
PREFACE

Democratic Politics Today

On the eve of the twenty-first century, amid the upheavals the world is witnessing, the task of rethinking democratic politics is more urgent than ever. For those who refuse to see 'really existing' liberal democratic capitalism at the 'end of history', radical democracy is the only alternative. If the Left is to learn from the tragic experiences of totalitarianism it has to adopt a different attitude towards liberal democracy, and recognize its strengths as well as reveal its shortcomings. In other words, the objective of the Left should be the extension and deepening of the democratic revolution initiated two hundred years ago.

Such a perspective does not imply the rejection of liberal democracy and its replacement by a completely new political form of society, as the traditional idea of revolution entailed, but a radicalization of the modern democratic tradition. This can be achieved through an immanent critique, by employing the symbolic resources of that very tradition. Indeed, once we acknowledge that what constitutes modern democracy is the assertion that all human beings are free and equal, it becomes clear that it is not possible to find more radical principles for organizing society. The problem therefore is not the ideals of modern democracy, but the fact that its political principles are a long way from being implemented, even in those societies that lay claim to them. Because of the wide gap between those professed democratic ideals and their realization, the general tendency on the Left has been to denounce them as a sham and aim at the construction of a completely different society. This radical alternative is precisely what has been shown to be disastrous by the tragic

experience of Soviet-style socialism, and it needs to be discarded. However, this does not mean that we have to resign ourselves to democracy in its present form. Instead of proclaiming the ideological and illusory character of so-called 'formal bourgeois democracy', why not take its declared principles literally and force liberal democratic societies to be accountable for their professed ideals? This is the path advocated by those who favour 'radical and plural democracy', and I shall argue that this is the only hope for the renewal of the left-wing project.

This is certainly far from completely new, and one can easily show that the modern democratic principles of liberty and equality have furnished the language in which most democratic struggles have been waged. Since the moment when Mary Wollstonecraft took hold of it in 'Vindication of the rights of woman', the discourse of rights has provided the means that have made it possible for different forms of inequality to be presented as illegitimate and anti-natural; equivalent to forms of oppression. Democratic advances have usually been the result of a process of displacement of rights along a double axis: either new groups have claimed access to rights already declared, or new rights have been demanded in social relations hitherto considered 'naturally' hierarchical, such as those concerned with race, gender, etc. Radical democracy must acknowledge that the articulation of the ideas of popular sovereignty and civic equality with the liberal themes of natural rights, constitutional government and separation of powers — an articulation that is constitutive of liberal democracy — has made it possible for new rights to be claimed, and new meanings, new uses and new fields of application to be created for the ideas of liberty and equality. It is within such a framework that the struggle for a free and equal society has to be waged. It is high time to adhere to Norberto Bobbio's long-held conviction that liberal democratic institutions should be an essential part of any democratization process, and that socialist goals can only be achieved in any acceptable way within a liberal democratic regime.

One objection to a strategy of democratization conceived as the fulfilment of the principles of liberal democracy is that capitalist relations constitute an insuperable obstacle to the realization of democracy. And it is true that liberalism has generally been identified with the defence of private property and the capitalist economy. However this identification is not a necessary one, as some liberals have argued. Rather, it is the result of an articulatory practice, and as such can therefore be broken. Political liberalism and economic liberalism need to be distinguished and then separated from each other. Defending and valuing the political form of

society specific to liberal democracy does not commit us to the capitalist economic system. This is a point that is increasingly recognized by liberals such as John Rawls, whose conception of justice does not make private ownership of the means of production a prerequisite of political liberalism.

The aim of this volume is to provide a range of reflexions on rethinking the politics of the Left in terms of extending democracy within the framework of a liberal-democratic regime. In order to achieve this aim the liberal tradition is examined to identify the areas where it needs to be reformulated, so that the great contribution of political liberalism to modern democracy can be freed from the individualistic and rationalistic premises that have become fetters to democracy in its present form. The notions of citizenship and community have been stripped of much of their content by liberal individualism, and we need to recover the dimension of active participation that they hold in the classical republican tradition. Now this tradition needs to be made compatible with the pluralism that is central to modern democracy. The contributions to the present book are intended to address from different angles the following challenge: How can the maximum of pluralism be defended — in order to respect the rights of the widest possible groups — without destroying the very framework of the political community as constituted by the institutions and practices that construe modern democracy and define our identity as citizens?

