# WHAT IS DEMOCRACY

### ALAIN TOURAINE

Translated by David Macey

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#### Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is an extension of the reflections with which I ended my previous work, *Critique of Modernity* (Touraine 1995). I felt the need to take up once more the themes of its final chapter, which deals with democracy, and to expand on them. Just as there is in contemporary thought a close connection between moral philosophy and political philosophy, I wanted to demonstrate that there is a necessary link between democratic culture and the idea of the subject.

In 1989, UNESCO Director General Federico Mayor Zaragoza asked me to take intellectual responsibility for an international colloquium on democracy to be held in Prague in 1991 under his chairmanship and that of President Vaclav Havel. The introductory and concluding reports that I presented in Prague provided the starting point for this book. I wish to thank Federico Mayor Zaragoza for the great interest he has taken in my work and for encouraging me to write this book.

François Dubet and Michel Wieviorka kindly agreed to read the text before publication, but I owe even more to the constant exchanges I have had with them for so many years. They know how important those exchanges have been to me. Simonetta Tabboni also helped in the preparation of this book. Jacqueline Blayac's remarkable organizational and communications skills made it possible to prepare this work. I owe her much more than she knows.

Alain Touraine

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#### Introduction

For several centuries we have associated democracy with human liberation, thanks to a combination of reason, economic growth, and popular sovereignty, from the prisons of ignorance, dependency, tradition, and divine right. We undertook to give society an economic, political, and cultural impetus by freeing it from all absolutes, religions, and state ideologies, so that it would be subject only to truth and to the criteria of knowledge. We placed our trust in the apparent links between technical efficiency, political freedom, cultural tolerance, and personal happiness.

But we also have long been beset by worries and fears: Although freed from its weaknesses, is not society now a slave to its own strength, its technologies, and above all its tools of political, economic, and military power? How could the workers who were subjected to Taylorist methods see the rationalization of industry as the triumph of reason, when they were being crushed by a social power in the guise of technology? How could bureaucracy be defined purely as a rational and legal authority, when public and private administrations were controlling and manipulating our personal lives and at the same time promoting their own interests rather than their managerial role? Popular revolutions throughout the world have degenerated into dictatorships over the proletariat or the nation, and the red flag more often flies over the tanks that crush popular uprisings than it does over workers in revolt.

Great revolutionary hopes have been transformed into totalitarian nightmares or state bureaucracies. Revolution and democracy have proved to be enemies, and one does not lead to the other. The world, exhausted by calls for mobilization, would readily settle for peace, tolerance, and well-being, with liberty reduced to meaning protection from authoritarianism and arbitrary rule.

On the European continent, where modern democracy was born, the greatest misfortune of the twentieth century has been not poverty but totalitarianism, and we have therefore fallen back on a modest conception of democracy as a set of guarantees that can prevent a leader from coming to power or holding power in defiance of the will of the majority. Our disappointments have been so profound and so prolonged that, for a long time to come, many of us will agree that the limitation of power is the primary definition of democracy. The appeal to human rights, which was first heard in the United States and France at the end of the eighteenth century and was thereafter silenced so quickly in all countries, is heard

once again in protests against all states that claim to represent a truth higher than the sovereignty of the people.

We must, however, define more clearly this necessary limitation of the state, as it can ultimately lead to the omnipotence of the masters of money and information. Limitations on political power can even lead to the decomposition of political society and political debate, which in turn leads to a direct and unmediated confrontation between an internationalized market and introverted identities. The nation-state that was created in Great Britain, the United States, and France was primarily a set of mediations between the unity of the law or science and a diversity of cultures. This nation-state today is being dissolved into the market or, at the opposite extreme, transformed into an intolerant and identitarian nationalism that results in the scandal of ethnic cleansing and condemns minorities to death, deportation, rape, or exile. Squeezed between a globalized economy and aggressively introverted cultures that proclaim an absolute multiculturalism implying a rejection of the other, the political space is fragmenting and democracy is being debased—reduced, at best, to a relatively open political marketplace, which no one troubles to defend because it is not the object of any intellectual or affective investment.

This book offers an answer to the question that arises when we reject both the excessively arrogant mobilizing state and the highly dangerous confrontation between markets and tribes: What positive content can we give to an idea of democracy that is not reducible to a set of guarantees against authoritarian power?

Such an inquiry impinges equally on political philosophy and on the most concrete of acts aimed at reconciling majority rule and respect for minorities, insuring the integration of immigrants and the participation of women in political decisionmaking, and bridging the divide between North and South.

The answer we seek must, first and foremost, protect us from a most immediate threat—the growing dissociation between the instrumentality of the market and the technological world on the one hand and the closed world of cultural identities on the other. How are we to combine the unity of the former with the fragmentation of the latter, the motion with the direction, the objective world with the subjective? How are we to recompose a world that is fragmenting socially, politically, geographically, and economically?

It is primarily at the level of the concrete social actor—whether group or individual—that this reconstruction must take place. Only at this level can we reconcile the instrumental reason that is indispensable in a world of technology and trade with the memory and creative imagination without which there can be no actors producing history but merely agents reproducing a self-contained order. I have defined the subject as the effort to integrate these two facets of social action.

The assertion of the subject does not, however, occur in a social void. It is grounded in the struggle against the logic of dominant apparatuses; it presupposes institutional conditions that are the very definition of democracy, and it re-

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sults in the combination of cultural diversity with universal reference to the standards of law, science, and human rights.

