

Ten Theses on Democracy

By Alain de Benoist

1. Since everyone nowadays claims to be a democrat, democracy is defined in several mutually contradictory ways. The etymological approach is misleading. To define democracy on the basis of the modern regimes which have (rather belatedly) proclaimed themselves to be democratic is questionable to say the least. The historical approach ultimately appears to be the most reasonable: to attempt to define democracy, one must first know what it meant for those who invented it. Ancient democracy brings together a community of citizens in an assembly, granting them equal political rights. The notions of citizenship, liberty, popular sovereignty and equal rights are all closely interconnected. Liberty stems from one's identity as a member of a people, which is to say from one's origins. This is liberty as participation. The liberty of the folk commands all other liberties; common interest prevails over particular interests. Equality of rights derives from the status as an equal citizen enjoyed by all free men. It is a political tool. The essential difference between ancient democracies and modern ones is the fact that the former do not know the egalitarian individualism on which the latter are founded.

2. Liberalism and democracy are not synonyms. Democracy is a '-cracy', which is to say a form of political power, whereas liberalism is an ideology for the limitation of all political power. Democracy is based on popular sovereignty; liberalism, on the rights of the individual. Liberal representative democracy implies the delegation of sovereignty, which strictly speaking – as Rousseau had realised – is tantamount to abdication by the people. In a representative system, the people elect representatives who govern by themselves: the electorate legitimises a genuine power which lies exclusively in the hands of representatives. In a genuine system of popular sovereignty, elected candidates are only entrusted with expressing the will of the people and the nation; they do not embody it.

3. Many arguments can be raised against the classic critique of democracy as the reign of incompetence and the 'dictatorship of numbers.' Democracy should neither be confused with the reign of numbers nor with the majority principle. Its underlying principle is rather a 'holistic' one, namely: acknowledgement of the fact that the people, as such, hold political prerogatives. The equality of rights does not reflect any natural equality; rather, it is a right deriving from citizenship, the exercise of which is what enables individual participation. Numerical equality must be distinguished from the geometrical view, which respects proportions. The purpose of majority rule is not to determine the truth; it is merely to choose among different options. Democracy does not stand in contrast to the idea of strong power any more than it stands in contrast to the notions of authority, selection or elite.

4. There is a difference between the notion of generic competence and specific competence. If the people have all the necessary information, it is perfectly capable of judging whether it is being well-governed or not. The emphasis placed on 'competence' nowadays – where this word is increasingly understood to mean 'technical knowledge' – is extremely ambiguous. Political competence has to do not with knowledge but with decision-making, as Max Weber has shown in his works on scientists and politicians. The idea that the best government is that of 'scientists' and 'experts' betrays a complete lack of understanding of politics; when applied, it generally

leads to catastrophic results. Today this idea is being used to legitimise technocracy, whereby power – in accordance with the technical ideology and belief in the ‘end of ideologies’ – becomes intrinsically opposed to popular sovereignty.

5. In a democratic system, citizens all hold equal political rights not by virtue of any alleged inalienable rights possessed by the ‘human person,’ but because they all belong to the same national and folk community – which is to say, by virtue of their citizenship. At the basis of democracy lies not the idea of ‘society,’ but of a community of citizens who are all heirs to the same history and/or wish to carry this history on towards a common destiny. The fundamental principle behind democracy is not ‘one man, one vote,’ but ‘one citizen, one vote.’

6. The key notion for democracy is not numbers, suffrage, elections or representation, but participation. ‘Democracy is a folk’s participation in its own destiny’ (Moeller van den Bruck). It is that form of government which acknowledges each citizen’s right to take part in public affairs, particularly by appointing the government and lending or denying his consent to it. So it is not institutions that make democracy, but rather the people’s participation in institutions. The maximum of democracy coincides not with the ‘maximum of liberty’ or the ‘maximum of equality,’ but with the maximum of participation.

7. The majority principle is adopted because unanimity, which the notions of general will and popular sovereignty imply in theory, is in practice impossible to achieve. The notion of majority can be treated as either a dogma (in which case it is a substitute for unanimity) or as a technique (in which case it is an expedient). Only the latter view assigns a relative value to the minority or opposition, as this may become tomorrow’s majority. Its adoption raises the question of the field of application of pluralism and of its limits. We should not confuse the pluralism of opinions, which is legitimate, with the pluralism of values, which proves to be incompatible with the very notion of the people. Pluralism finds its limit in subordination to the common good.

8. The evolution of modern liberal democracies, which are elective polyarchies, clearly reflects the degeneration from the democratic ideal. Parties do not operate democratically as institutions. The tyranny of money rigs competition and engenders corruption. Mass voting prevents individual votes from proving decisive. Elected candidates are not encouraged to keep their commitments. Majority vote does not take account of the intensity of people’s preferences. Opinions are not formed independently: information is both biased (which prevents the free determination of choices) and standardised (which reinforces the tyranny of public opinion). The trend towards the standardising of political platforms and arguments makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between different options. Political life thus becomes purely negative and universal suffrage comes to be perceived as an illusion. The result is political apathy, a principle that is the opposite of participation, and hence democracy.

9. Universal suffrage does not exhaust the possibilities of democracy: there is more to citizenship than voting. A return to political procedures in keeping with the original spirit of democracy requires an assessment of all those practices which reinforce the direct link between people and their government and extend local democracy, for instance: the fostering of participation through municipal and professional assemblies, the spread of popular initiatives and referendums, and the development of qualitative methods for expressing consent. In contrast to liberal democracies and tyrannical ‘popular democracies,’ which invoke the notions of liberty, equality and the people, organic democracy might be centred on the idea of fraternity.

10. Democracy means the power of the people, which is to say the power of an organic community that has historically developed in the context of one or more given political structures – for instance, a city, nation, or empire. Where there is no folk but only a collection of individual social atoms, there can be no democracy. Every political system which requires the disintegration or levelling of peoples in order to operate – or the erosion of individuals’ awareness of belonging to an organic folk community – is to be regarded as undemocratic.

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