Democracy in Europe
A History of an Ideology

Luciano Canfora

Translated by Simon Jones

Democracy in Europe

The Making of Europe

Series Editor: Jacques Le Goff

The *Making of Europe* series is the result of a unique collaboration between five European publishers – Beck in Germany, Blackwell in Great Britain and the United States, Critica in Spain, Laterza in Italy, and le Seuil in France. Each book will be published in all five languages. The scope of the series is broad, encompassing the history of ideas as well as of societies, nations, and states to produce informative, readable, and provocative treatments of central themes in the history of the European peoples and their cultures.

[*] Title out of print

Democracy in Europe
A History of an Ideology

Luciano Canfora

Translated by Simon Jones

Contents

Prologue

I have had to battle against the greatest of commanders. In my time I have succeeded in getting emperors, a king, a tsar, a sultan, and a pope to agree. But no one on the face of the earth has given me more trouble than this Italian rogue – emaciated, pale, scruffily dressed, but stormily eloquent, fiery as an apostle, cunning as a thief, insolent as a comedian, and tireless as a lover: his name is Giuseppe Mazzini.

<div align="right">Klemens Metternich</div>

"Of political wisdom Garibaldi was utterly devoid. He was neither a master of Italian letters like Mazzini nor a profound statesman like Cavour, but as a daring captain of irregular troops and as a leader capable of inspiring rough followers with the elements of a simple and passionate political faith he had a certain Homeric grandeur." Thus writes the British liberal historian H. A. L. Fisher in the third volume of his *History of Europe* (1935).[1]

Benedetto Croce, another liberal-minded historian, is less reductionist, and his writings frequently pay tribute at least to the role Garibaldi and Mazzini played as models for action by oppressed nations. "Even today those names have a resonance as far away as India, where those men have their followers," he wrote in 1928, in *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915*.[2]

In 1860, during the military campaign that drove the Bourbons from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Garibaldi took on the role of dictator. He certainly had in mind the Roman dictatorship, an office that placed supreme authority in the hands of one person for a period limited to a few months, though this could be renewed. He had a great deal of political and military experience under his belt, from South America to the Roman Republic of 1849, where he had also been put in a position of authority (even though Mazzini, who for his part had risen to be head of a "triumvirate," appointed as his superior General Roselli, whom Garibaldi disobeyed whenever he felt inclined to do so). At one point Garibaldi had suggested to Mazzini that it would be preferable to wage a guerrilla war in the mountains rather than to conduct a stubborn – and militarily doomed – defense of Rome. He demanded that if the latter strategy were adopted, he should be granted the *dictatorship*. In other words, the idea of dictatorship recurs in his

thinking as a desirable and necessary form of power. Mazzini tried to soothe Garibaldi's resentment and eventually succeeded, but soon afterwards the Roman Republic was routed.

Before the republic had even been established, Garibaldi and his men were already within the borders of the Papal States. He was at Ravenna when Pellegrino Rossi was assassinated on the Capitoline Hill. Of that time, he writes in his *Memorie*: "In Ravenna, a spy appeared among the crowd in broad daylight. A rifle shot felled him, and the gunman calmly walked away: he did not flee, for no other spy would appear, and the accursed body would remain as an example to all." He expresses approval of the people of Ravenna, who are "people of action, if of few words." The killing of Pellegrino Rossi, too, earns his highest praise: "That day, the world's old metropolis showed itself to be worthy of its ancient glory, freeing itself of tyranny's most redoubtable servant and bathing the marble steps of the Capitoline Hill in his blood. A young Roman man had rediscovered the fire of Marcus Brutus!"[3]

In the ancient Roman constitution both triumvirate and dictatorship were extraordinary offices, endowed with unchecked power. Marx's suggestion, at about the same time, that the coming revolution should begin with a phase of "dictatorship" of the proletariat was thus, in a sense, in keeping with the ideas prevalent in democratic circles regarding the type of power that should be established during the transition from the old regime to the new.

In 1864, when Garibaldi made his unexpected visit to England, and spoke publicly of the great international problems of the day – from Greece to Poland, Schleswig-Holstein, and the Venice question – Lord Palmerston put strong pressure on the English organizers of the visit to ensure that it appeared strictly *private*. He said: "I urged that he should decline on the score of health all public dinners, at which he would say foolish things and other people mischievous ones."[4] Disraeli turned down all invitations that risked a meeting with Garibaldi, declaring that he had no wish to make the acquaintance of that "pirate" – an allusion both to the general's distant time in Montevideo and to the way he had conquered the Kingdom of Naples. Nevertheless, Garibaldi's arrival in London was a triumph. Croce, too, recalls it admiringly in his *Storia d'Italia*. Half a million people waited all morning for Garibaldi to arrive. His carriage, surrounded by the crowds, took six hours to travel six miles. Workers' friendly societies, "temperance" associations, and others which had come together to form the "Working Men's Garibaldi Demonstration Committee" achieved an unhoped-for success: there was not a single instance of trouble. Queen Victoria, on the other

hand, declared herself "half-ashamed of being the head of a nation capable of such follies."[5] The general's visit to Mazzini caused a stir and greatly worried Palmerston. Perhaps for this reason too, Garibaldi suddenly dropped everything and returned to Caprera.

Marx, who was living in London, considered the scenes of popular enthusiasm for the Italian visitor "a miserable display of imbecility." He disliked the man. Three years earlier, on February 27, 1861, writing to Engels in a completely different context, he had made a passing and unflattering reference to Garibaldi. Spartacus, he wrote, had truly been a "great general (not a Garibaldi)."