We must learn to live together with our differences, to build an increasingly open world that is also as diverse as possible: Without unity, communication becomes impossible; without diversity, death prevails over life. We cannot sacrifice one for the sake of the other. Democracy should no longer be defined as the triumph of the universal over the particularized, but as a set of institutional guarantees that makes it possible to reconcile the unity of instrumental reason with the diversity of practical experience, and to bring together social exchange and political freedom. As Charles Taylor put it, democracy is based on a politics of mutual recognition (Taylor 1992).

Democracy must do battle on two fronts: On the one, it risks reappearing as an ideology in the service of the most powerful; on the other, its name is threatened with exploitation by an arbitrary and repressive regime. My goal in writing this book was to aid in reconstructing the political space and to promote the rebirth of democratic convictions by combating both these threats.

#### To the Reader

After reading Chapter 1 the reader may move directly to Part 3, which contains this book's central ideas, before going back to Part 1. Part 2 is a continuation of Part 1, but adopts a historical rather than an analytic approach. Part 4 outlines an answer to the difficult question of the relationship between democracy and development.

#### PART 1

# The Three Dimensions of Democracy



#### A New Idea

Democracy is a new idea. Now that authoritarian regimes have collapsed in the East and the South and the United States has won the cold war against the Soviet Union—which, after having lost its empire, its all-powerful party, and its technological pride, has finally ceased to exist—many people believe that democracy has won. Many now believe that democracy is of necessity the normal form of political organization, the political face of modernity, whose economic form is the market economy and whose cultural expression is secularization. Reassuring as this belief may be for those living in the West, it is so flimsy that we should find it worrisome. An open and competitive political market is no more identifiable with democracy than a market economy is in itself constitutive of an industrial society. In both cases, we can say that an open system—whether political or economic—is a necessary but not a sufficient precondition for democracy or economic development. There is indeed no democracy unless the ruled are free to choose their rulers, or without political pluralism, but we cannot speak of democracy if the voters' only choice is between two fractions of the oligarchy, the army, or the state apparatus. In the same way, the market economy ensures that the economy is independent of state, church, or caste; but if we are to be able to speak of an industrial society or self-sustaining growth, there must also be a legal system, a public administration, an inviolate territory, entrepreneurs, and agents who redistribute the national product.

There are now many indications that the regimes we describe as democratic are, like authoritarian regimes, being weakened, and that they are dominated by the demands of a world market that is protected and regulated mainly by the United States and by agreements between three main centers of economic power. This world market tolerates the participation of countries with strong authoritarian governments, countries with decaying authoritarian regimes, or even oligarchic regimes. It also tolerates the participation of what might be called democratic regimes, or, in other words, regimes in which the ruled are free to choose the rulers who represent them.

As states, democratic or otherwise, decline in importance, involvement in politics also declines, and we have what has rightly been called a crisis of political rep-

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resentation. Voters no longer feel that they are represented. They voice that feeling by denouncing a political class that appears to be interested only in its own power or in the accumulation of personal wealth by its members. The awareness of citizenship fades, either because many individuals feel that they are consumers rather than citizens, and cosmopolitans rather than nationals, or because a certain number of individuals feel that they have been marginalized by or excluded from society for economic, political, ethnic, or cultural reasons.

Once democracy has been weakened in this way, it can be destroyed either from above, by an authoritarian power, or from below, by chaos, violence, and civil war. Alternatively, it may be destroyed from within as power comes under the control of oligarchies or parties that accumulate economic or political resources so as to impose their choices on citizens, who have been reduced to the role of voters. The twentieth century has been so strongly marked by authoritarian regimes that their destruction seemed to many to be adequate proof of the triumph of democracy. Yet if we content ourselves with purely indirect or negative definitions of democracy, we restrict the analysis to an unacceptable extent. Giovanni Sartori was right in both his first (Sartori 1957) and his most recent book (Sartori 1993) to reject absolutely the distinction some have made between two forms of democracy, described respectively as political and social, formal and real, or bourgeois and socialist, depending on which vocabulary these ideologues preferred. Sartori correctly reminded us that there is only one form of democracy—firstly, because we could not use the same word to designate two different realities if they did not have a great deal in common, and secondly, because a discourse that culminates in the claim that an authoritarian or even totalitarian regime is democratic cancels itself.

Have we no choice but to follow the pendulum as it swings back to constitutional liberties after having attempted, throughout the long century that began in 1848 in France, to extend political liberty to economic and social life? Adopting that stance does not help us to answer the question of how to reconcile or combine government by law with the representation of interests. It merely underlines the incompatibility of the two goals and, therefore, the impossibility of constructing or even defining democracy. We thus come back to our starting point.

We therefore have to agree with Norberto Bobbio, who defined democracy in terms of three institutional principles. According to Bobbio, democracy is primarily "a set of rules (primary or basic) which establish who is authorized to take collective decisions and which procedures are to be used" (Bobbio 1988: 24). To this one might add that the greater the number of people who participate either directly or indirectly in decisionmaking, the more democratic the regime; and, finally, that the choices to be made must be real choices. One might also agree with Bobbio that democracy is based on the replacement of an organic conception of society by an individualistic vision, the main elements of which are the idea of a contract, the replacement of Aristotle's political animal by homo œconomicus, and by utilitarianism and its pursuit of the greatest happiness for the greatest number.