

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

**THIS SHORT BOOK** is about democracy understood as a way of life—a cultural practice involving participants' very sense of themselves and their relations to others—rather than as restricted to political institutions. While it argues some specific positions in the context of a coherent theory of democracy, its main task is to introduce the student, citizen or activist to current thinking about democracy. I hope that my readers will be able to take from the book enough understanding to be able to argue with me and to form their own conclusions. As nature abhors a vacuum, democracy abhors experts, especially experts in democracy.

The following chapters propose a theory of democracy by focussing on how public debate is renewed and reformed by social movements. A democratic culture, prop-

erly understood, can make a substantive contribution to the moral-political issues that constantly arise, and that have to be addressed by citizens and political thinkers. Democracy, in this basic and far-reaching sense, should perhaps be called *radical* democracy. This underscores the point that genuine democracy is about much more than the institutional arrangements that allow the current consumer capitalist way of life with its attendant inequalities to perpetuate itself. When understood radically, democracy is about the processes of public decision-making to which economic, social and cultural institutions must be subjected in order to be legitimate and binding upon citizens. Such a radical concept of democracy is concerned to *judge* social, economic and political institutions, not presuppose their legitimacy. It is concerned also with how such judgments are made socially and, therefore, with the social movements that propose critical judgments of current institutions and try to persuade others to share them. To call democracy radical in this sense is not to add anything new. Critical participation has been the core of the idea of democracy from its beginning. In our own time, however, there are powerful pressures from large-scale political and economic institutions such as transnational corporations and nation-states that tend to turn “democracy” into a merely formal procedure of approving decisions that have already been made by elites. Against this restrictive and apologetic tendency, to call for radical democracy is to re-

turn democracy to its origins in a critique of established power and a concern with how citizens can articulate their needs in order to decide what courses of action to pursue. Democracy is self-government.

Such a radical conception of democracy has come to the fore again recently, after a shift in left-wing political thought that occurred in the final decades of the twentieth century. Left-wing movements and ideas have had a difficult time in recent years in the face of ascendent market-oriented, neoliberal, right-wing politics. This difficulty has led to some major reformulations of the ideas and projects of the Left, a process that is still ongoing. For a generation, the critical energies of activists had been concentrated in social movements such as environmentalism, feminism, gender liberation, city and regional reform movements, national movements, ethnic politics, and so forth. The labour movement maintained a continuing, if somewhat diminished, presence in the Left. These movements, which won some major victories, and addressed some crucial blind spots of traditional Left-wing politics, are likely to continue. But we have also seen an emerging international coalition of these diverse movements protest the dominance of neoliberal economics at international meetings of the World Trade Organization and World Bank. It is, in many ways, a new form of struggle—one that will not leave the diverse movements themselves unaffected. One might suggest that it is characteristic of the emerging coalition

that their association for a common goal modifies the movements while, simultaneously, the movements modify the coalition. This is in no sense a return of the “popular front” politics of the 1930s, where “front groups” were used instrumentally by organizations for their own purposes. In retrospect, one might say that a new era of anti-free trade coalition-building began with the rebellion of the Zapatistas (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico that announced itself to the world on January 1, 1994, the same moment as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) kicked in. It was both a specifically Aboriginal group engaged in identity politics and an inclusive international movement against neoliberal free trade.

These new energies and opportunities correspond to a change in emphasis in left-wing language from class struggle and exploitation to democracy. It is not that there has been an end to class or other forms of domination. But it has become clear that the project of the Left suffered from the absences in this previous language. To regard democracy as the most fundamental term in the political language of the Left is not to deny that there are many forms of oppression and exploitation. Rather, democracy is an ethical and political term that can bridge some of the gaps in left-wing thought and can gather together many forms of resistance into a coalition that asserts the right of every person to participate in making the decisions that affect his or her life.

What absences do I have in mind? The almost exclusive focus on class struggle historically assumed the homogeneity, or basic similarity, of the demands of the working class. In fact, since the Second World War we have seen a plurality of social movements addressing issues of gender, race, nature and political association whose description of different forms of oppression has resulted in many different demands for the end of racism, sexism, domination of nature, top-down decision-making, and so on. Also, both major strands of left-wing political parties—social democratic parliamentary parties and Marxist-Leninist revolutionary parties—oriented themselves to a takeover of the political institutions of the nation-state. In contrast, the new social movements argue that the whole of daily life is political in the sense that it incorporates power and decision-making. For example, environmentalism has shown that our consumer-buying decisions must be considered in relation to industrialism and the way that it treats nature as merely a resource. Feminism has shown how the apparently pre-political realm of the family must, and can be, politicized. The examples could be multiplied. One of the most valuable aspects of contemporary social movements is that they have brought home to many members of the public a much more profound sense of the political than the institutions of the nation-state can ever recognize. This important shift has also influenced the labour movement, which has incorporated many aspects of

the demands of the new social movements into their traditional workplace demands—the demand for equal pay for work of equal value, for example. Furthermore, the orientation of the traditional Left toward attaining state power meant that the Left had little critique of the centralizing and anti-democratic tendencies of modern society. Indeed, many of these tendencies were reflected in the rigidly hierarchical and centralized organizational structures of left-wing parties and trade unions. The Left tended to limit its critique to the uses to which state power was put, not the problems created by the centralization of power itself. In this sense, the 1960s was a transitional period in which the rediscovery of participatory democracy existed alongside a homogenizing discourse of anti-imperialism. The conflict between these two legacies of the Left was not apparent at the time because it was still assumed that the working class were a homogeneous group and thus that the critiques of traditional Marxist and social democratic political parties did not entail a simultaneous critique of their practical politics. The politics of everyday life was simultaneously discovered and obscured in the 1960s. Later, this conflict became apparent when the movement was re-absorbed into traditional parties (Marxist or social democratic), on the one hand, and burst forth to create the identity politics of contemporary social movements on the other.

