

THE DEMOCRATIC
CITIZEN

The Radicalism of Democracy

CHARLES DOUGLAS LUMMIS

In the case of a word like democracy, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it; consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to one meaning.

—George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

The word “democracy” has been worked to death. It has been used to justify revolution, counterrevolution, terror, compromise, and mediocrity. It has been applied to representative institutions, free enterprise economies, Leninist party rule, and dictatorship by plebiscite. Wars have been fought to make the world safe for it, and atomic bombs have been dropped to establish it on foreign soil. Democracy has become a prostituted word that, as Orwell points out, none of its employers wants to reform.

Democracy has been used and betrayed by state, party, sect, and interest. Yet it still has honest lovers, who detect in it something that has mysteriously remained immaculate and true. In the right place, at the right moment, the word is fresh, clear, and cutting. It is not out of habit or nostalgia that we continue to use it, but because, despite its shady career, it is somehow still a virginal political idea.

The word contains a simple idea that stands one level deeper than any effort to exploit and distort it. This idea may be ignored or misemployed, but it cannot be destroyed. To understand what it is we must begin naïvely, by going back to the root of the word, to what a philologist might call its *radical* meaning. This meaning is not simple to implement, but it is simple to understand.

Democracy is a word that joins “the people” and “power.” This means that it is not the name of any particular political system or arrangement of institutions. Rather it is a situation that a political system may or may not help to bring about. It describes an ideal, not a method of achieving it. It is not a *kind* of government ✓

but an *end* of government; not a historically existing institution, but a historical project.

Standard definitions slip away from this primary idea. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that democracy means "government by the people," the *Columbia Encyclopedia* describes it as "a government in which the people share [we are not told with whom] in directing the activities of the state. . . ." The ambiguity is introduced when "power" is replaced by "government." If for "government" we read governance then it is virtually the same as power. But if "government" here means the institutions of government, then we have not a definition but a hypothesis. The hypothesis is that the way to get power to the people is to put them in charge of the government, i.e., the state apparatus. This is not democracy, but demo-archy (archy from *archein*, to rule), and is offered in the confidence that where demo-archy prevails democracy will surely follow. It is a good bet, but no more a definition than "pressing the accelerator" defines "acceleration." The latter will not work if (for example) your automobile is chained down in the hold of a freighter crossing the Atlantic, and the former won't work if (for example) the government is similarly only a piece of cargo carried along by the ship of corporate power.]

Abraham Lincoln's lawyerlike "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" improves the hypothesis. But improving a hypothesis does not make it into a definition, though it may make the difference unimportant for practical purposes. In this instance, however, the difference matters.

At least, it mattered to Lincoln. Time and again he sought to make clear the difference between the scheme of government and the principles that that scheme is supposed to promote (as in his famous image of the silver frame of government protecting the golden apple of liberty). The frame of government was not democracy itself, nor did the state have the power to immediately establish democracy, as we can see in Lincoln's reluctance to use federal power to abolish slavery.

Lincoln's formula in the Gettysburg Address is taken by most people as his (for many, *the*) definition of democracy, despite the fact that he did not say it was: the word does not appear in the speech. And it is clear from the context, as well as from his Civil War policy, that what he means by "government" is not governance but institutions, the "frame" designed to empower the people, not the people empowered. After all, if "government" means governance, then the phrase "that government of the people . . . shall not perish from the earth" becomes ludicrous, and we should have to believe that Lincoln is exhorting his audience to strive on so the people can continue to be governed.

If we take Lincoln's formula for a definition then democracy is an existing set of state institutions, and the struggle for democracy is defensive military action that requires an increasingly powerful central government, a military conscription system, a massive army commanded by the likes of Grant, Sherman,

and Hooker, and a firing squad for deserters. Once democracy is defined as an existing political system, then it is natural that the task of the democrat emerges as the struggle to defend the state, to "save the Union." This is certainly not to raise an argument with Abraham Lincoln about whether saving the Union was the right policy in his time. The only point is that for Lincoln the Union was not a synonym for democracy—it was the silver frame, not the golden apple. The difference seems small but the consequence is great, namely whether, as democrats, we are to understand "the unfinished work" and the "great tasks remaining before us" to which Lincoln calls us in that address, as the long historical struggle toward democracy, or the defense of the American state against all enemies foreign and domestic.

