rejected on 2005 by France and Holland). And yet, the Irish have got everything from Europe! Probably, support for the European Constitution was viewed by the Irish as an obligation or repayment for recent European help. Surely re-voting meant a slap in the face of democracy. Another understanding of the term democracy, familiar to the readers of Jacques Ranciere's *Le Maitre ignorant*, is that it conveys a sense of power that is neither quantitative nor concerned with control. In ancient Greece 'the power of the *demos* is neither the power of the population nor its majority but rather the power of anybody. Anybody is as entitled to govern as he or she is to be governed' (89). Towards the half of 19th century Rimbaud said that 'the term democracy is no longer being used to express the demands of the people in a national class struggle; but is rather being used to *justify* the colonial policies of the "civilized lands" in a struggle on an international scale between the West and the rest, the civilized and the non-civilized'. (95) Democracy is for sale, democracy had become a class ideology justifying systems that allow a very small number of people to govern and to govern without the people. All today's advanced industrial democracies are oligarchic democracies.

In the essay 'From democracy to divine violence,' inspired by Benjamin's "divine violence", Slavoj Žižek presents a long analysis of the history of the 20th century: democracy, liberalism, populism, China, and all continents. Later on, he discusses the actual state of the planet. For Žižek, a new global class is emerging today, whose way of living is exclusively private. What about the middle class and lower class? Recalling Hegelian suggestions, we remember that 'if a class of people is systematic deprived of their rights, of their very dignity as person, they are *eo ipso* also released from their duties toward the social order, because this order is no longer their ethical substance' (116). We are confronted by a structural asymmetry: on the one side, the lower class that sustain its authority if subjects hear in it an echo of the obscure unconditional self assertion, on the other the people's divine violence correlates with this excess of power. The alternative, at least theoretical but also practical, remains to take the state in order to transform it, radically changing its functions. For Žižek 'the proletariat is the only (revolutionary) class in history that abolishes itself in the act of abolishing its opposite' (118).

At the end, many are the cruxes in question. Žižek's recall of the proletariat, as the only revolutionary class, does not convince. By degrees, the category of class has began to lose its efficacy in providing the promise of a collective subject for social change, other liberation-movements are emerging as contenders for 'completing' what appears to be missing from the emancipatory subject. Maybe the concept of 'multitude' is more useful and preferable. Hardt and Negri speak of the multitude as 'an already existing subject that is the engine of social production'. They simultaneously acknowledge that it "needs a political project to bring it into existence". The media must help citizens to understand the enormous extent to which politics influences their lives. Certainly, we need to think democracy otherwise, to re-address urgently here and now the issue of

democracy and critical practice. Once more the specter of Marx and the 11th *Thesis On Feuerbach* reappears in twilight: “Philosophers have sought to understand the world; the point, however, is to change it.”

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