Radical Democracy and Citizenship

If we agree that radical democracy is the only viable alternative for the Left today, and that it consists in trying to extend the principles of equality and liberty to an increasing number of social relations, an important question is raised: What kind of political identity does it require? In other words, since within such a perspective the creation of a common political identity can no longer be conceived in terms of *class*, what kind of political identity can contribute to the constitution of the 'we' of the radical democratic forces?

There is a degree of consensus on the Left that we should revive the idea of *citizenship*. Such an idea, it is said, could recover the radical character that it possessed during the struggle against absolutism, and it might provide the rallying cry of all democratic forces in the attempt to defeat neo-liberalism. I believe that the idea of democratic citizenship is

This is why the current debate in political philosophy between Kantian liberals and their communitarian critics is highly relevant to our purpose. What is at stake is the possibility and desirability of a return to the civic republican tradition in order to restore the idea of politics as the realm where we can recognize ourselves as participants in a community. The issue that is addressed in several of the contributions to this volume concerns the adequacy of the civic republican emphasis on the 'common good' and the way it can be made compatible with the pluralism of modern democracy. How can we defend the gains of the democratic revolution and acknowledge the constitutive role of liberalism in the emergence of a pluralistic democracy, while trying to redress the negative consequences of individualism? That is arguably the central issue in the present debate.

The rediscovery of citizenship is undoubtedly a very positive move, but we should be careful that we do not go back to a pre-modern conception of the political; and we need to be alert to the dangers of nostalgia for the Greek *polis* and *Gemeinschaft* types of community. Using the tools of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek shows how the desire for a community conceived as *Gemeinschaft* is fraught with dangers. Examining the recent developments in Eastern Europe, he helps us to understand the role played by the desire for an organic community in the growth of authoritarian nationalism. The victory of democratic pluralism, he argues, requires the acknowledgement that the multitude of dreams is irreducible. An organic unity can never be attained, and there is a heavy price to be paid for such an impossible vision.

Important as it is, recovering some of the concerns of the civic republican tradition, with its richer conception of the political, and recapturing our insertion in a political community and our identities as citizens, should not be done in such a way that the modern recognition of pluralism is made void. The individual is not to be sacrificed to the citizens; and the plurality of forms of identities through which we are constituted and which correspond to our insertion in a variety of social relations, as well as their tension, should be legitimized.

On the other hand, we must recognize that the current search for a more active conception of citizenship is a response to the limitations, not only of the liberal conception that has reduced citizenship to a legal status, but also to the bureaucratic and statist conception of politics that has for many years been the principal alternative presented by the Left. The shortcomings of such a view should also come under scrutiny. To affirm that citizenship should be accorded a certain pre-eminence

a very promising one for radical democracy, but it must be properly

elaborated.

The question we need to ask is: 'What kind of citizen?' As Bryan Turner's overview of sociological debates about citizenship reveals, there are many different ways in which citizenship can be understood. According to the perspective presented here, a purely defensive strategy of reasserting the liberal view of the citizen as a bearer of rights is inadequate. It may help us to resist the neo-liberal onslaught on existing rights, but it is not enough. A citizen cannot properly be conceived independently of her insertion in a political community. In order to formulate a satisfactory concept of the political community, we must go beyond liberal individualism to questions of justice, equality and community.

Besides, since we are concerned with a modern democratic political community, the crucial question of *pluralism* must also be addressed. In recent discussions about citizenship the theme of rights has been presented as central. It is indeed important to reassert the view of citizenship as a system of rights constitutionally guaranteed to all members of a political community, and to affirm that these rights should not only be political but also social. In this way one can re-establish the link between social and political citizenship, which was the great contribution of social democracy and which neo-liberalism has attempted to break. However, since our aim is not simply to restore social democracy but to foster radical and plural democracy, we need a conception of citizenship adequate to such a task. If the idea of citizenship is to serve as the point of convergence for the current endeavour of rethinking the politics of the Left as an extension of democracy, it has to be responsive to the new political demands, which social democracy was unable to address and which have contributed to its crisis. In short, it has to meet the challenge of the 'new movements' and acknowledge concerns relating to ecology, gay issues, ethnicity and others, as well as the struggles around class, race and gender.

