

DEMOCRACIES AGAINST DEMOCRACY

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC HAZAN

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You dissent from the view that today there isn't anyone who isn't an adherent, a firm supporter, of democracy. Perhaps it's because you conceive of democracy quite differently from the way most people do.

The answer is twofold. In the first place, it is indeed my position that democracy is irreducible to either a form of government or a mode of social life. Second, even granting the so-called ordinary sense of the word *democracy*, it is not in the least evident to me that democracy enjoys total unquestioning support. Things were different during the cold war, when it was democracy versus totalitarianism. But since the Berlin Wall fell, what we've witnessed in the countries we call "the democracies" has been a mistrustful and faintly or openly derisive attitude toward democracy. In *Hatred of Democracy* I tried to show that a large part of the dominant discourse is working in one way or another against democracy.¹ Take for example the debates in France surrounding the elections of 2002 or the referen-

dum on the European constitution in 2005. We heard all this talk about the democratic catastrophe, about irresponsible individuals, about all these little consumers pondering great national choices as though they were shopping for perfume or something. What all this led to in the end was that the constitution was not resubmitted to the popular vote. Indeed we saw a huge display of distrust of the popular vote. Yet the popular vote is part of the official definition of democracy. We heard the same old line coming from people like Daniel Cohn-Bendit: that democracy brought Hitler to power and so on. Among those regarded as intellectuals the dominant view is that democracy is the rule of the preformatted individual consumer, it is mediocracy, the rule of the media. You find the same stance from the right to the far left, from Alain Finkielkraut to *Tikkun*.

Yet, for all that, everyone identifies as democratic . . .

Not at all! “The democracies” is just the conventional term for that bloc of states. Internally, the democrat is an enemy. The Trilateral Commission was pushing this line thirty years ago: democracy, by which they meant the uncontrolled activity of democrats, nobodies trying to get involved in public affairs, was a threat to the democracies, meaning the wealthy countries.

What we are seeing today takes us right back to the time when the word originated. Ever since, the one thing on which all have agreed is that *democracy* denotes different, opposing things. It starts with Plato, who says that democracy is not a form of government, just the whim of people who want to behave licentiously. It continues with Aristotle, who says that democracy is fine, as long as the democrats are kept from exercising it. And how many times in the modern era have we heard that old chestnut from Churchill about democracy being the worst regime, except for all the others? So I don’t believe there is universal assent to democracy, only universal consensus that it means two different things.

Your position puts me in mind of a sort of triangle, with constitutional liberties in one corner, the parliamentary system in another, and in the third Rancièrean democ-

racy, the locus of the power of all those with no special entitlement to exercise it. Does a word that polysemic, covering things that different, deserve to be retained, or is it not worn out? Because words do get used up; republic is an example. In 1825 you could get your head chopped off for identifying as a “republican” in France, but today it is meaningless.

Being fought over is what makes a political notion properly political as I see it, not the fact that it has multiple meanings. The political struggle is also the struggle for the appropriation of words. There is an old philosophical dream, which analytic philosophy still keeps alive, of defining the meanings of words with such perfection as to make ambiguity and multiple meanings vanish . . . but I think the struggle over words is important, and that it is normal for “democracy” to refer to different things in context. For the average French intellectual, democracy is a shopper home from the supermarket, slumped in front of her TV. But I am just back from Korea, where there was dictatorship until twenty years ago and where the idea of a collective power separate from the machinery of the state is meaningful enough to make the people take to the street and occupy it in spectacular fashion. I quite accept that the word is somewhat the worse for wear in the West, where it was invented, but if you think about everything that is going on in Asia, the word still bears meaning. If there is a better word we can replace it with, fine. Egalitarianism isn’t exactly the same thing. Democracy—that’s the equality already there at the core of inequality. What word hasn’t been torn and frayed by use? Then there’s another serious problem: you have to know what you’re doing before you decide to drop a word, what forces you might be activating or deactivating.

I wonder whether, for you, democracy, being neither a form of government nor a form of society, isn’t an unattainable ideal. Or rather a critical tool, a polemical battering ram.

No, it’s not an ideal, because I always follow the principle of Jacotot that equality is a presupposition, not a goal to be attained. What

I am trying to convey is that democracy, in the sense of the power of the people, the power of those who have no special entitlement to exercise power, is the very basis of what makes politics thinkable. If power is allotted to the wisest or the strongest or the richest, then it is no longer politics we are talking about. It's the argument of Rousseau: the power of the strongest need not present itself as a right—if the strongest is the strongest, he imposes his will, and that's all there is to it. No need for further legitimation. I think that democracy is an egalitarian presupposition from which even an oligarchic regime like the one we have has to seek some degree of legitimation. Yes, democracy does have a critical function: it is the wrench of equality jammed (objectively and subjectively) into the gears of domination, it's what keeps politics from simply turning into law enforcement.