No word (of this kind) means, or only means, what it says.
If the word means what it says, there is democracy where the people have the power. Understood in this way, democracy is one of those beautiful, absolute, clear principles—clear in the abstract like "thou shalt not kill"—that poses a maddening, tantalizing puzzle to humankind and launches us on the historic project of seeking to realize it in our collective life. But however successful institutions may be in coming close to it, democracy itself—like justice, equality, or liberty—remains a critical standard against which all institutions, real and imagined, may be measured.

Looking at the governments in the world today, we can make a stronger statement: radical democracy is subversive in every country. It is a dangerous principle in the U.S., the USSR, Poland, Japan, Korea, El Salvador. Radical democracy is *the* critique of centralized power of every sort—charismatic, bureaucratic, military, corporate, party, union, technocratic. By definition it is the antithesis to all such power. Though we may find other reasons—order, efficiency, the necessities of struggle—to justify centralization of power, this gives radical democracy no reason to yield in *its* critique: "justifiably" undemocratic power remains undemocratic.

Who is the great theorist of radical democracy? Though we may catch glimpses of it in Locke, in Rousseau, in Jefferson, or in Marx, the great bulk of even avowedly democratic theory quickly moves on to the discussion of institutions. This is precious work, but who has stood up for the thing itself, from beginning to end; who has written its manifesto? No name comes to mind.

There may be several reasons for this. For one, perhaps no one has really believed in it. Perhaps everyone, like Madison, has believed that democracy is only for angels, and the best we flawed human beings can hope for is some compromise, some democratized Leviathan. Perhaps democracy is more frightening than anarchism. For anarchism seeks to abolish power at the same time that it liberates the people, hoping thereby to ensure that they will not do anything very harmful in their liberty. Democracy does not abolish power: it gives it to the

people. Most anarchists envision the political space abolished, and the people under the invisible rule of "society," or set apart by radical individualism so they will no longer be a people at all. Radical democracy envisions the people gathered in the public space, with neither the great paternal Leviathan nor the great maternal Society standing over them, but only the empty sky; the people making the power of Leviathan their own, free to speak, choose, and act. Perhaps the scale of the freedom here implied is so dizzying that the mind quails before it and turns to the more manageable business of demonstrating the need for centralized authority, representative officials, rule of law, police, and the like.

Another reason for the absence of a political philosophy of radical democracy is that it is the one political state that requires no argument for its legitimation. It may be that the need for theory begins only when power is placed somewhere other than with the people. Isn't that what "legitimation" is? If you are going to give power to the philosophers, the Prince, the elected, or to the party central committee, you have to explain why. In the case of placing power with the people, no such argument is required. An explanation may be required of why such a situation will be safe, efficient, lasting, or a source of wise decisions, but not why it is legitimate. Radical democracy is legitimacy itself.

The word "radical" places democracy directly at the center of the polity. Its motion is not lateral toward the edge (as with "left") but straight down to the source. The first meaning listed for "radical" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reads,

1. Radical humidity, humour, moisture, sap: in mediaeval philosophy, the humour or moisture naturally inherent in all plants and animals, its presence being a necessary condition of their vitality. So *radical heat*.

Radical democracy, taken in this sense, is like radical humidity—the vital source of energy at the center of all living politics. Every regime is built by taking power from all the people and giving it to a few, every ideology is an explanation of why this power transfer is justified, and regimes are stable and powerful when those explanations are accepted by the people. Radical democracy—the people's power—is the root of all government power.

From the standpoint of radical democracy, the justification of every *other* kind of regime has something of the character of the emperor's new clothes. Even a people that has lost its political memory, that has been terrorized or mystified into believing that the power of the government is a personal characteristic of the Prince, punishment from God, an inheritance from the Founders, the direct command of History, an inescapable scientific law, a commodity you can buy, or something that grows out of the barrel of a gun, may still make the discovery that the real source of power is itself.

Even an army bristling with the most fearsome weapons is of no use to the

general if all the soldiers desert, and mass desertion is always a *physical* possibility. Any regime at any time has the potential to collapse back into a State of Democracy, though in particular times and places such a thing may be psychologically and socially inconceivable. The fact that mass desertion will dissolve the power of the state accomplishes little in situations where the people's beliefs prevent them from acting, but at the same time differences in belief don't alter the physical fact.

Radical democracy neither progresses nor regresses with history, and thus a democratic revolution is not a leap forward into the uncharted future, but, as Locke indicated, a return to the source. Democracy is the radical, the square root of all power, the original number out of which all regimes are multiplied, the root term out of which the entire political vocabulary is ramified. Democracy is radical politics in the same way that faith was once called the "radical grace," acetic acid "radical vinegar," and granite "the universally radical rock." A call for radical democracy does not mean that something must be rooted out, but that democracy must be rooted in; it is a call, not for eradication, but for radication.

