

THE DEMOCRATIC EMBLEM

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Despite all that is devaluing the word *democracy* day after day and in front of our eyes, there is no doubt that this word remains the dominant emblem of contemporary political society. An emblem is the “untouchable” in a symbolic system, a third rail. You can say what you like about political society, display unprecedented “critical” zeal, denounce the “economic horror,” you’ll always earn pardon as long as you do so in the name of democracy. The correct tone is something like: “How can a society that claims to be democratic be guilty of this or that?” Ultimately you will be seen to have judged society in the name of its emblem and therefore itself. You haven’t gone beyond the pale, you still deserve the appellation of citizen rather than barbarian, you’re standing by at your democratically assigned place. Be seeing you at the next election.

Well, I say this: before one can even begin to apprehend the reality of our societies, it’s necessary, as a preliminary exercise, to dislodge

their emblem. 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*). In the world we're living in, *tout le monde* doesn't make any sense without the emblem, so "everyone" is democratic. It's what you could call the axiom of the emblem.

But our concern is *le monde*, the world that evidently exists, not *tout le monde*, where the democrats (Western folk, folk of the emblem) hold sway and everyone else is from another world—which, being other, is not a world properly speaking, just a remnant of life, a zone of war, hunger, walls, and delusions. In that "world" or zone, they spend their time packing their bags to get away from the horror or to leave altogether and be with—whom? With the democrats of course, who claim to run the world and have jobs that need doing. What they then find out the hard way is that, warm and cosy in the shelter of their emblem, the democrats don't really want them and have little love for them. Basically, political endogamy obtains: a democrat loves only another democrat. For the others, incomers from zones of famine and killing, the first order of business is papers, borders, detention camps, police surveillance, denial of family reunion. One must be "integrated." Into what? Into democracy, clearly. To be admitted, and perhaps on some distant day greeted, one requires training in democracy at home, long hours of arduous toil before the notion of coming to the real world can even be entertained. Study your integration manual, the good little democrat's handbook, in the intervals between bursts of lead, landings by humanitarian paratroopers, famine, and disease! You've got a stiff exam ahead of you and still no guarantee that you won't find the passage from the false world to the "real" one blocked. Democracy? Sure. But reserved for democrats, you understand. Globalization of the world? Certainly, but only when those outside finally prove they deserve to come inside.

In sum, 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 de-

mocracy, the emblem and custodian of the walls behind which the democrats seek their petty pleasures, is just a word for a conservative oligarchy whose main (and often bellicose) business is to guard its own territory, as animals do, under the usurped name *world*.

With the emblem dislodged, and the territory seen plainly for what it is—a landscape filled with democrats bustling and reproducing—we can turn to important matters: what conditions must a territory meet before it can present itself speciously as part of *tout le monde* under the democratic emblem? Or to twist the thought a bit: of what objective space, of what settled collectivity, is democracy the democracy?

At this point we may turn (back) to the moment in philosophy when the democratic emblem was first dislodged: book 8 of Plato's *Republic*. Plato applies the term *demokratia* to a way of organizing the business of the polis, a certain type of constitution. Lenin said the same thing long after: democracy is no more than a particular form of State. But both Plato and Lenin are more interested in the subjective impact of this State form than they are in its objective status. Thought must shift the focus from the legal framework to the emblem or from democracy to the democrat. The capacity of the democratic emblem to do harm lies in the subjective type it molds; and, not to mince words, the crucial traits of the democratic type are egoism and desire for petty enjoyments.

Lin Piao, by the way, was being perfectly Platonic when he said, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, that the essence of false communism (the kind prevailing in Russia) was egoism and that the true motive of the reactionary "democrat" was quite simply fear of death.

Of course, Plato's approach entails a purely reactive part, for he was convinced that democracy would not save the Greek polis, and in fact it didn't. Dare one assert that democracy will not save our beloved West either? Indeed; I daresay it won't, and I would add that this brings us right back to the ancient dilemma: either we reinvent communism or we undergo some reinvented form of fascist

barbarity. The Greeks for their part had the Macedonians and then the Romans, and either way it was servitude, not emancipation.