On the last page of Hatred of Democracy, you write "egalitarian society is no more than the ensemble of egalitarian relations spun into existence in the here and now through singular and precarious acts." That leads, in turn, democracy and politics being almost synonymous for you, to something you said in your Theses on Politics: "Politics comes about as an always provisional accident in the history of forms of domination." Or again, from the end of Disagreement, "Politics, in the fully specific sense, is rare. It is always local and provisional."² Precarious, provisional, and occasional—is that how you see politics and democracy? These sudden, brief upwellings leading nowhere . . . isn't that a bleak vision of movements of emancipation?

I don't think I ever said anything about brief upsurges leading nowhere. I don't have a vision of history as punctuated equilibrium, where things erupt at intervals and then lapse back into platitude. In the text you cite, all I was trying to say was that equality exists as the ensemble of the practices that trace out its domain: there is no other reality of equality than the reality of equality. I didn't mean to suggest that equality exists only on the barricades, and that once the barricades come down it's over, and we go back to listlessness. I am not a thinker of the event, of the upsurge, but rather of emancipation

as something with its own tradition, with a history that isn't just made up of great striking deeds, but also of the ongoing effort to create forms of the common different from the ones on offer from the state, the democratic consensus, and so on. Of course there are events that punctuate the flow, that open up temporalities. The three "July Days" of 1830, for example, opened up the historic terrain on which the workers' associations, the insurrections of 1848, and the Paris Commune later came to grief.

Equality exists through that, in actuality, and not as a goal we might reach if we had the right strategy or the right leadership or the right science. Frankly, I don't see why that stance is bleaker than any other. We all know what a proliferation there was of deep revolutionary thinkers in Italy, and the result? Berlusconi. One of these days we ought to call all these people who hold the key to the future, these political prognosticators, to account—make them account for what's going on right now. If they're the optimists and I'm the pessimist, if they're the realists and I'm the dreamer . . . (*laughs*).

For someone like you who has worked a lot in the archives, I don't get the feeling that you are all that strongly oriented toward the past.

Yes. I believe there are traditions of emancipation. The one I try to work on, or work in, is different from the one that got confiscated by the strategic visionaries, Lenin and the like. I've always fought against the idea of historical necessity. As for working in the archives, from that I learned at any rate that history is made by people who have only one life. What I mean is, history isn't some entity that acts or speaks; what we call history is what is woven by people as they construct a situation in time out of their own lives and experiences. We retell the stories of collective subjects like the working class or the workers' movement, but everyone can see that the transmission gets interrupted from time to time; some threads of the past get ruptured, then heal and reform. Look at what happened subsequent to 1968. For years, stretching into decades, the 1960s were denigrated and even execrated. Then arrives a generation with a fresh interest

in what was going on in the 1960s, who rediscover Maoism, and so on. Sooner or later a new generation arrives that tries to reinvest certain words with meaning, certain hopes linked to those words, but in different contexts and with differing, indeed aleatory, forms of transmission.

9. Sheldon Wolin formulates this matter a little differently, arguing that only what he calls “fugitive democracy” is possible, episodic expressions by the people of their rightful title. See the final chapters of both *Politics and Vision*, expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and *Democracy, Inc.* for Wolin’s development of this notion.
10. For fuller development of this point, see my “Sovereign Hesitations,” in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, eds., *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), and “The Return of the Repressed: Sovereignty, Capital, Theology” in David Campbell and Morton Schoolman, eds., *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
11. For a fuller discussion of post-Marxist philosophers pursuing the possibility of resubordinating the economic to a democratic political sphere, see my “The Return of the Repressed.”
12. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (New York: Beacon, 1964).

5. Democracies Against Democracy

- 1 Jacques Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005); English translation: *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Verso, 2006)
2. Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente: Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995); English translation: *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

6. Democracy for Sale

1. Auguste Blanqui, letter to Maillard, June 6, 1852, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2006), pp. 172–186. Translations from the French, unless otherwise noted, are my own; translations of Rimbaud are taken from Paul Schmidt’s *Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) and have been in some cases slightly modified.
2. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing blog, October 26, 2007.
3. Interview, RTL, June 9, 2008.
4. *Le Monde*, June 7, 2008.