Lenin was more generous. In *The Collapse of the Second International* (Geneva, 1915) he contrasts the great representatives of the bourgeoisie – Robespierre and Garibaldi – with other, pernicious members of that class – Millerand and Salandra – commenting: "One cannot be a Marxist without feeling the deepest respect for the great bourgeois revolutionaries who had an historic right to speak for their respective bourgeois 'fatherlands', and, in the struggle against feudalism, led tens of millions of people in the new nations towards a civilised life."[6]

Lenin – who was much more in touch with practical realities than the aristocratic Marx – appreciated the revolutionary "leader" in Robespierre and Garibaldi. This "leader" figure was present, and an inescapable factor, in every phase of the European revolutionary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gramsci's article *Capo*, written on Lenin's death, is a determined attempt at establishing a theory of this complex subject – which had already suggested to Max Weber, in the same historical and political climate, the rich and ambiguous concept of the "charismatic leader." It appears that Lenin criticized Italy's socialists, at the time of the Fiume adventure, for having "allowed a D'Annunzio to slip through their fingers!" In his article published on Lenin's death, Gramsci wrote that "whichever class is dominant, there is a need for leaders." He also argued that "in the age of revolution" the only true leaders were "Marxist" ones. Clearly, however, he was mistaken: when he was writing, the almost mystical adoration of a *Führer* by one of the most cultured peoples in Europe, perhaps on the whole planet, had yet to materialize. Later Gramsci himself, writing his *Quaderni* in prison, drew an unconvincing distinction between "progressive" and "regressive" Caesarism.[7]

What the relationship between the leader and the masses consists of is a matter of controversy. A glance through *Conversations with Eckermann* reveals frequent mentions by Goethe of Napoleon, even long after the end of the latter's political career, as a hero, a man of extraordinary qualities,

physically superior, and so forth. There is also lively discussion in an exchange of letters between Goethe and Walter Scott, who was the author of an unfavorable biography of Bonaparte. Perhaps this very suggestion of Goethe's is what lies at the root of the detailed opinion given by J. G. Droysen (1833) on Cleon, the infamous "leader" of the Athenian democracy who came to power after the death of Pericles. In the introduction to his German translation of Aristophanes' *The Knights*, Droysen writes: "No one would contemplate singing the praises of the bloody Robespierre or the savage Marius; yet in their works they embodied the feelings and gained the approval of thousands of men, from whom they differed only in that fatal greatness, or violence of character, that does not flinch from taking action." He goes so far as to assert that there are times when such men are needed: "it is a question of infringing rights, of bringing down ancient, venerable institutions; yet we praise the bold, firm hand that has opened the way to a new age, and we forget the transgression, which is inseparable from human action."[8]

This reflection by the great Droysen – who at that time (1834) was overturning the traditional moral verdict on Alexander the Great and the age that terrible, meteoric ruler inaugurated – takes us far back in time to the ancient debate over these hegemonic, creative "leader" figures. A case in point is Polybius's criticism of the way in which Theopompus, the historian who was a contemporary of Philip of Macedon, had spoken of Philip: as the "greatest man Europe had ever produced" and yet also a criminal, traitor, tyrant, and worse (Polybius, VIII, 9, 1). This sort of dispute was rekindled more than once in ancient times as a result of the frequent emergence of such figures. Pierre Bayle, in *Nouvelles lettres critiques sur l'histoire du Calvinisme* (letter IV) notes and comments on a passage of Seneca in which the philosopher reproaches the historian Livy, who had used the description "great man" for a person (we do not know who) on whom the moral verdict was anything but positive. Seneca challenges Livy's expression "vir ingenii magni magis quam boni" and puts him right thus: the *ingenium* "aut magnum aut bonum erit" (*De ira*, I, 20, 6), that is, the man can be great or good, but not both.

   On one occasion Bonaparte turned to Jean-Baptiste Suard, the austere publicist who refused to accept the official version of the killing of the duke of Enghien, and flung in his face the hollowness of Tacitus's moralizing against Nero: "Votre Tacite n'est qu'un déclamateur, un imposteur qui a calomnié Néron...oui, calomnié, car, enfin, Néron fut regretté du peuple." ["Your Tacitus is nothing but a tub-thumper, an impostor who has slandered Nero...yes, slandered, for after all Nero was greatly missed by the people."][9]

In a letter dated July 26, 1767, to the marquis of Mirabeau, father of the great orator who was a leading figure in the French Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau states that despotism would inevitably come. The great problem of politics, the equivalent of squaring the circle, is "*to find a form of government that places the law above people*." If this is not achieved – and he is convinced it is impossible – "we must go to the opposite extreme" and "establish arbitrary despotism, and the most arbitrary possible. I would wish that the despot could be God!" because "I see no bearable middle course between the most austere democracy and the most perfect Hobbesianism." Having got this far, however, he then contemplates, with his habitual sense of pathos, a series of infamous names, and despairs: "But a Caligula, a Nero... My God! I roll about on the floor and groan at my fate of being human."[10]

Trapped in this conundrum, Rousseau appears oblivious to the question that Aristotle examined so clearly: the *fundamental connection* between "belonging" to the people and the role of "leader," as exemplified in ancient Greek history by the experience of the so-called "tyrannies." Aristotle writes: "Pisistratus being a *demagogos* [that is, head of the popular faction] became a tyrant."[11] The sentence could also be taken to mean "*because* he was a *demagogos* he became a tyrant," given what Aristotle states in the *Politics*: "The tyrant is put in power by the mass of the people in opposition to the nobility, to protect them against the latter" (1310^6, 12–14). The rise of Pericles, after all, eventually led to personal power, as Thucydides pointed out admiringly.