Plato, an aristocrat oriented to the past, reaches for configurations like a philosophically trained military aristocracy, which he imagines to have existed once. In fact, he invents them, aristocratic reactionism generating political myth. There are plenty of contemporary variants of reaction dressed as nostalgia on display. The one most striking to anyone who follows developments here in La République Française is the idolatrous “republicanism” we see pervading our intellectual petite bourgeoisie, where any invocation of “our republican values” is greeted with loud applause. Just remind me again, will you—which republic was it you were referring to? The one created out of the massacre of the communards in 1870? The one that flexed its muscles in colonial conquest? The republic of Clemenceau the strikebreaker? The republic that did such a splendid job of organizing the shambles of 1914–1918? The one that handed plenary power over to Pétain? The hallowed and virtuous “republic” of which you prate has been concocted for the express purpose of safeguarding the democratic emblem, which hasn’t been looking too healthy of late. Plato thought he was flying the banner of aristocracy with his philosopher-guardians, but it was tattered and moth-eaten. It’s the old story; nostalgia is always nostalgia for something that never existed.

Still, quite apart from its aristocratic reactionism, Plato’s critique of democracy retains independent and, indeed, bivalent force. On one hand, it is aimed at the essence, the reality, of the democratic form of State, on the other, at the constitution of the subject—*homo democraticus*—in a world thus formalized. Plato’s two theses, which I regard as entirely well-founded and wish to extend a bit beyond the world of the polis, are

1. the democratic world isn’t really a world;
2. the only thing that constitutes the democratic subject is pleasure or, more precisely, pleasure-seeking behavior.

In what respect does democracy authorize a pleasure-seeking subject to the exclusion of all else? Plato describes two forms of the relation to pleasure constituted in the democratic nonworld. The first is youthful Dionysiac enthusiasm. The second is elderly indifference to the varieties of pleasure. At bottom, the socialization of the democratic subject begins with the illusion that everything is available. "Untrammelled pleasure!" says the anarchist of '68. "My clothes, my Nikes, and my hash," says the would-be (or perhaps "wannabe") rebel from France's problem suburbs. Yet democratic life comes full circle with the crepuscular awareness of the equivalency, and thus the nullity, of everything except the universal standard of value: money (and the whole apparatus needed to protect it: the police, the justice system, the prisons). From prodigious avidity fancying itself freedom to budgetary avarice with a strong security presence—there you have it in a nutshell.

What has this to do with the world? Any world, for Plato and for me, only becomes visible, is only thrown into relief, by the differences constructed within it, first by the difference between truth and opinion and then by the difference between truths of more than one type (love and politics, for example, or art and science). But within a horizon in which everything is equivalent to everything else, no such thing as a world is discernible, only surfaces, supports, apparitions without number. 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 the unequal." Diversion is what the young seek, the satisfaction, potential at least, of their wants. What Plato calls the imposition of an artificial equality on things unequal translates seamlessly, for me, into the monetary principle, the universal equivalency or fungibility that bars any possibility of real difference, of the heterogeneous as such (in the way that truth methodically reached is heterogeneous to freedom of opinion). This abased, abstract equality is

really no more than a demeaning subjection to quantifiability that interdicts the con-sistence of a world and imposes the rule of what Plato calls “anarchy.” Anarchy obtains when value is mechanically attributed to what is without value. A world of universal substitutability is a world without any proper logic of its own, in other words not a world at all, only an “anarchic” whirl of eidola.