Citizenship and Community

A radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking. The citizen, as Sheldon Wolin rightly emphasizes, requires that we think from a perspective of commonality: this is incomparable with an individualistic framework.

among our different identities, and that it is the democratic political identity *par excellence*, does not imply that we should either deny the importance of our other forms of membership or defend a state-centred conception of politics. In 'The Civil Society Argument' Michael Walzer proposes a conception of 'critical associationalism' in which citizenship, while being only one among our several commitments, one of the many associations to which we belong, nevertheless has a crucial role to play because it enables us to mediate among the others and act across them.

Citizenship and Social Justice

Alongside the question of rights, another current topic of discussion concerns the notion of social justice. This is highly relevant to our enterprise. Indeed, a democratic and pluralistic citizenship requires a theory of social justice that can serve as a framework for regulating the diversity and plurality of demands and rights claimed by the various participants in the political community.

It is from that point of view that we should evaluate the work of John Rawls, whose argument for distributive justice in *A Theory of Justice*¹ has been very influential because it combines a defence of individual liberty with a strong commitment to equality. As I have already indicated, it is a type of liberalism that does not make private ownership of the means of production a necessary component of the doctrine, and for this reason it is attractive to progressive liberals. It has also been well received by social democrats because it provides them with a philosophical defence of the welfare state.

There is no doubt that, against theories like Hayek's and Nozick's, who reject the notion of social and distributive justice as meaningless, Rawls's attempt to reconcile individualism with social justice has merit. Nevertheless, I consider that his views are insufficient for a radical democratic project. For, despite their merit, Rawls's proposals do not go beyond liberal individualism. He defines citizenship as the capacity for each person to form, revise and rationally pursue his or her conception of the good. Citizens use their rights to promote their self-interest within certain constraints imposed by the exigency to respect the rights of others. However, Rawls's approach precludes viewing the citizen as one for whom it is natural to join with others in common actions. As communitarian critics have pointed out, it leaves no place for a notion of community that would be constitutive of their identity. According to

Rawls, citizens in a liberal democracy need share only beliefs about procedural matters, about rules concerning getting along together. This is of course consistent with the mainstream liberal tradition, but it is precisely here that the problem lies. As Sheldon Wolin shows, liberalism's exclusive concern with individuals and their rights cannot provide content and guidance for the exercise of those rights. This has led to the devaluation of civic activity which is at the heart of our predicament. The current neo-liberal reduction of the common good to a question of 'wealth-creation', 'tax-payers' freedom' and 'efficiency' has been made possible by that individualism. We cannot successfully challenge their views if we remain on the same terrain.

Another shortcoming of Rawls's thesis, as Quentin Skinner shows, is his reliance on a tradition that considers that the best way to guarantee the individual liberty of citizens is to minimize the exigencies of social responsibility. His approach to social justice in terms of the priority of liberty is therefore inimical to the idea of active political participation. Drawing his arguments from the classical republican tradition, Skinner argues that this is a flawed conception and, against Rawls, he defends the view that it is only through public service that we can ensure and maximize our personal liberty.

There are other problems with Rawls's perspective. For instance, his theory of justice was formulated in the context of a politics that is now in crisis. The emergence of new political subjects, and the creation of new forms of identity and new types of community, has rendered inadequate a conception of justice centred principally on economic inequality. Its failure to address other means of domination makes it inappropriate for capturing the imagination of the new movements.

For a different way of thinking about social justice, one more in tune with the point of view defended here, one can turn to Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*.² Walzer argues that we can no longer conceive of the egalitarian ideal in terms of 'simple equality', by which he means a concern to make people as equal as possible in all respects. According to Walzer such a view does not provide modern societies with a sufficient level of differentiation. Furthermore, it would require constant intervention on the part of the state to coordinate the distribution of all goods, and that would jeopardize liberty. To make equality a central objective of a politics that also respects liberty we must, says Walzer, think in terms of 'complex equality'. This means that different social goods should be distributed in accordance with a variety of criteria reflecting the diversity of those goods and their social meanings. He proposes

distinguishing several spheres of justice as well as different distributive principles: free exchange, desert and need. Justice would consist in not violating the principle of distribution that is specific to each sphere, and in assuring that success in one sphere is not allowed to exercise dominance in another sphere, as is the case today with wealth. Walzer's approach provides a pluralistic framework that enables us to address different forms of domination. His theory of justice is compatible with a society that would be both egalitarian and heterogeneous. For that reason it is better suited to the democratic and pluralistic conception of citizenship that we require.