The spirit of conservatism dictates that the techniques, institutions, traditions, and manners that have developed over centuries have hidden within them more wisdom and more uses than we know, and can possibly know, so that if we start knocking them down we are likely to lose things that we don't want to lose and begin a chain of destruction beyond what we intended. It developed in response to Jacobinism, conceived as the notion that the world can be reshaped, by violence if necessary, to conform to an ideal pattern dictated by abstract reason. But the ruling-class "conservatism" of today is the direct historical heir of Jacobinism, and the institutions it seeks to preserve are institutionalized Jacobinism. What ruling-class conservatives are interested in conserving are the institutions that maintain and extend their power. Tennyson wrote,

That man's the best conservative
Who lops the mouldered branch away.

*Capitalist
Jacobins -*

But the ruling-class conservatives seek to save the branch by going after the root, and the economic system that they seek to conserve has eradicated more traditional techniques, customs, and institutions than any other force in the history of the world. To give the name "conservative" to this kind of technological and economic Jacobinism is like calling a strip miner a conservationist because he conserves the institution of strip mining.

The ecology movement in recent years has found the proper field for the spirit of conservatism. Here the classic conservative argument is right: when the industrialist tells us his science guarantees that little will be harmed by logging off the Amazon jungle for pulp, or leaking a bit more radiation, or adding another chemical to the food, it is not ignorant know-nothingism, but conserva-

tive wisdom, to answer, *your science cannot know that much.*

Politically, the ecology that is important here is less the ecology of the wilderness (which has a different importance of its own) but rather the ecology that has been developed in the centuries of dialogue between nature and the people who do productive labor; between farmer, soil, and season; between carpenter, tools, and wood; between potter, clay, and fire; between fisherman, sea, and weather. These are dialogues that the ruling class has rarely participated in directly, and knows little about. Their products have been the culture of the people, the culture of productive labor, that carries on the most ancient traditions known to humankind, many dating back to the neolithic age, and compared to which every tradition and inheritance Burke sought to protect is a new-fangled innovation. It is this ecology, the infinitely complex set of relationships between the human culture of production and that part of nature on which production has been based, rather than the "ecology of games" that connects the institutions of big government, big business, and high finance, that is the proper sphere of conservatism. It is here that change must be slow and watchful, and it is precisely here that the ruling-class conservatives send in their bulldozer brigades. Ordinary people, however, whose lives are embedded in this ecology, have been naturally protective of it, and this motivation has been a large part of the history of people's struggles since the early days of capitalism, from Luddism, through factory-workers movements, through anticolonialism, to the antiredevelopment, anti-pollution, antinuclear struggles of today.

It is often said that the people are natural conservatives, which is true: natural *democratic* conservatives.

Radical
Democracy ≠
Socialism

Radical democracy is in a different category from socialism. It is the name of an ideal political condition, whereas socialism is a hypothesis. In its simplest form, the hypothesis is that the socialization of the means of production will end exploitation, oppression, and war, by removing their cause, class power. The socialization of production in itself—which is to say, socialism itself—has no independent value as an end. Its value is as a means to bring about these results, and should it fail to do so, the socialist hypothesis may be thrown into a crisis. But such a setback would cast no doubt on the value of the struggle for an end to exploitation, oppression, and war, and would cast no doubt on the value of the struggle for democracy.

Disagree

The radical democrat agrees with the socialist that capitalist economic institutions give to the few power that should be held by the people. The radical democrat does not agree, however, that after solving that problem it will be safe to abandon the democratic struggle and disband the organizations and obliterate the traditions by which it has been sustained. The radical democrat does not believe that any institutional or social arrangement can give an automatic and permanent solution to the main question of political virtue, or can repeal what may

be the only scientific law political science has ever produced: power corrupts. The demand that power should be with the people is as easy to understand after the revolution as before. The radical democrat is particularly suspicious of socialist historians who define what they call the "democratic revolution" as something logically prior to and to be superceded by the socialist revolution. The question is rather the other way around: whether a democratic revolution—and not mere backsliding to a capitalist economy—will prove to be possible in a socialist country. Should such a thing actually occur, even in only one country, this would amount to a revision of the catalogue of political possibilities available to the world's people, which is why such a heavy burden of hope has been placed on Poland's Solidarity.

