

THE INNER ENEMIES OF DEMOCRACY

TZVETAN
TODOROV



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Tzvetan Todorov

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Translated by Andrew Brown

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Contents

1 Democracy and its Discontents	1
The paradoxes of freedom	1
External and internal enemies	4
Democracy threatened by its own hubris	7
2 An Ancient Controversy	12
The main characters	12
Pelagius: will and perfection	14
Augustine: the unconscious and original sin	19
The outcome of the debate	22
3 Political Messianism	29
The revolutionary moment	29
The first wave: revolutionary and colonial wars	33
The second wave: the Communist project	37
The third wave: imposing democracy by bombs	45
The Iraq war	48
The internal damage: torture	50
The war in Afghanistan	53
The temptations of pride and power	57
The war in Libya: the decision	59
The war in Libya: the implementation	62
Idealists and realists	67
Politics in the face of morality and justice	71

4	The Tyranny of Individuals	78
	Protecting individuals	78
	Explaining human behaviour	81
	Communism and neoliberalism	87
	The fundamentalist temptation	91
	Neoliberalism's blind spots	97
	Freedom and attachment	101
5	The Effects of Neoliberalism	104
	Blame it on science?	104
	The law retreats	109
	Loss of meaning	113
	Management techniques	116
	The power of the media	125
	Freedom of public speech	128
	The limits of freedom	134
6	Populism and Xenophobia	139
	The rise of populism	139
	Populist discourse	142
	National identity	147
	Down with multiculturalism: the German case	150
	Britain and France	153
	The debate about headscarves	156
	One debate can hide another	162
	Relations with foreigners	166
	Living together better	168
7	The Future of Democracy	173
	Democracy, dream and reality	173
	The enemy within us	179
	Towards renewal?	184
	Notes	189
	Index	197

1

Democracy and its Discontents

The paradoxes of freedom

The question of freedom entered my life early on. Until the age of twenty-four, I lived in a totalitarian country, Communist Bulgaria. The main thing everyone around me complained about was the shortages – the difficulty of getting hold of not just basic commodities but those little ‘extras’ that brighten up life, such as food, clothing, toiletries and furnishings. But the lack of freedom still came next on the list of gripes. The country’s leaders exercised control over countless activities through a whole range of different organizations, through occupation, neighbourhood and age group, as well as through the party apparatus, the police force and the political police known as ‘State Security’. Our whole life was monitored, and the slightest deviation from the party line risked being denounced. This obviously included all the areas that could be related to the political principles laid down, from literature and the human sciences to public institutions. But it also included more neutral aspects of life, aspects that it would be difficult to imagine, in other circumstances, as having any ideological meaning at all: the choice of a place of residence or of a profession, and even something as seemingly frivolous as your preference for a particular garment. Wearing a

miniskirt, or trousers that were too tight (or too loose), was severely punished. It could lead you, first, to the police station where you were given a couple of slaps in the face; for a subsequent offence, you could end up in a 're-education' camp, and you were never sure you would get out alive.

We suffered from this lack of freedom to a degree that depended on how much we needed it. I was a curious young man, living in the capital, studying literature, preparing myself for an intellectual profession, teaching or writing. The word 'freedom' was, of course, legitimate and even highly valued, but like the other ingredients of official propaganda, it was used to hide – or to fill in for – an absence: for lack of the real thing, we had the word. Those who wanted to participate in public life without becoming slaves of dogma were asked to practise a variant of the 'forgotten art of writing' of which Leo Strauss speaks, the language of Aesop: do not *say* a thing but *suggest* it – a subtle game in which you, too, could end up being the loser. For my part, I was sensitive to the lack of freedom of expression, a lack which eroded the very freedom of thought on which it was based. I had witnessed – in silence – the public humiliation of several people whose behaviour had been found to deviate too much from the model imposed, and I hoped to spare myself such sessions of 'critique' without betraying my convictions.

During the last year I spent in Bulgaria before leaving, fresh out of college, I took my first tentative steps in public life by writing for newspapers. I was especially proud when I felt I had managed to get round the all-pervasive censorship. On the occasion of a national holiday, they had asked me to prepare a double-page spread in a newspaper. I chose to mention some dead heroes of the anti-fascist resistance who had fought against tyranny: these were characters of undeniable virtue. My stratagem consisted of talking about the present under cover of evoking the past, so as to remind

everyone that freedom has to be fought for. This was indeed the title I had chosen for these pages: 'For freedom!' Many people, I remember, noticed this publication and, understanding the allusion to the present, praised me for my ingenuity . . . Such were the paltry victories which a young Bulgarian author could boast of, in those days. Freedom, in any case, was the value that was most dear to me.

