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# EDITORIAL

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**T**his issue marks the beginning of *democracy*'s third year of publication. It is a proper occasion for thanking our readers for their many letters of encouragement, suggestion, and criticism, and for their loyal support. A special thanks to the large numbers of subscribers who completed the questionnaire accompanying the previous issue.

The first issue of *democracy* coincided with the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. He came to office in January 1981 promising a "new beginning." Unlike most campaign promises this one is being delivered, and so it is important to look back on two years of Reaganism and to ask, "What are its meaning and implications, especially for the cause of democracy?"

Reagan's policies can be summarized as an American translation of the advice that a French king gave to his bourgeois supporters, "Enrich yourselves!": tax cuts, depreciation allowances of almost embarrassing generosity, relaxation of environmental safeguards, giveaways of public lands and resources, job training programs in which businessmen write the specifications and the public underwrites the costs, and defense spending that is keyed to ever more expensive, complicated, and quickly obsolescent technology. If for nothing else, the first two years of Reaganism should be remembered as the golden moment when the political utopia of corporate America became reality, when the brows of those who governed America were never darkened, not even for an instant, by the thought that what was good for the *Fortune* 500 might not be equally good for the American 200 million.

This is, of course, not a new chapter in the history of the republic. Bankers, industrialists, and arms manufacturers have been swilling at the public trough ever since Hamilton succeeded in establishing the principle that the fate of the American political system would depend ultimately on their support and confidence.

What is new is that the policies of the Reagan administration, both by what it has provoked as well as by what it has promoted, has quickened certain deep-running and opposing tendencies in the life of the nation and caused them to

group into polarized forces. The sharp cuts in social programs and the vast increase in defense expenditures have not only provoked an either/or choice in public policies, they have also struck at the power of society while increasing the power of the state. By eliminating or severely reducing family services, health care, aid to the elderly, dependent, and handicapped, nutritional programs, education, worker safety rules, environmental standards, and much more, the Reaganites have all but declared war on society in the name of economy and on behalf of the tightlipped virtue portrayed in Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. ("It's about time that the people who blow so much smoke about compassion started showing some real compassion for the people who pay this country's bills."). Concurrently, the military power of the state grows by leaps and bounds, as do the other instruments of control. Surveillance is increasing, while public access to information is decreasing. "National security" is being restored to its Nixonian grandeur as a justification for governmental arbitrariness. The independence of the judiciary is under attack in the name of halting "judicial activism," and measures are readied to change the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court so as to put certain subjects beyond its reach.

Society has not, however, passively submitted to the legal authoritarianism of the administration. For almost two decades there has been a tremendous upsurge of political activity that has been ignored by the official indices of polls, elections, and news media. Grassroots politics in rural areas, cities, and towns is the most important political story of the past two decades, and it is happening almost entirely outside and in spite of the established political structure. With the emergence of the women's movement, the antinuclear and disarmament movements, new and broader dimensions have appeared. All of these movements are testimony that what is politically authentic—the spontaneous cooperation of citizens acting together out of a sense of common concerns and a commitment to their common well-being—has virtually nothing to do with the state, with the official processes and institutions that are supposed to embody the nation's political life. The great polarity is between a managerial, antipolitical state and a participatory, political society.

This polarity will survive the results of the recent midterm elections, because the Democratic party does not represent an alternative to state-dominated politics. It has not functioned as an opposition party because the terms on which politics is now defined do not make it politically feasible. A political economy dominated by huge corporations, governed by the federal bureaucracy, and struggling to adapt to the changing dynamics of an international economic system, is too massive and too much in need of political stability to allow for anything more than party competition whose permissible gamut will extend no further than from A to B. The Democratic party has become the medium for registering the narrow limits within which the political system can allow democratic reforms.

How far this process has gone, of sacrificing democracy to the needs of a corporate economy, was clearly indicated recently when a committee representing House Democrats issued a policy paper on the economy. The report carefully avoided any reference to "full employment" as a goal. Instead, as a spokesman helpfully explained, the document was meant to signal a "move from the politics of redistribution to the politics of investment and growth." To translate this description one should realize that in the language of political economy "employment" is the equivalent of "the people" and "redistribution" is the code word for a politics that favors them, just as "investment" and "growth" are variations on the theme of trickle-down politics. The document also produced a vision of politics that is profoundly antidemocratic. It urges the government to establish "a partnership among labor, small business, big corporations, universities, and government." According to the report, this partnership will uncork prodigies of production and marvels of efficiency that will enable the United States to compete against Japan.

Although the report starts out with five partners, it somehow ends with three: government, business, and labor. This matters less than the assumption that the Big Three would be representative of anything other than their respective hierarchies. Does anyone seriously think that the AFL-CIO represents the rank-and-file? or that "big corporations" and "small business" would forward the views of small farmers and white-collar employees? or that universities would represent more than a concern with protecting patents on the latest scientific discovery by a combined team of university and corporate scientists? The scheme is merely one of several fashionable proposals for introducing under the guise of corporatism a huge enterprise zone carefully sealed off from citizen participation. As a vision of politics it is simply a rehash of Saint-Simon, an early nineteenth-century eccentric who proposed to solve all political and economic disorders and unleash an orgy of productivity by handing over complete authority to a body composed of industrialists, bankers, and scientists. He was more imaginative than the Democrats, however, for he saw that to make the authoritarian system work there was need for a new religion to restrain the greed of the few and provide solace for the many, as well as for enlisting the intellectuals to write inspirational messages on behalf of productivity.

The document illustrates an important reversal in the role of the Democrats in forging a national consensus. Beginning with the New Deal, the historical pattern was for the Democrats to pass innovative and progressive legislation; when the Republicans gained the presidency in 1952 and 1968, there was little effort made to roll back previous gains, even when they were anathema to Republican orthodoxy. As a result, a consensus was formed around liberal social policies. Under the Reagan administration this pattern has been reversed as the Democrats joined the counterrevolutionary consensus. Only on rare occasions and in

small numbers did Democrats take principled positions against the effects of Reaganomics on the poor, the unemployed, the environment, and the cities. At the party's miniconvention last June a Democratic congressman spoke for many when he applauded the party's "tone of moderation" and suggested the proper electoral strategy should be based on the fact that "there are not enough poor people in America today to win a national election with their votes."

Democrats, then, are not more democratic, only somewhat less antidemocratic than Republicans. They exist not as an alternative but as a reminder of the necessary limits to change—not to all types, only to change that challenges the presuppositions of the bureaucratic and corporate system. One of the main lessons of Reaganism is that that system can be made to respond dramatically and with strong measures when it involves corporate interests. Another is that only an administration so wholly at one with corporate power could undertake to dismantle systematically and quickly programs, institutions, and vested rights and expectations of relatively long standing, and not provoke a fierce opposition and clamor. It is not at all paranoid to speculate that if a merely liberal—let alone radical—program commensurate with Reagan's were to be introduced by a president who had received as vague a mandate as Reagan did, and who had not been elected in the midst of an obvious national emergency, the result would be a political crisis of chilling if not Chilean proportions.

The biggest lesson of all is that the revitalization of democracy must be undertaken primarily in society rather than through state-oriented institutions, and its model of action is not the administrator who "creates" an organization, but the craftsperson who respects what he or she is working with—persons, relations, places, and needs—and knows the story of where they have come from. A basis has already been laid, thanks to the devoted efforts of countless community organizers and ordinary citizens, and a rich and varied fund of political experience is now accessible. The next step is to begin the slow task of developing political economies so that political life, the life of citizens, can become whole.

—Sheldon S. Wolin  
October 29, 1982