Indeed, as Jean Leca argues, the challenge that we are facing today is precisely that of developing a view of citizenship which is adequate for multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. We have to accept that national homogeneity can no longer be the basis of citizenship, and that pluralism must allow for a range of different ethnic and cultural identities.

Approaching this question from the point of view of a European identity, and taking his bearings from the situation in France, Etienne Tassin argues in favour of dissociating citizenship from nationality. He declares that the creation of a European public space requires breaking away from the dogma of the nation-state and the confusion that it establishes between general will and national will. That, according to Tassin, is the necessary condition for the existence of Europe as a political community.

These questions are of particular relevance today because of the current process of European integration. The need to envisage what form a European citizenship would take which allows for different national affiliations, is pressing. If Europe is not to be defined exclusively in terms of economic agreements and reduced to a common market, the definition of a common political identity must be at the head of the agenda, and this requires addressing the question of citizenship. European citizenship cannot be understood solely in terms of a legal status and a set of rights, important as these are. It must mean identifying with a set of political values and principles which are constitutive of modern democracy.

Citizenship and Identity

A radical democratic conception of citizenship, which aims at expressing the demands of the 'new movements', cannot ignore the criticisms that

have been made by some feminists against the very idea of citizenship. Their argument is that modern citizenship has been constructed on the negation of feminine values. For that reason, and following Carol Gilligan, some feminists oppose a feminist 'ethics of care', which promotes a set of values based on the experience of women *as* women, i.e. their experience of motherhood exercised in the private realm of the family, to what they see as the male, liberal 'ethics of justice'. It is in that vein that the current known as 'maternal thinking' defends a type of politics guided by the specific feminine values of love, care, recognition of needs and friendship.

While acknowledging the insights presented by a number of feminist critiques of the liberal conception of citizenship, the position defended here is different. In her analysis of feminism and theories of citizenship, Mary Dietz criticizes what she calls the 'maternalist' bias in feminist politics and its claim that motherhood should provide the model for a new type of politics and citizenship. She argues that democratic politics is linked to the existence of a public sphere where people act as citizens, and that this cannot be fashioned on the type of intimate bond that exists between mother and child. Agreeing with the important criticisms made by feminists the private/public distinction and its role in women's subordination does not imply that we should reject such a distinction. What we need is a new way of understanding the nature of the private and of the public, as well as a different mode of articulation between them.

Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'public sphere' can help us to do precisely that, since, as Maurizio d'Entrèves shows, the practice of citizenship is, in her view, intimately linked to the existence of a public sphere where members of civil society can exist as citizens and act collectively to resolve democratically the issues concerning their life in the political community.

For Arendt, one's identity as a citizen should not be made dependent on one's ethnic, religious or racial identity. Following the same line of reasoning, we can also affirm that gender should be irrelevant to the practice of citizenship. It is true that the modern category of the citizen has been constructed in a way that, under the pretence of universality, postulated a homogeneous public, which relegated all particularity and difference to the private, and that it has contributed to the exclusion of women. But that does not mean that the answer is to introduce women's so-called specific tasks into the very definition of citizenship. The fact that sexual difference has been central to the structure of modern citizenship, and that it has had negative consequences for women, can