What defines the homo democraticus trained into this anarchy is that he or she as subject reflects the substitutability of everything for everything else. So we have the overt circulation of desires, of the objects on which these desires fix, and of the cheap thrills they deliver, and it’s within this circulation that the subject is constituted. And as I said, in senescence our subject, blasé by now, comes to accept a certain interexchangeability of those objects, as a boost to circulation (or “modernization”). All he or she can really make out any more are the numbers, the quantities of money in circulation. The pump driving the whole system, though, is the youthful urge to seek pleasure in the satisfaction of desire—from which it follows that, while the *wisdom* of circulation may reside with the old who have come to see that the essence of everything is monetary nullity, its animated *existence*, its incessant self-perpetuation demand that youth occupy the foreground. Homo democraticus is an avaricious old fellow grafted onto a craving adolescent. The adolescent makes the wheels turn, and the old fellow reaps the profits.

Plato lucidly observes the false democratic world in action, compelled to idolize youthfulness while mistrusting youthful enthusiasm. There is something essentially juvenile about the democratic ethos, something that feels like universal puerilization. As Plato puts it, in a false world of that sort “the elderly abase themselves to youthful modes, for fear of seeming tiresome and overbearing.” Likewise, in order to collect the dividends of his cynical skepticism, the elderly democrat must pretend to be fighting a youthful battle for more “modernity,” more “change,” more “rapidity,” more “fluidity.” It puts

one in mind of an aging millionaire rock star, creaking and creased but doggedly bawling into the microphone and thrusting his pelvis this way and that nevertheless.

What becomes of collective life, of the collectivity, when its emblem is eternal youth, when the sense of age has vanished? The answer depends on whether one is observing the state of things in zones where monetary circulation has not yet really shifted into high gear (capitalist gear) or in our zone. Possible outcomes in the former include a sort of terroristic exaltation of the brutality and heedlessness of adolescence. We saw the dreadful consequences of the revolutionary version of this kind of indigent “juvenilism” with the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution and the Khmer Rouge and the equally dreadful consequences of the deideologized version of the same thing with the terror sown in numerous regions of Africa by armed gangs of adolescents manipulated by outside powers or warlords. Those are limit cases, extreme (but thereby definitive) examples of adolescent democratism unplugged from all the myriad forms of monetary circulation but one, the circulation of lethal firearms in abundance. But what about us? In our zone, the supremacy of youth gives the search for pleasure the force of a social imperative. “Have fun” is the universal maxim. Even those least able to do so are obliged to try to comply. Hence the profound stupidity of contemporary democratic societies.

Plato is a sure and perceptive guide to the panorama of modern society, which is a weave of three main motifs: the absence of world, the democratic emblem as subjectivity enslaved to circulation, and the imperative of universal adolescent pleasure seeking. His thesis is that any society matching that description is on a road to ineluctable disaster, because it is incapable of organizing a discipline of time. Plato puts a famous ironic tribute to the existential anarchy of contented democrats and their “beautiful, youthful, mode of government” in the mouth of Socrates. Here it is, rendered with a certain liberty:

Democratic man lives only for the pure present, transient desire is his only law. Today he regales himself with a four-course dinner and vintage wine, tomorrow he is all about Buddha, ascetic fasting, streams of crystal-clear water, and sustainable development. Monday he tries to get back in shape by pedalling for hours on a stationary bicycle; Tuesday he sleeps all day, then smokes and gorges again in the evening. Wednesday he declares that he is going to read some philosophy, but prefers doing nothing in the end. At Thursday's dinner party he crackles with zeal for politics, fumes indignantly at the next person's opinion, and heatedly denounces the society of consumption and spectacle. That evening he goes to see a Ridley Scott blockbuster about medieval warriors. Back home, he falls to sleep and dreams of liberating oppressed peoples by force of arms. Next morning he goes to work, feeling distinctly seedy, and tries without success to seduce the secretary from the office next door. He's been turning things over and has made up his mind to get into real estate and go for the big money. But now the weekend has arrived, and this economic crisis isn't going away, so next week will be soon enough for all that. There you have a life, or lifestyle, or lifeworld, or whatever you want to call it: no order, no ideas, but nothing too disagreeable or distressing either. It is as free as it is unsignifying, and insignificance isn't too high a price to pay for freedom.¹

Plato's thesis is that sooner or later this manner of existence, grounded in the indiscipline of time, and its correlative form of State, representative democracy, will bring about a visible manifestation of their despotic essence. Because that is what it comes down to: the real content of all that youth and beauty is the despotism of the death wish. That is why, for Plato, the trajectory that begins with the delights of democracy ends with the nightmare of tyranny. He is proposing that, from a perspective embracing the world and time, there

exists a link between democracy and nihilism. For the democratic nonworld is a leakage of time. Consumption is consuming it.