Two terms that crop up, infrequently but interestingly, in Greek political language of the Roman period are *demokratia* and a derivative of it, *demokrator*. If interpretation of their contexts is correct, these words clearly mean "rule *over* the people" (or over the entire community). In *Civil Wars*, Appian writes of the conflict between Caesar and Pompey that the two fought "vying for *demokratia* [*peri tes demokratias*]."[12] Dio Cassius, the historian who lived at the time of the Severi, seems to define Sulla, a dictator, using the term *demokrator* (judging from a later observer of the Byzantine period who describes his writings).[13] In essence, the term corresponds to the concept of a *dictator*, not in a technical or constitutional sense but in the much deeper sense of "unopposed and accepted personal rule," which might perhaps be preceded by the assumption of *dictatura* – as in Sulla's case. The defining characteristic, though, is overwhelming personal power that is above the law. At this point, *demokratia* and "dictatorship" coincide.

All this palpably lays bare the extreme, and uncomfortable, closeness between different forms of government that accepted political "doctrine"

may class as distant from or even opposite to each other. And it seems beyond doubt that the political experiment, or "invention," that did most to create this impression of closeness – to the confusion not just of the masses but of political theorists – was Caesarism-Bonapartism-Fascism. We will get nowhere if we overlook the elements of class that lie beneath the "veneer" of "political systems."

A Constitution Imbued with Hellenism: Greece, Europe, and the West

In *The Republic*, Book V, Plato says: "The Greeks will certainly not destroy the Greeks. They will not enslave them, lay waste their fields, or burn their houses. Instead, they will do all this to the Barbarians." The orations of Isocrates, so full of pity for the ills of the Greeks, are ruthless towards the Barbarians and the Persians, and continually exhort the nation, and Philip, to exterminate them.

Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*

A philosopher can be allowed to broaden his vision and regard Europe as one great republic, whose inhabitants have attained almost the same level of civilisation and culture . . . The savage peoples of the earth are the common enemy of civilised society, and we can inquire with eager curiosity whether Europe is still threatened by a repetition of those calamities.

Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

The belief that democracy is a Greek invention is rather deeply rooted. One consequence of this crude notion was apparent when the draft preamble to the European constitution was published on May 28, 2003. Those who, after much alchemy, drew up that text – one of the most authoritative of them being the former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing – had the idea of putting a Greco-classical stamp on the nascent constitution by placing before the preamble a quotation from the epitaph that Thucydides attributes to Pericles (430 BC). In the preamble to the European constitution, Pericles' words appear in this form: "Our Constitution . . . is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole of the people." This is a falsification of the words Thucydides attributes to Pericles – and it is important to try to understand why the authors resorted to such linguistic duplicity.

In the weighty oration that Thucydides attributes to him, Pericles says: "The word we use to describe our political system [it is clearly modernistic and erroneous to translate the word *politeia* as "constitution"] is *democracy* because, in its administration [the word used is in fact *oikein*], it relates not to

the few but to the *majority* ["power" therefore does not come into it, let alone "the whole of the people"]. Pericles goes on: "However, in private disputes we give equal weight to all, and in any case freedom reigns in our public life" (II, 37). We can reinterpret these words as much as we like, but the essential point is that Pericles is presenting "democracy" and "liberty" as antithetical.

Pericles was Athens's greatest political leader of the second half of the fifth century BC. He did not achieve military successes: if anything, he amassed a series of defeats in foreign policy, such as the disastrous expedition to Egypt, in which Athens lost a huge fleet. However, he was so skillful in securing and consolidating consensus that for some 30 years (462–430), almost without interruption, he succeeded in guiding the city of Athens along the road to "democracy." *Democracy* was the term opponents of government "by the people" used to describe such government, precisely with the aim of highlighting its violent character (*kratos* denotes exactly the violent exercise of power). For the opponents of the political system that was based around the people's assembly, therefore, democracy was a system that destroyed freedom. This is why Pericles, in the solemn official speech attributed to him by Thucydides, modifies the meaning of the term and distances himself from it, well aware, moreover, that the word was disliked by the popular faction, which certainly used *people* (*demos*) to denote the system with which it identified. Thucydides' Pericles takes a step back, saying: we use *democracy* to describe our political system simply because we are in the habit of referring to the principle of the "majority"; *nevertheless*, we uphold freedom.

Thucydides sees Pericles as a veritable *princeps* endowed with a sort of "primacy" or "princedom": accepted and acknowledged personal power which in the end distorts the balance of powers, though without violating them. Just four centuries later, a similar kind of power was established by Augustus who, although he became "prince," did not hesitate to claim that he had restored the Republic to Rome. For Pericles' contemporaries, however, it was natural to think of another form of personal power with which they were more familiar: "tyranny." Indeed, some comic poets – taking advantage of the freedom of speech granted to the theater – used the stage to lash the *princeps* Pericles, mockingly begging him not to assume the tyranny of Athens. It was Thucydides, Pericles' contemporary and admirer, who coined the term "prince" (*protos aner*) with reference to him. Thus, in tracing his "portrait," he writes that under his government "Athens, though in name a *democracy*, was in fact coming to be ruled by her *protos aner*" (II, 65). This description is highly measured; each word is consciously weighed. It is all the more telling because it is closely followed by the speech in which Pericles himself (as quoted by Thucydides) distances himself from the word

democracy and emphasizes how inadequate it is to convey the true – and highly original – nature of the Athenian political system.

Thucydides, then, does not assert that the government of Pericles resembled "tyranny," as the hostile comics openly proclaimed. Instead he invents – and this is a sign of his stature as a political thinker – the unprecedented category of "princedom." He also knows well the kind of power the "tyrants" – or rather the tyrant *par excellence*, Pisistratus (560–528 BC) – exercised in Athens during the previous century. When we speak of "tyranny" we confuse different situations. Moreover, we have difficulty in assessing them equitably because the sources that speak of them are for the most part extremely hostile to the individuals who, in various Greek cities, took on such a role. In principle, this role was essentially that of a mediator, and was played by men who – like Pisistratus – could rely on a base of popular support. "From a demagogue, Pisistratus became a tyrant," writes Aristotle in the *Constitution of Athens* (22, 3). Thucydides is well aware that, in Greece, it was Sparta that brought down the "tyrants." In the particular case of Athens, Pisistratus's government was characterized not by savage terror and oppression (the "rhetorical-democratic" image of the tyrant) but by his unbroken presence in power in a constitutionally correct setting, albeit one changed insofar as the same men – Pisistratus and those close to him – were constantly present in the city's leadership. Thucydides therefore describes the "tyrant" of Athens (Pisistratus) in terms very similar to those he uses for the *princeps* Pericles, and in any case he does not call Pericles a tyrant, but instead invents a new category. Thus the very writer who theorized about the *repetition* of historical events conceives that they are specific and not interchangeable.

