

'No single idea sums up the political self-understanding of Western societies as much as democracy.'¹

A Unesco sponsored enquiry into the conflict of ideals associated with the concept of 'democracy' generated, back in 1949, two key conclusions. While none of the respondents expressed aversion to the idea of democracy, it was considered ambiguous and lacking clarity. Differing conceptions of the term have long been the subject of political antagonism. Its positive connotations – of choice, freedom, equality – have been harnessed for even the most anti-democratic of political projects: witness for example the current market-driven dismantling of the British National Health Service in the name of an extension of personal 'choice' and consumer 'freedom'.

Recent world events, however, have thrown these theoretical debates into new relief, challenged old certainties, and generated new concerns. As this issue of *New Formations* (co-edited by Slovenian Renata Salecl) goes to print, Yugoslavia, currently without head of state, faces the threat of civil war. Slovenia, the northern-most republic of Yugoslavia with its own democratically elected government, a multi-party system and a relatively prosperous economy, is now on the verge of secession. With several outbreaks of violence in the republics of Croatia and Bosnia already having led to deaths, with the threat of further violence, and lack of agreement as to legitimate structures of government, the issues of order, rule and government have been placed squarely at the centre of Yugoslavian thought. In a country which is a 20th century creation, with a problematic sense of itself as a single nation, and with numerous languages and ethnic groupings, issues of pluralism and identity are also clearly of the essence. The BBC's Central Europe correspondent, Misha Glenny, wrote in 1990: 'Yugoslavia is the most seductive and beautiful country in Central and Southern Europe. In its present form it is also the most hopeless and, sadly, quite doomed.'² Less apocalyptically, *The Guardian* states: 'The current crisis in Yugoslavia is complicated. It is about a country which is trying to move from a one-party system to multi-party democracy . . .'³

It is this attempt at the creation of democracy, the struggle for democratic rule, which has seemed to dominate world politics throughout the last few years: the celebration of the pro-democracy movement in China and the tragic consequences in Tiananmen Square, the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, the bringing down of the Berlin Wall, the democratization being orchestrated in the Soviet Union. In the words of Jan Urban, Czech signatory of Charter 77, leading representative of the Civic Forum and now journalist on *Lidoviy Noviny*: 'We are in transition from the negation of the old to the building of the new.'⁴

Whilst this moment of transition has produced upheaval, uncertainty and, all too frequently, suspicion and violence, it does allow for theoretical re-evaluation and realignment. Specifically, recent events impact upon how we think about democracy. Growing concern with the issues of citizenship, indi-

vidualism, pluralism, coupled with discussions about accountability and responsibility and the questioning of the notion of the nation, have left 'democracy' under the intense spotlight of theoretical scrutiny. And this, of course, applies no less to those of us currently living under so-called democratic governments, than to those involved in the process of their creation. Reflecting on the political system in Britain in the light of the movements towards democratization elsewhere, Anne Phillips for example has recently commented: 'I felt more acutely than usual the hollowness of our so-called democracies.'⁵ Rethinking democracy is no less underway in established democracies than in the nascent ones.

When the Czechoslovakian writer, Milan Simecka (who sadly died last year) came to speak at the ICA in London in June 1989 there were two distinct groups in the audience: the libertarian and the social democratic. Both had been cultivating links with East European dissidents in past years; both tried to claim Simecka (and by implication the aspirations of Civic Forum) for their own cause, asking 'Is Britain a democracy?'. 'I don't know' came the reply, 'I've only been here two days.' There is a risk that we try to read into East Europe our own particular concerns and preoccupations and therefore misinterpret the developments within these countries. But there is also the potential to evaluate critically existing structures in the light of new developments – both practical and theoretical – outside our own sphere of reference. Critical reflection on events in Eastern Europe, for example, will lead us to question whether grounding a theory of democracy upon liberal individualism is adequate, or inevitable. Similarly, current critiques of the impoverished notion of the political and the individual, of the assumption of the neutrality of the state, of consent as voluntary submission and of the certainty of knowledge, may allow us to elaborate alternative ways of thinking of democracy. Different theoretical perspectives (whether they be communitarian, psychoanalytic, postmodern) are being brought to bear on democracy, previously maligned or marginalized as a manifestation solely of liberal thought. In the words of Chantal Mouffe: 'The point is no longer to provide an apologia for democracy but to analyse its principles, examine its operation, discover its limitations and bring out its potentialities.'

This is precisely the project of the articles in this issue. They share a common concern with the internal paradoxes of democracy, which, interestingly, are frequently resolved through a division between public and private spheres of life.

Chantal Mouffe questions the conflict between liberal individualism and democratic homogeneity and argues that democracy does not necessarily entail pluralism. It is based on a logic, not of difference, but of identity: the democratic logic of identity being located in the public sphere, the pluralistic logic of difference in the private sphere. While for Mouffe, the simultaneous existence of these two logics does not render pluralist democracy non-viable, it does require the imposition of a division between public and private spheres of life.

The paradox of democracy is also the focus of Renata Salecl's piece. For Salecl, however, the paradox is that the more democracy 'self-binds' (places

limits upon itself), the stronger it is, since self-binding gives it legitimacy. That contradiction, however, is not in Salecl's view recognized by the nascent East European democracies. Hence the danger that the new societies 'created on the grave of "real socialism"' tend to overlook self-binding, and instead fall into the destructive trap of retroactive legitimization of violence in the name of preserving democracy itself. Zdravko Kobe also addresses the paradox of self-binding and of the people bound twice: as a subject and as a part of a sovereign body, as an individual and as part of a collective unity.

The paradox highlighted in Joan Copjec's piece arises out of the rooting of the concept of democracy, both in a notion of the universal subject (devoid of specific characteristics), and of the simultaneous diversity of citizens (asserting their uniqueness). The twin logics of identity and difference, to borrow Mouffe's terms, require in Copjec's argument, a hysterical response. 'Democracy hystericizes the subject.' Mladen Dolar, meanwhile, looks at Kant's text on the Enlightenment and highlights the paradox of 'daring to know' and 'obeying' – 'Use your own reason freely – provided that you obey!' This paradox of freedom and obedience is again reconciled by placing each in its own sphere, public and private. Not however, 'think what you wish in private, as long as you obey in public' (as Mouffe argued in her conception of a pluralist democracy), but reasoning as public, obedience as a private affair. Slavoj Žižek, finally, questions the foundations of social democratic discussions of distributive justice, highlighting the paradox of the individual behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance who is held both to have knowledge of the social system, yet to be ignorant of her/his position within it: the subject is split into the 'pathological' subject and the ethical subject.

What these articles share therefore is an engagement with the process of transition: not only with discovering the limitations of democracy, but also with bringing out its potentiality.

JUDITH SQUIRES

May 1991

NOTES

- 1 ICA Philosophical Forum, Saturday 16 March 1991.
- 2 Misha Glenny, *The Rebirth Of History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 118.
- 3 Martin Kettle 'Divided Nation in Turmoil' *The Guardian* 21 May 1991, 3.
- 4 Jan Urban 'Czechoslovakia: the Power and Politics of Humiliation' in Gwyn Prins (ed.) *Spring in Winter* (Manchester University Press, 1990), 100.
- 5 Anne Phillips *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).