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# EDITORIAL

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## Why democracy?

**democracy** (Gr. *dēmokratiā*:  
*dêmos*, people + *kratia*, power)

**T**he reasons for beginning this journal now and calling it *democracy* come down to what, in our view, is the most significant political fact about contemporary American life: the steady transformation of America into an anti-democratic society. Every one of the country's primary institutions—the business corporation, the government bureaucracy, the trade union, the research and education industries, the mass propaganda and entertainment media, and the health and welfare system—is antidemocratic in spirit, design, and operation. Each is hierarchical in structure, authority oriented, opposed in principle to equal participation, unaccountable to the citizenry, elitist and managerial, and disposed to concentrate increasing power in the hands of the few and to reduce political life to administration.

At the same time, the political institutions historically associated with democracy are on the decline. Political parties no longer function to organize the electorate into a stable following or to bind elected representatives to a party program and strategy. Elections, supposedly the grand expression of the will of the people, are becoming more like rituals of despair in which the voters heap their scorn and embarrassment upon the national institutions of Congress and the presidency. At the same time that vast sums of private money are being spent to buy candidates, public millions are, in effect, handed over to the public-relations and public-opinion industries so that their flacks can purchase the right to debase public discourse during prime time and encourage a level of political deliberation somewhere between idiocy and prolonged adolescence. Historically, great cities have provided many of the models and much of the inspiration

for democracy; our cities are becoming the digs of industrial archaeology, the abandoned places where permanently marginal and unabsorbed people huddle in squalor while the political power of nonelected corporate and financial representatives is legitimated through "control boards."

We have been hypnotized so long by the ideology of economic and technological progress that we have scarcely noticed that, politically, we have become a retrogressive society, evolving from a more to a less democratic polity and from a less to a more authoritarian society. These tendencies define the meaning of the present as the moment in our national history when democracy is forced into opposition.

The basic objective of *democracy* is to help repair the democratic fabric where it has been rent and to invent and encourage new arrangements that will point the way toward a better society. To do this, *democracy* will encourage a different kind of understanding, one that tries to combine what is usually separated. Baldly put, most historical analysis tends to be untheoretical; most theoretical analysis tends to be unhistorical; and most of the analyses that boast of being pragmatic, tough-minded, and practical are neither historical nor theoretical. Our aim will be to encourage the development of an historical and theoretical understanding around the concrete problems of the present. We cannot offer recipes or specific policies, but we can bring a critical approach that will illumine what is at stake for the future of democracy in current debates; how specific problems have come to have their present form; and what kinds of broad alternatives, consistent with democracy, are possible.

An historical and theoretical understanding has, we believe, not only intellectual merits but real political implications. At this moment in the historical development of a capitalist civilization in America—including under "civilization" not only the economy, but politics, state organization, technology, and organized or "big science"—the crucial challenge to radical democracy is to be as zealous in preventing things of great value to democracy from passing into oblivion as in bringing into the world new political forms of action, participation, and being together in the world. Radicals need to cultivate a remembrance of things past for in the capitalist civilization, which Schumpeter saw as based upon the principle of "creative destruction," memory is a subversive weapon. The ideology of progress fostered by science and capitalism depends upon the steady elimination of historical consciousness and of the customs, sensibilities, and textures of everyday life nourished by that consciousness; just as it depends upon the emasculation of the critical function of theory. What is at stake simultaneously is the past *and* the future. Radicals cannot leave the past to the conservatives; they need to remind themselves that they, too, have a past rich with democratic experience and wisdom, and that the arts of conservation have as much to do

with learning how to live with the past as with learning how to live within nature and with other human beings. The subtitle of *democracy* states our highest aim: renewal and radical change.

**T**o help realize these aims, there will be regular departments, each designed to present articles that will add to the development of a democratic understanding of our present condition—the present being the point where the past and future intersect. Each issue will have a major theme with three or four articles analyzing various aspects of it. Themes will be chosen because they concern, in vital ways, society as a whole and because they affect, in ways that matter, the daily lives of the vast run of people in society. Our boldest hope is that with each issue there will be a gradual deepening of the understanding, not only of the problems and prospects of democracy, but of the meaning of it. We are, in other words, trying to get somewhere with each issue rather than to start with some predetermined doctrine and apply it mechanically to every question.

Each number will also contain a section devoted to “explorations” where our authors will seek to expand the democratic dialogue, sometimes by introducing ideas and experience from other countries, other times by going back into either the very recent or the more remote past, or by opening up some new possibility in the present.

One way to use the past is to reflect critically upon some of the important writings or writers who have shaped, or perhaps misshaped, the democratic traditions. As a regular feature we plan to have a reconsideration of a major “classic of democracy.” We expect to have essays on familiar figures, such as Jefferson and Thoreau; important foreign writers (Tocqueville); more recent thinkers (Veblen and Dewey); some who are less well known than they ought to be (Henry George, Eugene Debs, J. Allen Smith); and some who may be surprises (Schumpeter and Arendt).

Book reviews will be an important department of *democracy*. We have opted for the review-essay rather than the conventional book review because we shall be choosing books for their importance to the specific concerns of this journal. Occasionally we shall deal with books of a few years ago on the grounds that subsequent developments have increased their significance.

These, then, are our hopes. We invite the reader to a dialogue about democracy.

Sheldon S. Wolin