Such is his description that Thomas Hobbes – a great thinker and one of the founders of political thought, who began his career with a translation of Thucydides (1628) that profoundly influenced his intellectual development – concludes that Thucydides had placed both Pisistratus and Pericles among the "monarchs," and that therefore Thucydides himself was to be considered one of the greatest theorists and champions of monarchy. Hobbes's vision is clouded by his *own* vision of political and institutional forms. His assessment is inaccurate, but highly significant because it demolishes the banal Thucydides of mediocre interpreters, who built him up as a eulogist for democracy *because he was the author of Pericles' epitaph*.

Already these brief introductory reflections, to which I will return at greater length, throw light on the most important phenomenon of the constant, tortured, and often wandering efforts of modern writers to find their bearings in the labyrinth of ancient politics, especially of Greece. This effort is made even more arduous by the *verbal identity* of various funda-

mental concepts, starting with "democracy." This identity masks differences, making these difficult to understand. As has just been pointed out, they require a Thucydides.

Thus can we start to understand the gaffe committed by those who crafted the preamble to the European constitution. They had learned at school, perhaps at a fairly junior level, that "Greece invented democracy": a nonsensical formula and so schematic that, looked at in depth, it proves false. They also knew that ancient authors, whether Athenian or writing about Athens, mention, discuss, and pass judgment upon the mechanism of democratic politics. At first, probably, they will have searched through the writings of political thinkers (Plato and Aristotle), and must have been astonished to find that in their works, which have survived in such voluminous quantities, democracy is the constant target of polemics, and in the case of Plato's *Republic* is the subject of a furious diatribe. They looked elsewhere. Perhaps they searched among the orators? We don't know – but if they did they would have come away in alarm. In Isocrates they would have found the description of Sparta as "perfect democracy," and they would have asked themselves: but how? Wasn't it the oligarchic city *par excellence*? (Another cliché.) In the end, they turned to Thucydides (better not to call on Demosthenes, who suggested that political opponents should not only be "beaten with sticks" but branded "traitors" and "enemy agents"). But what to choose from the difficult, dialectical Thucydides? Finally, thanks again to their schooling, they decided on Pericles' epitaph: all it takes is an *index verborum*, a lexicon, and the entry for *demokratia* promptly leads to the passage. However, once read, it cannot have given much satisfaction. Even current translations, though neat and sometimes reconciliatory, cannot hide the detached, uncertain tone in which Pericles speaks. Hence the most brilliant and, in its way, classical solution: to make Thucydides say what he does not say.

It is to be hoped that this journey through the work of Greek writers has been instructive. It must have given a glimpse of a highly significant, though not edifying, fact: there is nothing by any *Athenian* writer that sings the praises of democracy. And this is no coincidence.

Every reader of Homer knows that the contraposition of Europe and Asia does not occur in the *Iliad* – and neither does that of Greeks and Barbarians, as Thucydides pointed out (I, 3). The Trojans are no less Greek than the Achaeans. This is thus a retrospective interpretation, which cannot predate the Persian wars. The *Geography* by Hecataeus of Miletus, who lived at the time of the Ionian revolt, consists of two volumes, one devoted to Europe

and the other to Asia, but "Europe" was more or less synonymous with Greece (excluding the Peloponnese) and the Greek colonies.

The Persian wars acted as a catalyst in creating the distinction between Greeks and Barbarians. What might be the essential difference between them? The Greeks lived in cities and the Barbarians did not: the former were "free," the latter subjugated under a leader. From the first sentence of Herodotus's *History*, the Barbarians and the Greeks make up the two poles of history: "Herodotus of Halicarnassus here displays his inquiry, so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great and marvellous deeds – some displayed by Greeks, some by barbarians – may not be without their glory."

The contraposition of Europe and Asia is depicted by Aeschylus in the *Persians* (472 BC) by the image of two sisters – the Dorian and the Persian – who are enemies. This vision was to be projected onto the Trojan war, retrospectively making the Trojans appear to be "Barbarians." For a long time the notion of *Europe* corresponded to the way the Greeks defined themselves. In the Greece of the city-states the following equations were deeply rooted: Greece = Europe = freedom/democracy; Persia = Asia = slavery.

But were the Greeks really in agreement on this point? In a passage of his *History*, Herodotus very clearly argues that, before Cleisthenes, political democracy had been "invented" in Persia by one of the Persian dignitaries involved in the conspiracy that brought down the usurper Smerdis. Herodotus bemoans the fact that the Greeks, during public readings of his work, had refused to accept this very clear, detailed assertion (III, 80). A great historian of Greece *and of Persia*, David Asheri, has written, correctly, that in this passage Herodotus is making a veiled attack on the typically Athenian (and more generally Greek) misconception that democracy was a Greek "invention."[1]

The fifth century BC (which, according to John Stuart Mill, began with a battle that was far more important for England than the battle of Hastings – the battle of Marathon) ended with a horrifying sight: that of the Greek city-states vying with each other to secure the favor and financial assistance of the Persian king. The Great King symbolized, in rhetoric of course, "Barbarian" slavery, but at the same time he was the ideal protector to turn to for military and financial help.