So there it is: the emblem of the modern world is democracy, and youth is the emblem of the emblem, symbolizing as it does the absence of *restraint* on time. Evidently this youth-emblem has no substantial existence. It's an iconic construct generated by democracy, but some constructs are constructive, and this one constructs the bodies it needs out of immediacy (only pleasure-seeking exists), fashion (each present moment substitutable for any other), and stationary movement (*on se bouge*, to use a French idiom).

So not being democratic is the same as getting old or being old? That misses the point entirely. As I said, the old see a lot and absorb a lot. The point is this: if democracy equals monetary abstraction equals an organized death wish, then its opposite is hardly despotism or "totalitarianism." Real opposition is the desire to set collective existence free of the grip of this organization. Negatively, that means the order of circulation must no longer be that of money, nor the order of accumulation that of capital. Private property simply cannot be allowed to dictate how things are going to be. Positively, it means that politics, in the sense of subjective mastery (the mastery of thought and praxis) over the future of humanity will have independent value, obeying its own atemporal norms like science and art. Politics will not be subordinated to power, to the State. It is, it will be, the force in the breast of the assembled and active people driving the State and its laws to extinction.

Plato contemplated these prospects clearly, even if the bounds of his own worldview made him restrict them to the lives of what he called the "guardians" of the city, with everyone else assigned fixed productive tasks. The guardians possess nothing, among them all is communal and shared, and their only power is that of the Idea, for their city has no laws. So let the maxims Plato reserves for his aristocracy of wisdom become the maxims of everyone, of all of us. Antoine Vitez used to say that the theater and art were meant to be

“elitist for everybody.” Well then, let there be an “aristocratism for everybody.” But aristocracy for everybody is just a way of formulating the highest aspiration of communism, and we know that the worker revolutionaries of the nineteenth century saw Plato as the first philosophical spokesman for communism.

You can take any doctrine and label the caricatural reversal of it its opposite, but if you think of its opposite as the moment of its creative fulfillment, when all the excess trappings fall away, then the opposite of the kind of democracy we have had served up to us during the “long good-bye” of capitalist parliamentarism is not totalitarianism or dictatorship. It is communism, which, as Hegel said at the time, absorbs and surmounts the formalism of the age of restricted democracy.

What I have aimed to do here is to set brackets around the authority the word *democracy* is likely to enjoy, or have enjoyed, in the mind of the reader and make the Platonic critique of democracy comprehensible. But, as a coda, we can go right back to the literal meaning of democracy if we like: the power of peoples over their own existence. Politics immanent in the people and the withering away, in open process, of the State. From that perspective, we will only ever be true democrats, integral to the historic life of peoples, when we become communists again. Roads to that future are gradually becoming visible even now.

NOTES

1. The Democratic Emblem

1. The corresponding passage will be found in *The Republic* book 8, 561d. The version supplied here is from the complete hypertranslation of *The Republic* into French on which I am presently engaged, for publication at the end of 2010. Its aim is to show that Plato is one of our foremost contemporaries. This passage in my translation is taken from chapter 7, "Critique of the Four Precommunist Politics." I naturally dispense with the division of *The Republic* into ten books, an irrelevant piece of textual fiddling perpetrated long after Plato by one or several Alexandrian grammarians.

2. Permanent Scandal

1. *New York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853.
2. See Enzo Traverso, *Le Totalitarisme: Le XX^e siècle en débat* (Paris: Seuil, 2001).