

# Democracy and Politics

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Not only are we in need of more democracy today but also of more books on democracy. I see this gathering here on »Democratic Politics Today« as a proper intellectual feast - of which we have unfortunately lost the habit of holding.

The forthcoming appearance of David Held's and John Keane's book here in Yugoslavia, marks a double democratic jubilee if I may link two sets of events - new books and past events.

The first jubilee - being two centuries of the French revolution which, despite all its shortcomings, brings to an end a cycle of democratic revolutions, as Tocqueville named them, and whose goals were liberty and equality for all citizens. The »wind of America« swept over France, as the phrase used at that time said.

The second jubilee being three centuries of the birth of Charles Secondat better known as Montesquieu, the social philosopher whose discourse on the spirit of the laws had such a profound influence on the French revolution.

And although we are in the past with these two events, we are in the modern past in an event and with an author that are resolutely modern and therefore belonging emphatically also to the present.

Two probing, clearly written books (*Models of Democracy*, and *Democracy and Civil Society*) on a complex theme and relationship - society and democracy. The question that was posed then and that persists today is how, in the history of modernity (not to go deeper into the past) people have tried to assure political liberties and individual liberties - how they have endeavoured to institutionalize freedom. Both the French revolution which placed the individual with his vote (to speak briefly) in the position to decide his fate, and gave him rights as man and citizen, and Montesquieu whose book is one of the founding books of modern political thought - tried to give each individual the same rights in searching for happiness as he or she saw fit, (these were at least the goals).

When speaking of the French revolution from a standpoint of actuality then the aftermath of revolution or rather the reactions to revolution appear as a relevant question. It is interesting to note (again very briefly) that the French revolutionary process, provoked at the beginning of the next century a reaction that led to the formulating of theories of non-violent social change, be they the theories of the utopian socialists or, later on, of liberal social thought. Today after the revolutions of

the earlier or later twentieth century one might say that similar non-violent, reformist ideas are being formulated at least in the developed modern societies of East and West. Which of course, does not mean that violence is not to be used when other means at the disposal of the defence of human dignity and life are not available anymore. In this respect it is very instructive to see Bronislaw Baczko's analysis in his latest book where he poses the question: »How does one exit from terror?« (*Comment sortir de la Terreur, Thermidor et la Revolution*, Gallimard, Paris 1989).

In another respect the revolutionary goal of unifying the social and political domain, of making social relations transparent, of anticipating an end to social division and political conflicts is of course an illusion and a sign of total disregard for the complexity of society and of social relations, especially those of modern society. This dream of a haven, far from the troubles of everyday life, colonized in many ways by the social and political evils of modern society, is over. The idea of the abolishing of political power in a harmonious community of equal, happy, peaceloving people, with the withering away of the state has demonstrated its unrealistic, and in some ways theological character. This is understandable as a yearning but especially today unjustifiable. We are not confronted with a singular choice of the illusion of possible liberation and the bare truth of oppression, we live in an epoch in which the rejection of domination goes along with the decision to look straight at the roots of domination and ask what is at its base and how it persists. Here, we unavoidably touch upon La Boetie's fundamental question of voluntary servitude, which is crucial in examining the relation of democracy and politics. But leaving this important question to the side on this occasion, it is significant to note, in a process of understanding the sinuosities of the democratic path and its politics, the following concluding remark by the french theorist Marcel Gauchet in his article »Le sens et la dette de l'Etat«: I quote: »And if after thousands of years of refusing to see the origins of submission for what they are, there appeared a will to confront the reasons of power. A wish not to conjure domination but to dominate its principle... We are maybe witnessing the passage from a history of refusal of power to a history of grasping the truth of power« (*Libre*, No. 2, 1977, p. 42-43).

Bearing this in mind: the question of the institutionalization of freedom, of revolution and its aftermath, of the complexity of social relations, of voluntary servitude, the question of power... it is clear that democracy as an unending invention and as a form of imaginary institution of society is closely tied to the question of the political. We are constantly faced with the enigma of the social question, with the question of why the social division exists. The universality of the political question persists and is engendered by the universality of the original division of the social (a problem touched upon by Machiavelli). In this respect the notion of society includes, within itself, the notion of the political. The split between power and the social whole elaborated a certain form of human coexistence which in turn defines all the other divisions of society, all its institutions. Politics has the double effect of revealing and concealing the mode of institution of the social. Of showing because one can see in which way society orders and institutionalizes through its divisions; and of concealing because the generating principle of the whole is lost.



The study of democracy shows how new liberties but also how new servitudes appear - a fact stressed by many a thinker. Fundamentally, democracy as Lefort states it, »Institutes itself and persists within the *dissolution of reference points of certainty*. It inaugurates a history in which men experience an ultimate indetermination as far as the foundation of Power, Law and Knowledge, and the foundation of the relation of *one to the other* on all levels of social life (everywhere where previously division expressed itself, namely the division between the holders of authority and those who were subjected to them, with respect to beliefs in a natural order or in a supernatural principle)«. (C. Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 29). Within such a framework, broadly speaking, »The possibility remains open for a deregulation of the democratic logic«, i.e. a »Change in the economy of power could bring about the appearance of a form of totalitarian society« (*Ibid.*, p. 29, 20). Democracy and contemporary democratic politics have hence to come to terms with such a possibility, »When the insecurity of individuals augments, following an economic crisis, following war destructions, when conflicts between classes and groups are exacerbated and cannot find their symbolic resolution within the political sphere, when political power seems to succumb at the level of reality, and appears to result in something particular in the service of interests and appetites of ordinary ambitious characters, briefly, when it shows itself *within* society, and when society shows itself *fragmented*, then there develops the illusion of a people-one, the quest for a substantial identity, for a social body soldered at its head, for an incarnated power, for a state free from division« (*Ibid.*).

Democracy, despite its shortcomings, ambiguities and ambivalences is still the better choice of regime; in the process of its invention it has given rise to the principles of plurality, legality and publicity. But to reflect upon democracy and its unending constitution we must place ourselves within its contradictions, within the »democratic adventure«. In that respect I could agree with Miguel Abensour that we are living a »Machiavellian movement« (term borrowed from J.G.A. Pocock's, *The Machiavellian Moment - Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton U. P., Princeton 1975) that is one of a rediscovery of the political and of a renewal of the reflection on the political. This theoretical reflection is constitutive as well as being a fundamental precondition to democratic politics today.