I will now leap forward forty-eight years, to the Europe of today. And here, with a mixture of puzzlement and anxiety, I discover that the word 'freedom' is still not associated with practices that I can approve of. In 2011, the term seems to have become a brand name for political parties of the extreme right, nationalist and xenophobic in character: the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, headed by Geert Wilders, or the Austrian Freedom Party, led until his death by Jörg Haider. The Northern League, under Umberto Bossi, has candidates at Italian elections standing as representatives of the League of the People of Freedom, joining Berlusconi's People of Freedom. The wave of anti-Muslim and anti-African reaction in Germany that followed the success of a book by Thilo Sarrazin has led to the creation of a party based on his ideas, called Die Freiheit ('Freedom'), with the programme of 'fighting against the rampant Islamization of Europe'. In Ukraine since 1995 there has been a nationalist party called Svoboda ('Freedom'), which campaigns against foreign, Russian or Western influences and against the presence of foreigners; its slogan is 'Ukraine for the Ukrainians'. The questionable use of the word 'freedom' is not entirely new: in the late nineteenth century the newspaper of French anti-Semitism, edited by Édouard Drumont, was called *La libre parole* (*Free Speech*).

I had thought at first that freedom was a fundamental value of democracy; I have since realized that a certain use of freedom can be a danger to democracy.

Could this be a sign that, today, the threats to it come, not from the outside, from those who openly present themselves as its enemies, but from within, from the ideologies, movements or actions which claim to defend democratic values? Or could it be a sign that the values in question are not always good ones?

External and internal enemies

The major political event of the twentieth century in the Northern hemisphere was the clash between democracies and totalitarian regimes, with the latter claiming that they intended to correct the defects of the former. This conflict was responsible for World War II, some sixty million deaths and an infinite amount of suffering: it ended with the victory of democracy. Nazism was defeated in 1945, and the collapse of Communism occurred in November 1989: the event that symbolized the denouement was the fall of the Berlin Wall. Any resurrection of the totalitarian threat in the near future is inconceivable. It is true that several countries around the world continue to claim that they are Communist in ideology; however, they are no longer perceived as a threat, but as anachronisms that cannot survive for long. The only one among them which is a great power, China, no longer corresponds to the 'ideal type' of the totalitarian regime. Instead, China appears to observers as a baroque hybrid, made up of Communist rhetoric, a repressive centralized administration, and a market economy that allows and even encourages an opening to the outside world and the personal enrichment of individuals, things that would have been inconceivable under Soviet or Maoist Communism. It is hard to imagine, in the foreseeable future, any Chinese military aggression against Western democracies. The end of the Cold War has put an end to the Communist threat.

At the turn of the century, due to the combined activities of various influential political commentators and the attack of September 11, 2001, against the United States, it was claimed that a new enemy had taken the place of the old foe. This new enemy was an Islamic fundamentalism that called for a holy war against all democracies, the United States first and foremost. The destruction of the Twin Towers in New York by suicide pilots resulted in the deaths of 3,000 people, had a huge and widespread impact, and revealed a real danger. But to compare it to the danger presented by the Soviet empire would be exaggerated. Even though Islamic fundamentalism is a force to be reckoned with in Muslim-majority countries, the threat posed by its international version (known as al-Qaeda) to Western countries is incommensurate with that embodied by the Communist countries: it is a threat that requires police vigilance rather than the intervention of a powerful army. The violence that it incarnates revives memories of the Red Army Faction in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy, rather than of Stalin's Red Army.

If terrorist acts of this nature have left a lasting mark on democratic societies, this is less because of the damage they have inflicted on these societies than because of the dramatic reactions they have aroused. The United States reacted to this cunning provocation like a bull charging at a red rag. What proportion can be established between the one-off attack on the Twin Towers of New York and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have lasted for years, have claimed hundreds of thousands of victims, cost billions of dollars and undermined for a long time to come the reputation (and, indirectly, the safety) of the United States in the region? In addition, this policy has inflicted damage even *within* the country, a damage that has had a knock-on effect on the United States' European allies: these include the legal acceptance of torture, discrimination against minorities and restrictions on civil liberties.

Islamic terrorism (or jihadism) is not a credible candidate for the role of enemy that was formerly held by Moscow. No model of society other than the democratic regime has as yet come forward as its rival; on the contrary, we see a desire for democracy arising almost anywhere where it was previously absent. This does not mean that democracies no longer bother to protect themselves with arms: the world's population has not been suddenly replaced by a choir of angels, and there are still many reasons for hostility or aggression between peoples; but there is no longer any global enemy or planetary rival. However, democracy secretes within itself the very forces that threaten it, and the novelty of our time is that these forces are superior to those attacking it from outside. Combating and neutralizing them is all the more difficult because they claim to be imbued with the democratic spirit, and thus have every appearance of legitimacy.