Plutarch tells of the widely held belief that at Sardis, at the time of the fall of the Achaemenid dynasty, Alexander the Great found a copy of the letters that the king of Persia had sent to the Ionian satraps, ordering them to support Demosthenes' political action with large sums of money (Plutarch, *Life of Demosthenes*, 20). Aware of the danger that Philip of Macedon posed to his kingdom, the king of Persia paid Demosthenes because he was a pillar of Greek opposition to Philip. In the same context, Plutarch adds that,

in the archives of the royal capital, Alexander the Great was lucky enough to come upon not only the letters that Demosthenes sent to his "friends" in Persia, but also a list of the sums of money the satraps had paid him. The king of Persia had obtained confirmation of the rumors of a forthcoming Macedonian attack when Hermias, the Greek ruler of Atarneus (in the Troad) and a friend of Aristotle and the Macedonians, had fallen captive to him. The capture and brutal killing of Hermias are the subject of a poetic text by Aristotle, who was deeply distressed, entitled *Hymn to Virtue* (fr. 675 Rose). By contrast, in his so-called *Fourth Philippic*, Demosthenes evinces an almost savage enthusiasm at the capture of Hermias, exclaiming: "The time has finally come; the king will hear of all these plots, not as the complaint of the Athenians, whom he might suspect of speaking for our own private advantage, but from the lips of the very man who planned and carried them out" (32).

In the same context, Demosthenes sarcastically expresses his contempt for those who, in Athens or elsewhere, still used fatuous labels: "you ought to drop the foolish prejudice that has so often brought about your discomfiture – 'the barbarian', 'the common foe of us all', and all such phrases" (*Fourth Philippic*, 33). He adds: "For my part, whenever I see a man afraid of one who dwells at Susa and Ecbatana and insisting that he is ill-disposed to Athens, though he helped to restore our fortunes in the past and was even now making overtures to us (and if you did not accept them but voted their rejection, the fault is not his); and when I find the same man using very different language about this plunderer of the Greeks, who is extending his power, as you see, at our very doors and in the very heart of Greece, I am astonished, and, whoever he may be, it is I that fear him, just because he does not fear Philip."

Realpolitik had taught Demosthenes that Asia was not dangerous, whereas the most fearsome enemy in the world for Athens was a powerful and hostile *European* neighbor such as, in his view, the king of Macedonia.

In the early stages of his career Demosthenes too had resorted to "foolish prejudice" and "anti-Barbarian" rhetoric, in the speech dealing primarily with economic and military matters entitled *On the Symmories* and, much later, in the *Third Philippic* (41–45), where the equation Asia = slavery is brazenly proclaimed for reasons of pure propaganda. He too shared the beliefs that were widespread among the Greeks for a long period: *Greece* meant *Europe* and, simultaneously, *freedom*; *Persia* meant *Asia*, and at the same time *slavery*. Such language was the only way to make an impact in the assembly.

The link between the ideas of *Greece*, *Europe*, and *freedom* has a long history. Its ideological essence is always the same; what changes is the

geographical area to which *Europe* refers. At first the two poles are quite clear: Rome on the one hand, Hellenism on the other. At the time of Augustus, the battle of Actium (31 BC) appeared, thanks to carefully orchestrated propaganda, to be the victory of the *West* over the *East*. The separation of these two "worlds" became formal and final as a result of the way the empire was organized after Theodosius: there was only one Christianity but the two parts of the empire – East and West – were distinct and soon, despite both being Christian, in opposition. That is when Greece became *Eastern* for good (though it was the "cradle" of the West). Until the Arab conquest (AD 640–642), and therefore a century after Justinian, Greece, Palestine, Egypt, and the Balkans were the East, "eastern" Europe. On the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, at the time of St. Augustine, the most civilized part of the West was North Africa.

By dividing the Mediterranean region in two, the Arab conquest "invented" Europe as we know it. Following that conquest – of Syria, Egypt, and immediately afterwards of North Africa as far as its northernmost point (as well as Spain) – the empire centered on Byzantium was displaced, becoming ever more "European," while the West, and especially the papacy, shifted more and more to the north from a geopolitical point of view. It is thus thanks to the Arab conquest that the "Europe of Charlemagne" took shape. But for a long time there remained, at least until the first fall of Constantinople, *two Europes*, mutually hostile, in which Russia played only a marginal part.

"The Pope is the Antichrist" read the banner that fluttered on the Esphigmènou monastery, one of 20 on Mount Athos in the Khalkidiki peninsula in northern Greece, in January 2003. The patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, reacted with extreme irritation, for he was the banner's target. Those mulish monks had even issued a writ in the Greek supreme court, accusing him of heresy for being too compliant towards Rome. Indeed, Bartholomew, the "ecumenical" patriarch of Greek Orthodox Christians – though at the head of a mere few thousand faithful in a Constantinople that has been Turkish for 600 years – is the most open to Rome of the heads of the Eastern Church. Despite his high-sounding "ecumenical" title he has no authority to impose his direction on any of the other Eastern sees, not only because his is almost "empty" but because his authority is certainly not autocratic in the manner of the pope in Rome. Thus, for example, the patriarch of Moscow has hitherto refused to contemplate a visit to Russia by the head of the Catholic church who, as far as he is concerned, is still essentially the heretical patriarch of the see of Rome. The "extremists" of Mount Athos apparently agree with him.

The split between the two halves of Europe – to which these dramatic conflicts bear daily witness – has roots that go far back into the past. The break that produced a lasting division of the European continent – replicating, in a sense, the division between the two *partes* of the Roman Empire made by Theodosius at the end of the fourth century AD – began, in religion too, with the long tug of war between Rome and Byzantium, culminating in the so-called Eighth Ecumenical Council (869–870) which the Eastern Church still considers illegitimate today. But the decisive break came 150 years later, when the Eastern Empire was still a great power and a "bastion" against Arab and Muslim pressure from the east.

