

# Krisis

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RADICAL DEMOCRATIC CHIC

Review of: Giorgio Agamben et al. (2011) *Democracy in What State?* New York: Columbia University Press, 130 p.

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Democratic theory has long been dominated by the (by no means homogeneous) mainstream of liberal political philosophy and its focus on state institutions, the constitution and the rule of law, and official forums for citizen representation, participation and deliberation. In recent years, however, an alternative and more radical theoretical approach has emerged that rejects the identification of democracy with the state and insists on the conflictual and anarchic logic of democratic practice that resists any attempt at institutional normalization and containment. Despite its heterogeneity, the various strands of this approach are often subsumed under the label ‘radical democracy’.

The collection *Democracy in What State?* now offers readers the welcome opportunity to get an update on the latest developments of the radical variant of democratic discourse, provided by the all-star cast of Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Wendy Brown, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek, who are joined by their comparatively less famous colleagues Daniel Bensaïd and Kristin Ross. The guiding question of this volume was posed by the editor of the French original: ‘is it meaningful, as far as you are concerned, to call oneself a democrat? If not, why not? And

if so, in line with what interpretation of the word?’ (vii-viii) This question provides what unity there is to the diverse responses (or rather ‘responses’, given that one wouldn’t guess from some of the contributions that the author even noticed there was a question).

Reading through the contributions one can quickly draw the, not very surprising, conclusion that there is at least a negative consensus among the authors that ‘actually existing democracies’ are not the real thing. Although they sometimes tend to dismiss representation and elections all too easily as bourgeois tricks only aimed at disciplining and containing the *demos*, this dismissal has the merit of underlining one of the core theses of radical democratic theory: democracy is not – or at least not only – a specific form of state.

This point is also made in Agamben’s short ‘Introductory Note on the Concept of Democracy’: democracy tends today to be understood exclusively as ‘a technique of governing’ (1) – but radical democrats should be wary of both under- and overestimating the link between the constitution of the *demos* as a political community and the governmental machine long ignored by political philosophy. Unfortunately, Agamben leaves the reader wondering how, in the face of this political ‘amphibology’, we can avoid resorting to ‘mere chatter’ (5; presumably this is what political philosophy sounds like from his vantage point).

It is not uncommon for authors in the radical democracy camp to proceed in willful (or ‘sovereign’) ignorance of the large body of work in ‘normal’, i.e. ‘non-radical’ democratic theory (with the partial exception, in this volume, of Bensaïd), but few manage to do so with the theoretical heroism of Badiou. Once more following his philosophical champion Plato (‘one of our foremost contemporaries’; 121, n. 1), his iconoclastic piece on, or rather against, ‘The Democratic Emblem’ takes on the herculean task ‘to dispel the aura of the word *democracy* and assume the burden of not being a democrat and so being heartily disapproved of by ‘everyone’ (7). Obviously, for Badiou ‘everyone’ (‘tout le monde’) is not a politically or theoretically significant authority, but rather a cipher for everything that he deems wrong in our societies. On his surprisingly Spenglerian list, pleasure-driven materialism, relativism (or, even worse,

nihilism), stupidity, and anarchy take pride of place. Badiou's alternative to this political as well as intellectual mess is a kind of universalized Platonic community of guardians he calls 'communism', which he promises is 'integral to the historic life of peoples' and 'absorbs and surmounts the formalism of the age of restricted democracy' (15; this is not, as the translation has it, what 'Hegel said at the time' but Badiou's attempt at imagining what 'parler comme Hegel' would be like).

If we fast-forward a bit, Badiou's vision might also be seen as ominously reminiscent of the 'authoritarian solutions and mythic communities' (43) to which the radical left, as Bensaïd warns us, has too often sought refuge during its twisted history. Even further into the book we're confronted with another case in point, namely the somewhat macho admiration Žižek, Badiou's clownesque ally, seems to have for Hugo Chávez as the, in his view, latest representative of the dictatorship of the proletariat (119). Building on the insights of German rage theorist Peter Sloterdijk, Žižek – on his way 'From Democracy to Divine Violence' – seems to think it's a good idea for the radical left to tap the motivational power of the promise of 'large-scale revenge' (111). Given that the historical lessons of radical leftist politics (and its failures) apparently escape some of its self-styled present-day proponents on the academic stage, Bensaïd's sober and self-reflexive (if at times long-winded) elaborations seem all the more à propos (leaving aside his defense of the 'party form' as an inescapable means of political organization). As he insists, from an emancipatory leftist perspective it must be a non-negotiable commitment that every tip of the hat to Stalin is 'a tip of the hat too many' (25).