I don't mean to suggest that hierarchical and centralist political parties ever defined the whole of the Left, of

course. There were critical currents, the most important of which were anarchism and council communism. The resurfacing of these buried currents gave life to the ideal of participatory democracy in the 1960s. However, the mainstream Left has been, and still is, plagued with certain problems due to its political language and the theoretical assumptions on which its practice was based. To a large extent, we are now at the end of an era and we look hopefully toward the beginning of a new one. Participatory democracy has never been the dominant tendency within the Left; the newness of our own time is that it appears to be the only strain of traditional left-wing thought that is worth remembering and carrying forward. The contemporary turn toward democracy as the fundamental term of an activist, left-wing political language seeks to redress the absences of the past and to hook the various contemporary movements into a coalition based upon an ethical and political vision. The core of this vision is the politicization of everyday life and democracy as a way of life. I hope that this book can play some small part in this great task, and make our understanding of the relationship between contemporary social movements and democracy richer and more complete by considering their historical and theoretical relationship.



The question of democracy has always been important to active citizens and political thinkers—which should be enough justification for a book. But in recent times democracy has taken a wider role also in philosophical debates, and it might be useful to indicate why the topics taken up in the following chapters have some implications for the philosophical awareness of our time. Significant currents of contemporary philosophy have moved beyond specialist questions and have assumed a role as a hermeneutic, or interpretation, of ways of life. One could distinguish two streams in this transformation. First, there has been a critique of the notion that philosophy should be primarily concerned with the adequacy of descriptive scientific, or knowledge-oriented, discourse. Such scientific representations presuppose, even though they do not discuss, the prior world of experience that is objectified in order to be described by scientific knowledge. This may be acceptable for a special science, but it involves an unacceptable restriction of scope for a philosophical interpretation of a culture, or way of life. The prior, and philosophically more basic question, is how one's experience of the world can be first objectified, in order that it can be later represented within a field of knowledge. From this angle, then, the investigation of the structure and implications of practical experience comes to the fore as a central theme for philosophy.

As a consequence of this shift toward the interpre-

tation of practical experience and ways of life, philosophy has increasingly concentrated on language as the key to understanding practical involvements in the world. Language is not investigated as a special science alongside others, but as a strategy for elucidating the practical world. The diversity of languages, dialects, and vernaculars suggests a diversity of ways of life to be examined and understood. Philosophy thus encounters the problem of “culture” and will eventually be drawn toward a reflection on the plurality of cultures.

Contemporary philosophy finds at the centre of its concerns the moral and political question of engaging in interpretation and evaluation of the multiplicity of ways of life. Reflection of this kind has to confront a serious perplexity: how can one evaluate different ways of life without imposing the criteria of one supposedly preferable form of life on all the others? For, if criteria of evaluation are internal to a way of life, then how could criteria be validly used beyond the confines of that way of life? And, if they cannot, the absence of such trans-cultural criteria leaves issues to be decided by naked power. In the event, philosophy would be able to do no more than shrug in the face of the central ethical and political issues of our time.

In this way, philosophy has rediscovered the question of power, of the political, at the centre of its concerns. To this extent, perhaps philosophy has begun once again to have the meaning that it has for those outside academic

institutions. Philosophy takes up the issue of a democratic way of life, which should put it next door to the activists of the anti-neoliberal globalization movement. We must seek to think together these three themes: cultural plurality, power, and moral-political evaluation. This is by no means an easy task, but it is one that is increasingly necessary for those engaged in the social and humanistic sciences to confront. All those who teach know the immediate involvement of youth with the lived dimensions of this knot. Political activists know how it emerges from, and must be addressed by, their actions.

Through democracy understood as a way of life this knot of issues can be confronted. Practically speaking, real, or radical, democracy demands a dismantling of top-down decision-making and the extension of participation in discussion and decision-making to the widest extent possible. Current thinking about democracy must show how its traditional critique of established and concentrated power can avoid an ethnocentrism of moral-political evaluation. One route toward the solution of this problem is in the theory of multiculturalism—a topic which will not be addressed directly in this text. Another is in the theory of public debate and decision. A third focuses on the social movements of our time which bring to public articulation perceived moral-political issues of domination and inequality. This book is concerned with the interaction between the latter two questions: how public debate is renewed and

reformed by social movements. The ethical and political components of this knot pose issues both for contemporary philosophy and for a democratic way of life. For these reasons, which are not so much answers as a way of asking questions, we should take very seriously the role of citizen-activists in the way of life that comprises radical democracy. Democracy is not simply about institutional political practices but is rather the core of a style of life—which is perhaps what its deepest impulse has always been.