Before it fell into Turkish hands in 1453, Constantinople played the card of reunification of the two churches. This was short-lived, however, and neither side fully believed in it: apart from anything else, given their relative strengths, it would have been more of a capitulation than a true union. Meanwhile the Slavs, Bulgars, and Russians had entered the Christian sphere thanks to Byzantium – which thus became the chief factor driving the "Europeanization" of this vast region of Europe – and these peoples were not prepared, now that the Eastern Empire was in its death throes, mechanically and automatically to follow its last-minute *Realpolitik* conversions. When Constantinople fell, the "lamp" – to use the old literary metaphor – of the Greek church passed to Russia. Soon, Moscow was the "third Rome." And the prophecy of Filofei, which is in vogue today, declares that "there will be no fourth Rome."

From that time onwards, the Russian world saw alternating waves of "Occidentalism" (Peter the Great, Lenin) and of turning in upon itself and its tradition as the root of its strength and continuity. Even the Bolshevik Revolution – which thought it would do away with "the opium of the people" and intended to exterminate the Orthodox church as an undeniable pillar of the tsarist *ancien régime* – gradually came round to making terms. The *de facto* reconciliation between Stalin and the patriarch contributed to the USSR's ability to withstand the German invasion of June 1941. The church contributed to the victory in what is still known as the "Great Patriotic War." Neither did a master of *Realpolitik* such as Stalin fail to notice that the church had not been exterminated at all: it lived on in the minds of the masses, who had also lived through the most traumatic transformation in history of a country of peasants into a predominantly urban and industrial one. This continuity and resilience of a deep-rooted structure such as religion interests the historian, but it impresses the politician, even the most radical doctrinaire, in equal measure.

In today's Russia – which superficial observers until recently described as "liberal" or even "democratic" while still calling the former dictator-president

Yeltsin (not without reason) "Tsar Boris" – in this Russia suspended between the old and the new, the church is one of the pillars of the new presidency, which has its roots in the old KGB. Vladimir Putin may flaunt his religious faith by visiting churches, but he asserts the valuable continuity of the institution in which he cut his teeth as a Soviet apparatchik.

With the end of authoritarian state "enlightenment" (which even in Afghanistan had brought civil rights for women and enforced literacy, but was defeated by the Taliban cultural guerrilla war, armed and financed by the CIA) Russia once again turned in on its traditions. This gave the patriarch of Moscow many more strings to his bow with which to be intransigent in his dealings with the pope in Rome, who was the "Antichrist" according to the monks on Athos. Why should he be compliant with Rome, now that he was once more strong and supremely authoritative (even Gorbachev had rediscovered the cult of Mary) and the long Soviet "interlude" was over? Rome could never yield over the matter of the supremacy of the pope – and Moscow could never contemplate negotiating on that point. This is one of those European rifts that, after a millennium, seem incurable even today. In the case of the US war against the Yugoslav federation, the original trigger for the conflict had nevertheless been the Vatican's action in favoring the secession of Croatia. Then came the war by proxy: Islamic fundamentalists – from Saudi Arabia to Sudan to Pakistan – rushed to fight as "volunteers" for Bosnia, using American weapons, and immediately after that for the Kosovo Liberation Army. Western Europe, which speaks in vain of having its own foreign policy, servilely and to its own detriment fell in line with the bombardment of Belgrade. The Russian church, Greece, and the monks of Mount Athos (for what such a strange alliance is worth) found themselves, automatically so to speak, on the side of a Serbia overwhelmed by aggressors. The rift between the two Europes had been made even deeper.

"*Soft* racism" is how Claude Calame, an expert on classical Greece, has described the attitude of the Greeks at the time of Aeschylus and Demosthenes. There was an assumption of superiority, some of whose presuppositions and effects have been described above. And yet the idea that the "democratic" political order should be closely linked to a factor that it is repugnant to describe as racial, but which has been presented exactly thus, was a widespread belief in the European-Atlantic West and may still be at the root of the imperial initiatives finally offered to the public under the disconcerting formula of "bringing democracy."

In 1863 a pamphlet entitled *A Dialogue on the Best Form of Government*, by George Cornewall Lewis, a minister in the Palmerston government

and a brilliant classicist, was published in London.[2] Among its admirers was the Italian Luigi Luzzatti, one of the most eloquent opponents of Giolitti's plan to widen electoral suffrage in Italy in 1912. In the pamphlet three characters, representing the three forms of government of classical political theory, hold a dialogue, while a moderator, Platonically named Crito, has the job of articulating the arguments that are perhaps "preferable" or at least favored by the author. It is Crito who at a certain point in the dialogue broaches the question of democracy seen in racial terms: "I question, moreover, the applicability of representative institutions to an Asiatic state" (p. 79). The character named *Democraticus* nobly protests, pointing out that, since the time of Tacitus, Bretons and Germans have made great progress. But his voice comes across as that of one who is losing in the dialectical clash that drives the dialogue. In a Europe that divided up not only Africa but also the districts of Beijing, and branded extremely ancient civilizations as "backward," the link between "democracy" (interpreted, of course, in a highly arbitrary way as meaning "representative regime") and "white race" was not a whim of political theorists but rather a deep-rooted and widespread conviction. The term "white race" – horrifying as it is – is not taken at random. It is there in the introduction to Julius Schvarcz's voluminous and rightly forgotten treatise *Die Demokratie* (1876).[3] Schvarcz had intended to complete his work, which remained unfinished, with a book on *political anthropology* (*Ideen zu einer Politik des Menschengeschlechts*) whose conclusion was to be (as he announces on page XXIII of the introduction to the first volume): "The mission of the white race is to *carry* the domination of Civilization (*die Herrschaft der Cultur*) to the entire surface of the planet." Moreover, the second volume (1886) of the "Biblioteca di scienze politiche" ["Political Science Library"] edited by Attilio Brunialti, which includes Lewis's dialogue first and foremost, opens with a learned preface by the editor, entitled "Le prime forme politiche ariane" ["The First Aryan Political Structures"] in which we learn (p. XI) that "The Semitic races show themselves *instead* [*scilicet*: compared to the Aryan races] completely ill-suited to such a way [the Aryan way] of understanding and organizing the State. Their concept of political organization has never gone beyond that of the tribe."

