

# Are there Democratic Values?

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My article has the title 'Are there democratic values?' In one sense the question is ironic: there *are* democratic values. And new ones appear every day. Nevertheless the question has a literal sense if you consider certain aspects of the regime or mode of existence of values in contemporary thought.

The idea that values are no longer what they used to be is not new: the classical line of argument on this question underlines the contrast between, on the one hand, the philosophy of the Ancients, for whom evaluation referred to a normative nature, to ideals, criteria of perfection, embedded in the order of things and, on the other, the philosophy of the Moderns, for whom we are the ones who make the decisions (we are the ones who do the evaluating). Objectivism of values on the one hand, humanist subjectivism on the other. I would like to leave aside this problem and the difficulties which it raises (notably: who is Ancient and who is Modern?), and try to approach in another way whether there is a specifically contemporary mode of being for values.

Indeed, in spite of its merits, the theory of modern subjectivism has a flaw: both in its decisionist (Nietzschean) version, and in the rationalist, neo-Kantian or utilitarian versions, it allows too much to the power of subjectivity and the mastery of the moral subject over his acts. This tendency to overestimate the subjectivism of the Moderns is, so to speak, inscribed in the word 'value' itself, behind which emerges the character of the one who sets the value.

I will start from two current issues in contemporary political philosophy, pluralism of values and the rational foundation of norms. Whatever the intellectual interest of these issues, they are very remote from the current reality of values as they are actually formulated, adopted, discussed and lived today. 1) In spite of the evidence of the *idée reçue*, pluralism of values is not what is most striking in liberal democratic societies; 2) in spite of the favour it finds among philosophers, the program of constructing a rational foundation of values does not perhaps have the relevance or the actual role which is attributed to it by its instigators. Let us look at this.

Pluralism is a core value of modern (individualistic) societies and it consists precisely in the fact of not only recognizing, but also supporting the proliferation of values. Those who are delighted with this in the name of freedom and those who deplore it as the reign of relativism and nihilism nevertheless agree on the nature of the phenomenon, together with all those who, more generally, consider pluralism to be the central feature of contemporary democratic societies and, consequently, a privileged topic for political philosophy, where it is variously labelled as multiculturalism, war of the gods, priority of the just over the good. This pluralism is however widely overestimated for the needs of philosophical

discussion. Everyone is free to choose his idea of the good life, his 'plans of life' as Rawls calls it, but the use which is made of this freedom keeps it within narrow limits. Conformity and the existence of obligatory values are much more the dominant features of the public mind. Tocqueville had already foreseen it: 'I think that those who will live in the new societies [*i.e.* democracies] will often make use of their individual reason; but I am far from thinking that they will often overuse it'.

This phenomenon of obligatory values is both widely perceived – this is what the current expression in French debate *pensée unique* (unique thought) refers to – and difficult to think about because it is paradoxical and puzzling. Pluralism is such an obvious fact of our individualistic social state, boosted by the progress of public freedoms, tolerance, which is always inscribed more vigorously in the law and customs, and the proliferation of television channels<sup>2</sup>, that it is difficult to imagine that a unified and obligatory ideology could emerge from the spread of this pluralism.

Until quite recently, we are told, the fact that human societies were still heteronomous meant that they were unified and strengthened by an ideology, a 'value-idea' according to Louis Dumont's lucid Durkheimian expression, which controlled the symbolic forms of a given society, the totem in times gone by, the nation more recently, or socialism. But all this is behind us and one would have to be short-sighted or querulous to apply this model to contemporary democracies in which even individualism has ceased to be the cement of society which it used to be once.

There is a modern ideology. Contemporary society is no less saturated with ideology than its predecessors. But we have not become clear-sighted and reasonable just because we are no longer carried away by nationalist or revolutionary passions, very far from it.

An anecdote will allow me to illustrate what I have said. The scene takes place on the set of LCI, the television non-stop news channel in France through which the contemporary world achieves self-knowledge. The debate, pluralist but civilized, concerns one of the 'reforms of society' of which our present government is so fond, the PACS (*Pacte civil de solidarité* – the contract entered into by those who are cohabiting), I think. At some point one of the participants says: 'but who can be against the creation of a new human right?' Indeed, there was no answer to that argument. If the matter is presented in this way, one could not disapprove without putting oneself outside the group.

This is an example of *obligatory value*, or more precisely of a schema for compulsory justification, which leads me to my second theme, rational foundation. This apparently simple, not to say simplistic, line of argument encapsulates in a sentence the contemporary philosophical idea that human rights are the indisputable and natural basis of values and norms.

What I am trying to say is appropriate to the present time in democratic societies and yet I have found a valuable and illuminating guide in Alexis de Tocqueville, who was writing more than 150 years ago, at the dawn of the 'era of democracy'. Indeed, it seems to me that his comments on the 'new face of servitude' speak directly to us, and that they have recently even acquired a new relevance.