also be redressed by constructing a new conception of citizenship where such a difference becomes truly irrelevant. Within the perspective of a project of radical and plural democracy such a 'non-gendered' conception of citizenship is more promising because it allows for the articulation of many democratic demands and does not focus solely on the exclusion of women. But it requires a non-essentialist framework, which implies that there is no fixed identity corresponding to men *as* men or women *as* women. All identities, including sexual identities, are forms of identifications and are necessarily precarious and unstable. This precludes any possibility of reaching their 'essence'. Recognizing the precariousness of identities does not render political agency impossible on the part of women, contrary to what a number of feminists opposed to post-structuralism are saying. According to Kirstie McClure, it allows a resituating of political agency within the plurality of the social, which opens the possibility for the political articulation of relations of race, class, ethnicity and sexuality. For that reason, she considers that it is necessary to acknowledge the important insights provided by post-structuralism for the elaboration of a democratic and pluralistic conception of citizenship. McClure indicates how post-structuralist contributions to political theory reconstitute questions of political identity and agency in a way that creates the conditions for a much more radical type of democratic pluralist politics.

Citizenship and Pluralism

A theoretical approach that incorporates the critique of essentialism, which is present in different forms in the more innovative currents of twentieth-century philosophy, is indispensable if we are to tackle the question of pluralism satisfactorily. Indeed, pluralism can only be formulated adequately within a problematic that conceives of the social agent not as a unitary subject but as the articulation of an ensemble of subject positions, constructed within specific discourses and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions. This requires abandoning the reductionism and essentialism dominant in the liberal interpretations of pluralism, and acknowledging the contingency and ambiguity of every identity, as well as the constitutive character of social division and antagonism.

This last point is decisive: we would have made no advance at all if we were simply going to replace the notion of a unified and homogeneous

subject by a multiplicity and fragmentation in which each of the fragments retains a closed and fully constituted identity. As we have argued in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,³ such an essentialism of the 'elements' remains within the problematic that it tries to displace, because a clear-cut identity presupposes a *determinate system of relations* with all the other fragments or 'elements' — and what is this but the reintroduction of the category of totality whose elimination was the meaning of the whole operation? It is therefore important not to visualize the dialectics of unfixity as a dialectic of *separation*, but as a dialectic of *subversion* and *over-determination*. And this is possible because the subject does not have an original identity (of either a holistic or a fragmentary nature) but is primarily the subject of a lack. As a result, whatever identity s/he has can be constituted only through acts of *identification*.

Understanding the nature of pluralism also requires a vision of the political as a discursively constructed ensemble of social relations, a vision that is at variance with the philosophy of liberalism. Yet, it is only within such a perspective that it is possible to grasp the specificity of modern democracy as a new political form of society. Modern democracy as a new 'regime' is constituted by the articulation between the logic of democracy and the logic of liberalism; by the assertion of popular sovereignty together with the declaration of a set of fundamental human rights that need to be respected. It therefore establishes a particular form of human coexistence, which requires the distinction between a sphere of the public and a sphere of the private as well as the separation between church and state, civil law and religious law. This is the great contribution of political liberalism to modern democracy which guarantees the defence of pluralism and the respect of individual freedom. It is therefore inconsistent to pretend that such a distinction should be abandoned in the name of pluralism, as some fundamentalists have been arguing during the Salman Rushdie controversy.

This last point indicates that any reflexion on modern democratic citizenship must recognize the limits of pluralism. While it is important to defend the widest possible pluralism in many areas — culture, religion, morality — we must also accept that our participation as citizens in the political association cannot be located on the same level as our other insertions in social relations. To recover citizenship as a strong form of political identification presupposes our allegiance to the political principles of modern democracy and the commitment to defend its key institutions. Antagonistic principles of legitimacy cannot coexist within one single political association; to accept pluralism at that level automatically

entails the disparition of the state as a political reality. And this — contrary to what some believe — would not mean more democracy but the very negation of its possibility. Modern democracy, far from being based on a relativist conception of the world, as it is sometimes argued, is articulated around a certain set of 'values', which, like equality and liberty, constitute its 'political principles'. Those who conceive the pluralism of modern democracy as being total and as having as its only restriction an agreement on procedural rules do not realize that there can never be pure, neutral procedures without reference to normative concerns.

It should be clear by now why a radical democratic perspective requires a view of the political that is different not only from the liberal but also from the communitarian one. The pre-modern view of the political community unified around a substantive idea of the common good which is found in some communitarians is antithetical to the pluralism that defines liberal democracy as a new political form of society. Radical democrats agree on the need to recover such ideas as 'common good', 'civic virtue' and 'political community', but they believe that they must be reformulated in a way that makes them compatible with the recognition of conflict, division and antagonism. This is indeed, as I argue in my contribution to this volume, one of the key areas for the elaboration of a modern democratic political philosophy.