In the positivist age, the *Storia Universale Ullstein* ["Ullstein Universal History"] (6 volumes, 1907–10) reigned supreme and was successful in translations, including one into Italian. Its co-ordinator and chief inspiration was the German medievalist Julius von Pflugk-Harttung (1848–1919). In this work, which includes some great contributions, in the first volume the "History of Evolution," by Ernst Haeckel, is followed by a chapter entitled "Races and Peoples" by the Austrian anthropologist Felix Ritter

von Luschan. The section devoted to America, which is a veritable paean to the destiny of the European races transplanted to the New World, offers the reader the following instructive overview:

> the future of the black race in America is in contrast with this bright future. Only the most superficial of men would overlook the importance of the negro question for America today – especially for the USA of the politicians, who discern in their dark-skinned fellow-citizens a grave and lasting threat, not only to social conditions *and to democracy*, but in general for the Union's very existence. There are writers who see the negroes not only as a thorn in the flesh of the United States, but as a nail in its coffin!

Having proclaimed the danger posed by the blacks' fecundity, and the futility, in practice, of abolishing slavery (Alexis de Tocqueville too, in his day, noted that even in the northern states of the Union discrimination against blacks was normal in all areas of social life),[4] Luschan complains that blacks, having become "suddenly" free and securing "political rights," have become even more dangerous, as demonstrated by the "continuous increase in crime." He does not stop there: "Even more worrying is the continuous increase in mulattos"; and he concludes: "this is a condition that in itself, and especially in a country governed as a free democracy, appears completely untenable."[5]

Certainly, at its height the French Revolution – an event that, with good reason, has towered over the history of Europe and beyond for two centuries – broke the cycle of racist prejudice. And it was this very radical character, the other side of the revolution's "harshness," that was and remains both the *scandal* of European history and its touchstone. In a sense, the rough ride the revolution received corresponded to, and moved in step with, the progress and development of the democratic movement, which for two centuries has sought to transform the principles the revolution sanctioned (in the implementation of which it became mired and was defeated) into *real* victories. The way the revolution was received varied from country to country. In Liberal England, throughout the nineteenth century, the French Revolution failed to recover from the blow dealt by Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) – and that was certainly not the worst of its kind. The revolution was never accepted, and it remained anathema. Only the severe jolt of the Russian revolution – a new and even greater scandal – in the twentieth century rebalanced minds and refined historiographic judgment, though only in part. In Italy, Giosuè Carducci was persecuted by journalists and *bien pensants* for singing the praises of the revolution with his sculpturesque sonnets entitled *Ça ira*. Not

to mention the university lectures of Bonghi (who inspired the campaign) entitled *Europa nell'età della Rivoluzione francese* ["Europe in the Age of the French Revolution"] – a title that recalls H. von Sybel's *Geschichte der Revolutionszeit: von 1789 bis 1795*, whose judgment was more profound but no less negative.

However, behind the smokescreen of horror at the "Terror," what truly scandalized about the men of 1793 was their affirmation of equality beyond Europe's borders. In a delicious pamphlet published in the *Revue des deux mondes* in 1889 (the first centenary) the liberal Catholic but not conformist Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu imagined a series of "toasts" to the revolution proposed by a diverse range of people; what he sees as the central problem of the now century-old event is the question of the equality of races and the liberation of blacks, as well as the emancipation of the Jews. The characters take turns to speak – a Jew, a university-educated black, an Austrian anti-Semite, an Indian gentleman, and so forth – and to each he attributes an imaginary but plausible speech. The Austrian anti-Semite's is worth reproducing here, the better to understand the serious and progressive essence that lies behind the pamphlet's veil of irony. He says: "Let the Negro and the Jew acclaim the Revolution: they have gained everything from it! But for us Christians of the white race, of Indo-Germanic stock, it is a different matter. What the Negro and the Jew see as its merit is what makes it suspect to me. The equality of races and of nations has been the Revolution's great error."[6] Leroy-Beaulieu was also well acquainted with conditions in Russia (he wrote a trilogy, *L'Empire des tsars*, which is still in print). Significantly, the young Russian, who speaks immediately after the Indian in the series of toasts, predicts revolution in Russia that will have a far wider impact: "From the black *izbas* of our illiterate peasants will come a revolution more vast and human than all the revolutions of your bourgeois assemblies." This is 1889.

Eurocentrism surfaces even in Marx. His assessment of the British colonization of India as "the only social revolution to have taken place in India to date" is very much in tune with the times.[7]

Alexis de Tocqueville's famous and celebrated book *De la démocratie en Amérique*, first published between 1835 and 1840, contains the well-known "prophecy" regarding Europe's future: we will become like America, and will be "democratic." The book sets out to describe a situation that is still distant geographically but growing in its essentials. This prediction is not made with enthusiasm: if anything, it is resigned. Tocqueville clearly states his opinion of democracy in the introduction to a parliamentary speech given in November 1841:

> I have an intellectual taste for democracy, but I am aristocratic by instinct –
> that is, I despise and fear the mob. I passionately love liberty, the rule of law,
> and respect for rights, but not democracy. This is the depth of my feelings.
> I hate demagogy…I belong neither to the revolutionary party nor to the
> conservative party. However, when all is said and done I care more for the
> latter than for the former. Indeed, I differ from the latter over means rather
> than ends, whereas from the former I differ over both means and ends. Liberty
> is the greatest of my passions. This is the truth.[8]