In itself there is nothing paradoxical about such a situation in which evil arises from good: there are many well-known examples. In the twentieth century, we learned that man has become a threat to his own survival. Thanks to the dazzling, rapid advances in science, he has penetrated some of the secrets of matter and is now able to transform it; but this also means he is threatened by nuclear explosions as well as by global warming, by the greenhouse effect as well as by the mutation of species that results from genetic manipulation. Contrary to what our ancestors thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we have become convinced that, as well as being a purveyor of hope, science can be a danger to our very survival. The same goes for technological innovations that reduce our physical efforts, but often deplete the life of the mind: it all depends on the use we make of them.

We are proud of the principle of equality of rights between individuals and between peoples; at the same

time, we can see that, if all the inhabitants of the earth based their consumption of goods on that of Western populations, our planet would soon run out of resources. We say out loud and clear that every human being has the same right to life, so we welcome the progress of preventive medicine that reduces child mortality, yet we know that the unlimited growth of the world population would be a catastrophe.

These paradoxical situations are very familiar to us. The way that democracy creates its own enemies is a little less familiar.

Democracy threatened by its own hubris

A democratic regime is defined by a set of features that combine together to form a complex arrangement in which these features limit and balance each other: although they do not come into direct contradiction with each other, they have different sources and purposes. If this balance is broken, alarm bells should start to ring.

Democracy is first, in its etymological sense, a regime in which power belongs to the people. In practice, the entire population chooses its representatives, who, in a sovereign way, make the laws and govern the country for a period of time determined in advance. Democracy is distinguished from traditional societies, which claim to submit to principles handed down from their ancestors, and from absolute monarchies under a king ruling by divine right, where the succession of leaders depends on belonging to the same family. The people, in a democracy, do not comprise a 'natural' substance. They are different not only quantitatively but qualitatively from the family, clan and tribe (where what matters is kinship), and they are different too from any collective entity defined by the presence of a trait such as race,

religion or original language. The people are comprised of all those who were born on the same soil, plus those who have been accepted by them. In a democracy, at least in theory, all citizens have equal rights, all inhabitants are equal in dignity.

Modern democracies are said to be liberal when a second fundamental principle is added: the freedom of individuals. The people remain sovereign, as any other choice would involve submitting them to an external force, but their power is limited: it must come to an end at the borders of individual persons who are masters in their own home. One part of their lives falls within the scope of the public power, while another is independent: personal fulfilment has become a legitimate purpose of individual existence. So we cannot regulate life in society in the name of a single principle: the welfare of the community does not coincide with that of the individual. The relationship that develops between the two forms of autonomy, the sovereignty of the people and the freedom of the individual, is that of a mutual limitation: individuals must not impose their will on the community, which in turn should not interfere in the private affairs of its citizens.

Democracies also rest on a certain conception of political action. They try, again, to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, unlike theocracies and totalitarian regimes, they do not promise they can give salvation to their populations, nor do they prescribe the path that will lead to salvation. Building heaven on earth is not part of their programme, and the imperfection of all social order is considered to be an irreducible given. But, on the other hand, democracies are not to be confused with traditionalist and conservative regimes, where it is believed that no rule imposed by tradition should ever be questioned. Democracies reject the fatalistic attitude of resignation. This intermediate position allows different interpretations, but we can say that any democracy

implies the idea of a possible improvement of the social order, a development through the efforts of the collective will. The word 'progress' is viewed with suspicion nowadays, but the idea behind it is inherent in the democratic project. And the result is clear: the inhabitants of democratic countries, although they are often dissatisfied with their condition, live in a more just world than those of other countries. They are protected by law; there is solidarity between members of the society, which benefits the old, the sick, the unemployed and the destitute; they can appeal to the principles of equality and liberty, or even to a spirit of fraternity.

Democracy is characterized not only by the mode of institution of its power, or by the goal of its actions, but also by the manner in which power is exercised. The key word here is *pluralism*, because it is deemed that all powers, however legitimate, should not be handled by the same people or concentrated in the same institutions. It is essential that the judiciary should not be subject to political power (which combines the executive and legislative), but that it should be able to pass judgement independently. The same goes for media power, the latest form of power on the scene, which must not be placed exclusively at the service of the government but must itself remain plural. The economy, dependent on private property, retains its autonomy from political power, which, in turn, does not become a mere instrument in the service of the economic interests of a few tycoons. The will of the people also comes up against a boundary of a different order: to prevent it from being affected by a transient emotion or a clever manipulation of public opinion, it must remain consistent with principles defined after careful consideration and enshrined in the constitution of the country, or simply inherited from the wisdom of the peoples.

The dangers inherent in the idea of democracy itself stem from isolating and promoting only one of its

ingredients. What links these various dangers is a form of excess. The people, freedom and progress are constituent elements of democracy, but if one of them breaks free from its relations with others, thus escaping any attempt to limit it and erecting itself into a single principle, they become distinct dangers: populism, ultraliberalism and messianism, those inner enemies of democracy.