On the other side, a reflexion on citizenship reveals the profound misunderstanding involved in the liberal tenet of the neutrality of the state. In order to respect individual liberty and pluralism, a liberal democratic state must certainly be agnostic on questions of religion and morality, but it cannot be agnostic on political values since, by definition, it postulates a certain set of those values, which constitute its ethico-political principles. But those political values are not to be conceived on the mode of a substantive common good: that would leave no place for a plurality of different conceptions of the good life. They only provide a framework of common practices to guide political conduct.

Such a critique of a supposed neutrality of the state is also suggested by Louise Marcil-Lacoste, who analyses the paradoxes of pluralism. She indicates how in many of its current liberal versions, pluralism is often reduced to the simple fact of the plurality of opinions. This is certainly the case not only in Rawls, who constantly refers to the 'fact of pluralism', but also in all those liberals who insist on the neutrality of the state and conceive democracy simply as a set of procedures to deal with the plurality of interests and opinions. Marcil-Lacoste argues that

pluralism should instead be conceived as the institutional expression of a value, i.e. individual liberty.

The understanding of radical democracy presented here should not be conflated with other views which, under a similar name, propose a view of politics which is quite different. This is, for instance, the case with several versions of radical democracy formulated within the framework of a Habermasian problematic. While sharing with us the critique of the traditional conception of socialism, those forms of radical or participatory democracy belong to another philosophical universe and these theoretical divergences have important political consequences. Those universalistic versions of radical democracy are grounded on an evolutionistic and stagist conception of moral development, and they require the availability of an 'undistorted communication' and of a final rational reconciliation of value claims. In other words, they envisage the possibility of a politics from which antagonism and division would have disappeared. Our understanding of radical democracy, on the contrary, postulates the very impossibility of a final realization of democracy. It affirms that the unresolvable tension between the principles of equality and liberty is the very condition for the preservation of the indeterminacy and undecidability which is constitutive of modern democracy. Moreover, it constitutes the principal guarantee against any attempt to realize a final closure that would result in the elimination of the political and the negation of democracy.

To acknowledge the limits of pluralism also means that all differences cannot be accepted and that a radical-democratic project has also to be distinguished from other forms of 'postmodern' politics which emphasize heterogeneity, dissemination and incommensurability and for which pluralism understood as the valorization of all differences should be total. Such an extreme form of pluralism, according to which all interests, all opinions, all differences are seen as legitimate, could never provide the framework for a political regime. For the recognition of plurality not to lead to a complete *indifferentiation* and *indifference*, criteria must exist to decide between what is admissible and what is not. Besides, as Marcil-Lacoste points out, for pluralism to be made compatible with the struggle against inequality, one must be able to discriminate between differences that exist but should not exist, and differences that do not exist but should exist. Clearly, such criteria cannot be provided by the traditional liberal pluralists or by the recent forms of postmodern exaltation of differences and paralogies.

In the end what is always necessary for a democratic society to

function is a set of institutions and practices which constitute the framework of a consensus within which pluralism can exist. It is in such a way that a modern democratic political community should be conceived, as a discursive surface of inscription, not an empirical referent. Within such a framework there will always be competing interpretations of the shared principles of equality and liberty and therefore different views of citizenship. If our aim is the extension of those principles to the widest possible set of social relations, a radical democratic conception of citizenship has to be constructed through identification with a radical democratic interpretation of equality and liberty. But the tension between those principles has to be acknowledged and a radical and plural democracy rather than trying to resolve it should enhance and protect it. Between the democratic logic of identity and equivalence and the liberal logic of pluralism and difference, the experience of a radical and plural democracy can only consist in the recognition of the multiplicity of social logics and the necessity of their articulation. But this articulation should always be recreated and renegotiated, and there is no hope of a final reconciliation. This is why radical democracy also means the radical impossibility of a fully achieved democracy.

Chantal Mouffe

Notes

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford 1971.
2. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality*, Oxford 1983.
3. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London 1985.

PART I