He is convinced that the society "of the masses" will gradually establish itself everywhere, and believes that in the United States of America this is already the case, giving us a glimpse of what awaits us. Neither is he blind to the fact – as his notebooks especially make clear – that American "democracy," at the time he is writing about it, still contains the monstrous phenomenon of slavery. Thus, even 20 years after Tocqueville completed his great work, George Cornewall Lewis could rightly observe that, after all, American democracy was as backward as those of antiquity, in which even the essential precondition – that the whole of the people enjoy freedom – was missing![9]

At all events, the myth that Tocqueville's "prophecy" came true during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries probably remains no more than a myth. It cannot be argued that European institutions (assuming that an overall assessment is meaningful) are emulating the US model. Certainly, the gradual achievement of universal suffrage is a unifying feature of the political and institutional history of France, Germany, Britain, and Italy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However – aside from the many differences that make each country a unique case – we can see in this a lasting effect of the French Revolution, and certainly not the arrival of a model imported from America. As far as the creation of a society "of the masses" – and for Tocqueville this meant dreariness, banality, and equality as he imagined it – it is obvious that some of the features of such a society have asserted themselves with the development of universal suffrage, universal education, and so forth. But the true influx of the American society of the masses and its attributes did not materialize until much later, with 1917 and the American intervention in the First World War, and with its economic and military consequences until 1945 and beyond – most of all in the aftermath of the Second World War.

This is nonetheless a recurring problem in historiography – if indeed we can meaningfully speak of a single "*Atlantic* revolution" beginning in the British American colonies, with an important French contribution, and continuing with the revolution that began in Paris in 1789: a revolution in

which, as François Furet admirably perceives,[10] no end is in sight. This vision of a single "Atlantic" revolution, from the USA to the Netherlands to France, was fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, from Jacques Godechot to Robert Palmer. They saw an antecedent in a few pages of Georges Lefebvre's revised *Révolution française*, and a more remote antecedent in a sentence by Antoine Barnave, who, however, referred to "European revolution *that culminated in France*." This over-broad view of a single forward march of the "spirit of the world" along both shores of the Atlantic is hazy, and risks losing its way in the generic. An abyss separates the two events.

This book is founded on the premise that the 1789 revolution was the matrix that shaped the entire subsequent history of Europe: accordingly, it refuses to water down this essence in a generic, Spenglerian vision.

2

The Beginning: Democracy in Ancient Greece

Herodotus relates, in lively dialogue form, the debate that took place among the most important Persian notables in 522/521 BC regarding the best form of government. He puts great emphasis on the fact that the proposals put forward included the idea of establishing "democracy" in Persia. He repeats this elsewhere, in his account of how the satrap Mardonius, preparing an attack against Greece, "went about setting up democracies in Ionia" (III, 80; VI, 43). What constituted a "democracy" in a kingdom as vast as the Persian empire is hard to say, but it cannot be ruled out that this was a well-founded tradition. Probably the Persian noble Otanes, who made the proposal, was advocating a return to the "equality" that was customary in ancient Persis: a return to the past that must have applied only to the original nucleus from which the immense empire had gradually taken shape. The proposal was rejected, but Otanes and his descendants were granted a special statute of independence.

It may be that, as noted above, Herodotus emphasizes the episode – which he does forcefully, building an entire dialogue around Otanes' "scandalous" proposal – in order to highlight a certain Persian precedence in the matter of democracy. The episode predates by more than ten years the reforms of Cleisthenes, which according to Athenian tradition were among the most widely recognized "starting points" of the democratic experiment.

Some archaeologists have come to believe that wherever an urban site on Greek soil bears traces of an agora, these indicate that there was some custom of holding "assemblies."[1] In the Middle East in ancient times, forms of representation in the local community – such as a community meeting or the appointment of representatives – may have constituted

embryonic democratic procedures. These have sometimes been described as "primitive democracy."[2] However, although communities behaved locally in ways that seemed to foreshadow the people's assembly of Greek city-states, the fact that they were embedded within the ever more solid and limiting framework of the imperial order means that these experiments cannot have appeared to the ancients as a stage in the history of "democratic institutions." Within the even vaster framework of the Roman empire too, a series of urban communities retained the practices and institutions of a democratic "polis"; but these were for the most part in a highly reduced form, though periodically they saw a "drive" towards regaining the ancient *independence*, which also involved *ipso facto* a complete return to the practice of *democracy*. This was the case in Athens at the time of Sulla's war against Mithridates, which was fought on Greek soil (88/87 BC). Independence (full sovereignty) and democracy go together, for a number of reasons. But there is one essential reason, which brings us to the root of the ancient concept of citizenship and democracy in the sense of a *community of soldiers*.

The first question is: who holds citizenship? Who are the "all" whose freedom brings democracy into being? The second is: even when *all* hold citizenship, how do the weaker members of society exercise this right? The latter problem – the subject of bitter argument – raises more, such as the question of what instruments are needed to allow citizens' rights to be exercised *in practice* (in the absence of adequate intellectual and material resources), the question of the validity of the principle of "majority," whether the "will of the people" or "the law" should prevail (a common dilemma in practical politics), and so forth.

Demokratia – both concept and word – was forged in the heat generated by all these problems. From the earliest mentions it has always been a word denoting "conflict," a factional term, coined by the higher classes to denote the "excessive power" (*kratos*) exercised by the non-property-owning classes (*demos*) when democracy reigns.

Let us start with the first question. Who holds citizenship? *Polis* denotes the whole of the *politai* who, by virtue of who they are, are also *politeuomenoi*: that is, they exercise the right of citizenship. Therefore, strictly speaking, all cities not ruled by a "tyrant" (a figure who, "formally" or not, assumes powers above the law) can be thus described, in that the body of all the citizens exercises political rights. The problem is: how is that citizen body (which may vary) defined?

If we look at the best-known and most typical example, Athens, we see that at the time of Pericles this priceless right was possessed by relatively