No idea what this means. Commitment to, knowledge of...
 e.g. the expression "p. virtue"

democratic synecdoche

The "essence" of demo. I say it has no essence, only a history, many histories.

We hear much about "education for democracy," but the only real education system for democracy is democracy. Aristotle taught us that the essence of democracy was the system of choosing officials by lot, whereas choice by election was aristocratic by definition. Choice by lot presupposes, and operates to develop and maintain, a polity in which each citizen can stand for the whole. Similarly, Montesquieu taught us that the spirit of democracy is political virtue, which he defined as patriotism. In a democracy, it must be remembered, patriotism means the love that ties the people together, not the misplaced love of the institutions that dominate the people. Authoritarian patriotism is a relinquishing of one's will, right of choice, and need to understand, to the authority; its emotional base is gratitude for having been liberated from democratic responsibility. Political virtue is the commitment to, knowledge of, and ability to stand for the whole, and is the necessary condition for democracy. It binds the people together into a body by which the power can in principle be held. Choice by lot, the symbol of radical democracy, is an expression of trust, almost inconceivable to us today, that no matter who is chosen he (or she, we say, though the Greeks did not) will not turn out to be a demagogue, or a political fool, or a knave who will run off with the public funds.

choice by lot, he says, is the symbol of democracy - an expression of trust. I say acknowledgment comes before trust

Choice by lot is not radical democracy itself, but symbolizes it and would be a giant step toward it, and in it we can see the connection between democracy and human development: the development of political virtue. On the other hand, the key characteristic of modern representative government, as is explicitly stated in *The Federalist* papers, is the severing of this connection, and the construction instead of a governmental mechanism that is supposed to operate automatically to produce a result approximating what it would be if the people had political virtue, thereby making political virtue itself superfluous. This is a brilliant move, and the governmental system for which the American Constitution is the model has been an extraordinary success if the ultimate end is, as the Founders believed, the establishment of lasting institutions that bring domestic peace, order, and national strength, to which end the people are the means.

Federalist circumvention of quest of pol. virtue + severing of connection democ + human devt.

Athenian democracy, to which we owe so much, was a democracy among the masters: they could “act as bodyguards to one another against slaves and criminals so that none of the citizens may die a violent death” (Xenophon). Moreover, to the Athenian colonies it was, “to speak somewhat plainly, a tyranny” (Pericles), while to the women, we may be sure, it was endless, grinding labor for men who were rarely at home.

In a world in which we do not know how to establish democracy universally, it is a time-honored strategy to seek to establish it partially by surrounding it with a wall of discrimination, particularly against those who are exploited to provide the economic basis for the liberty of the citizens. There is little purpose in preaching moral sermons now against those who used this strategy in the past. The question is, can it be effective today? Would it be possible to establish “democracy in one country,” in the U.S. for example, surrounding it with a buffer of Third World puppet dictatorships to ensure the markets, raw materials, and cheap labor needed to give the citizens the leisure for politics? Given the growing awareness of Third World people themselves, the chances of such a strategy succeeding are steadily diminishing. But the question here is different. Even if it were *militarily* possible to hold the empire, what are the prospects of establishing a democracy at the imperial center?

The divided consciousness that once permitted democracy for some and slavery for others can no longer be maintained. This is not because the moral character of the twentieth century has improved over earlier times—surely it has not. It is because the myths and self-deceptions that these mass exclusions of human beings were based on have been exploded. Notions of natural slavery, or barbarism, or of the natural inferiority of other races or of women, are no longer available for use in the way they once were. Once they were considered as beyond doubt. Today they can be revived only through the crudest hypocrisy.

It is still possible to cut oneself off from the fate of one's fellow human beings, but what we know now is that the cutting, as it were, must go on within one's own nervous system. What we cut off is not the other people, but one of our own sense organs, that special organ that gives us the capacity, when we see the faces and hear the voices of others, to recognize them as human beings like ourselves. Aside from the question of the general advisability of this kind of self-mutilation, it directly contradicts the essence of radical democracy. That is, it is a lobotomy of the very sense that radical democracy seeks to develop, the sense that makes political virtue possible—what might be called the *democratic sense*. The movement for radical democracy seeks to sharpen and extend this sense; it cannot at the same time participate in a project to mutilate it. For the radical democrat, imperial democracy is no longer a possibility. Lest it corrupt its own spirit, the struggle for democracy cannot be the struggle only for a democratic country, but for a democratic world.