What the ancient Greeks called hubris, or excess, was considered the worst failing of human action: a desire drunk on itself, a pride persuading the person it fills that, for him, everything is possible. Its opposite was viewed as the political virtue par excellence: moderation, temperance. One of the first to discuss it, Herodotus, recounts in his *History* a case of hubris that led to catastrophic consequences. The Persian king Xerxes wanted to go to war against the Athenians to extend further the boundaries of his kingdom and his power; before making his final decision, he asked his advisors for their opinion. One of them, Artabanus, tried to dissuade him from going to war:

God is wont to cut short all those things which stand out above the rest. Thus also a numerous army is destroyed by one of few men in some such manner as this, namely when God having become jealous of them casts upon them panic or thundering from heaven, then they are destroyed utterly and not as their worth deserves; for God suffers not any other to have high thoughts save only himself.¹

The king did not listen to this sage advice; the consequences for himself and his country were indeed disastrous.

Among the ancient Greeks, the gods punish the pride of men who want to take their place and believe they can decide everything; among Christians, the human being is afflicted even before birth by original sin, which

severely limits all his aspirations. The people of modern democratic countries do not necessarily believe in gods or in original sin; but there is a brake on their ambitions, namely the very complexity of the social fabric and the democratic regime, the many demands such a system must reconcile and the conflicting interests it must satisfy. The first enemy of democracy is the simplification that reduces the plural to the single and thus opens the way to excess.

To discuss the internal threats to democracy as they arise from its constituent elements – progress, freedom, people – I will in this book draw on my own experience, as I spent the first third of my life in a totalitarian country and the other two thirds in a liberal democracy. Having in the meanwhile become a historian of ideas, I could not help but illustrate my subject by recalling a few stories from the past; but these allusions are brief and are not intended to replace the analyses carried out elsewhere, by myself or others. My presentation is not exhaustive, and I ignore other internal threats to democracy: I mention only what is most familiar to me. I am indebted to various authors cited in the text, but especially to my friend François Flahault, philosopher and social science scholar, whose remarks and writings have given me food for thought for decades. My goal in these pages is not to propose remedies or recipes, but to help people better understand the time and space in which we live.

2

An Ancient Controversy

The main characters

Before getting to the heart of the matter, I would like to mention an episode from the distant past, because I hope it will help to clarify the present.

The story took place about 1,600 years ago, and the initial location of the action was Rome. During the fourth century, Christianity began to gain political power; at the beginning of the century, the Emperor Constantine was converted, and one of his successors, Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the empire and banned the pagan rites. Rome became a forum for debate between advocates of different interpretations of Christian dogma. Among them was a self-assured and persuasive preacher named Pelagius, from the British Isles. He must have been born around 350, and arrived in Rome around 380. In his sermons, he criticized the dissolute lifestyle of the wealthy Romans and asked them to take immediate action to ensure their salvation: they must obey Christian precepts, renounce the pleasures of the flesh and give their wealth to the poor. Their destiny was in their own hands, and they were responsible for each of their failings. His teaching impressed young men of good family, who formed around him a circle of disciples. They

repented of their sinful past lives, and were drawn to sainthood.

Theological controversies were not the only concern of the Romans. For some time, tribes from the north had been attacking the empire with terrifying force; in 408, led by their leader Alaric, the Visigoths laid siege to the city. They were repulsed, but returned at the end of the following year. Between the two attacks, the Romans began to flee. Among them was Pelagius, accompanied by a few disciples: in 409, he embarked on a journey that would lead first to Carthage, a Roman province in North Africa, then to the nearby town of Hippo, where he asked to meet the Christian bishop, a certain Augustine.

Augustine was born in North Africa and was roughly the same age as Pelagius; and, like him, had gone to Italy, where he converted to Christianity. Augustine returned to his native land a few years later, became a priest, and then, in 395, bishop of Hippo. A prolific author, at home in both classical culture and the new theology, he was involved in numerous controversies with rival Christian thinkers. At the very end of the century, he wrote and published a deeply original book, the *Confessions*, which describes his life and his Christian faith. Pelagius had heard of Augustine in Rome, and he did not agree with all his ideas. He was particularly outraged to find that the bishop lacked confidence in his own strength and preferred to bow to the will of God. Augustine knew nothing of Pelagius' reservations, but perhaps he had heard of his doctrines, which in turn were not to his liking; at all events, he politely turned down the offer of an encounter: the two men never met.

After a year, Pelagius left North Africa and went to Palestine, where many other Roman refugees passionate about matters of faith had gathered. In and around Jerusalem, religious controversy was rife, and Pelagius and his disciples played an active part. A council