Naturally, this need not in any way detract from the radicality of one's political position. As Bensaïd, a leading figure of French Trotskyism who died last year, insists, democracy remains a permanent scandal 'because, to survive, it must keep pushing further, permanently transgress its instituted forms, unsettle the horizon of the universal, test equality against liberty. [...] It must ultimately attempt to extend, permanently and in every domain, access to equality and citizenship.' (43) This is precisely the point two of the most interesting recent French political philosophers have been making over and over for more than a decade now, and without resorting to noisy provocations of faux radicalism. The first is Ran-

cière, whose contribution to this volume is in the form of an interview (largely summing up his excellent little book *Hatred of Democracy*) and for whom democracy, and more generally what he refers to as politics in contrast to the 'police', is grounded in 'the power of the people, the power of those who have no special entitlement to exercise power' (79) – and therefore can be said to have no secure ground at all. The second is Miguel Abensour, who is strangely absent from this collection (as is Etienne Balibar).

As Abensour points out as well (e.g. in his recently translated *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*), the problem with 'actually existing democracy' is not only that it is more oligarchic than democratic, but that, on a more fundamental level, it confuses democracy with a regime that combines representative government with the rule of law. To speak of a 'democratic state' is, for him, an oxymoron, because the state is necessarily anti-democratic in that it separates itself as the bearer of political power from society and rests on the division between those who are governed and those who govern – a division that democracy seeks to abolish. In contrast, democracy consists in a continual struggle against the state, a struggle to reappropriate the power that pertains to the people, its 'pouvoir constituant', that has been arrogated or expropriated by the state (and other, private actors). To conceive of democracy as necessarily revolutionary and of the democratic revolution as necessarily unfinished does not mean, however, that democracy is incompatible with institutions – at least as long as these institutions do not suppress the dynamic that is essential to democracy, which seems to be exactly the depoliticizing effect of the institutions of present-day representative and electoral democracy. It is this irresolvable dialectic between constituent and constituted power, between the self-institution of society and its institutions, which is neglected in most of the contributions, either because they lack the conceptual resources to address it and thus fall behind the theoretical achievements of theorists like Cornelius Castoriadis and Balibar, or because they aspire to the ultimately romantic idea of dissolving the dialectic in the direction of some kind of 'pure politics' (a tendency further intensified by the almost complete absence of any social-theoretical perspective which leaves some of the authors, in their critique of contemporary society, unhelpfully gesturing towards some kind of

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presumably deep link between liberal democracy and neo-liberal capitalism).<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, Wendy Brown's claim that 'Berlusconi and Bush, Derrida and Balibar, Italian communists and Hamas—we are all democrats now' (45) might capture the weird universality of democratic rhetoric that accompanies the myriad processes of de-democratization she inventories. It is true that these processes which are part of 'the panoply of social powers and discourses constructing and conducting us' (53) cannot be subjected to democratic control by fiat. We should, however, also try to avoid the tendency to accept too quickly what needs to be challenged, namely the semantic and political arrogations characteristic of official rhetoric which often rests on the seemingly innocuous question Brown takes from Dostoyevsky: do people really want 'freedom rather than bread?' (55). Does anybody else remember reading somewhere that this might be a false dichotomy?

As the editor points out in the preface, democracy is 'a pivot around which core controversies of politics and political philosophy turn' (viii), and as Rancière reminds us, 'The political struggle is also the struggle for the appropriation of words' (78). One conclusion we can draw from this provoking and yet deeply unsatisfying book is that the semantic and political battles for democracy – the term and the thing – are far from over.

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<sup>1</sup> On these issues see also the dossier on 'Communism' in *Krisis* 1/2011.