I shall recall briefly the central intuition of his work, an apparently simple idea, the only one he offers (he often apologizes for it), but immensely clarifying: equality changes everything: the price and the duration of leases, the education of girls, relations between the social classes, the family, the character of men, the theatre, the appearance of political power, etc. In a word, equality begets 'a new condition of the world'<sup>3</sup>.

What is equality? An unavoidable passion. The discourse of pluralism and rational foundation of norms emerges as the domestication and intellectualization of the modern principles of independence and equality of individuals. Since these are principles, we are able to reflect on them, perfect them and to accomplish them in all conscience; it is enough just to want to do it. Yet, as Tocqueville shows us, they are not principles, but a 'passion'. The passion for equality is not a principle, but a sociological fact, nor even a 'value', but all that at the same time and even more, an anthropological disposition, a 'constitutive social imagination' in Castoriadis language, a 'generative fact' in Tocqueville's.

Thus: 1) this is not an achievable ideal; one cannot even describe or represent it, let alone achieve it, but an insatiable passion (see Tocqueville's famous law, which says that the more equality increases, the more unbearable the remaining inequalities become<sup>4</sup>; 2) this is not something that we can easily recognize and know, because it is the very source of our beliefs and judgements. There is in Tocqueville's theory of the democratic social state a sociological argument in the sociology of knowledge which is often ignored, perhaps because it is so radical. It tells us that democratic modernity, far from being disenchanting, is the supreme stage of enchantment, if you take that to mean not the supernatural and the gods, but one's own opacity, ignorance and ability to make things up. Enchantment without the supernatural, but enchantment just the same.

Tocqueville's idea is that human life in society presupposes 'dogmatic beliefs', i.e. common meanings 'because there can be no common action without common ideas and, without common action, men still exist, but not a social body. In order for society to exist, the minds of all the citizens always have to be assembled and held together by some major ideas<sup>5</sup>'. This is almost the anthropological concept of ideology, as expressed by Dumont, for example.

If accurate, this view of modern ideology ruins the foundationalist's claims to self-transparency and to total reflexivity. Foundationalism intends to draw the principles of a fair social order and morality from the pre-political idea of humanity as such, which is itself supposedly completely clarified and hence assumed to be self-transparent. To put it another way, we would be liberated from 'dogmatic beliefs'. This would be a serious mistake: 'there is no philosopher in the world who is so great that he does not believe a million things on the evidence of another, and who does not assume far more truths than he establishes<sup>6</sup>'. Rational thought can only function on a basis of unreflected certainties, which are neither rational nor irrational. Wittgenstein says exactly the same thing (*On Certainty*). To these universal considerations Tocqueville adds an argument which is specific to the 'democratic centuries'. There is in effect an asymmetry between the hierarchical principle of traditional societies and the egalitarian-individualistic principle of modern societies. Inequality of conditions is not the counterpart of equality of conditions since there is no passion for hierarchy as there is a passion for equality. On this point Tocqueville enlightens us beyond his intended doctrine: like Smith, Hegel and other perspicacious observers of the birth of modern democracy, he is fascinated by the completely new power of the new belief, to the point of seeing in it the natural state of humanity which we will finally achieve with the end of the hierarchical anomaly. Tocqueville is, so to speak, a Hegelian in spite of himself, democracy is the realization of the spirit of the world, a sort of end to history, in spite of its efforts to open up the possibilities of the democratic dynamic.

All in all, Tocqueville regards democracy as both the truth of the human condition and the social state which generates the maximum of ignorance about that truth. The natural

independence of individuals is also the state most remote from the understanding of this very independence:

As citizens become more equal and more similar, the inclination of each one to believe blindly a certain man or a certain class decreases. The tendency to believe in the masses increases, and more and more it is opinion which leads the world<sup>7</sup>.

Equality produces 'a sort of immense pressure of the mind of everyone on the intelligence of each one'. The political omnipotence of the majority 'actually increases the influence that public opinion would obtain without it on the mind of each citizen: *but it does not establish it at all*'. The 'new face of servitude' which he is considering here is not therefore the risk of the tyranny of the majority, which he discussed before, it is something else, an anthropological shift rather than a sociological mechanism. Here is the decisive passage:

It is within equality itself that we should look for the sources of that influence, and not in the more or less popular institutions which equal men are able to make for themselves . . . Whatever political laws govern men during the centuries of equality, it can be foreseen that faith in public opinion will become a sort of religion of which the majority will be the prophet<sup>8</sup>.

Tocqueville's famous law, besides being true, implies an anthropology of passions and opacity. Democratic ideology is bound to self-deception. This is the point we have reached. By declaring itself pluralist and subject to the demands of rational justification, ideology becomes invisible, because we are rational, and by the same token its character becomes compulsory, since we are pluralist.

In France we find a recent illustration of the fact that this philosophy of democratic values is the contemporary ideology *par excellence* in the philosophy syllabus for the final year of the school sixth form drafted under the direction of the philosopher Alain Renaut (March 2001). It is from this syllabus that I have just borrowed the pompous expression 'the important questions through which the contemporary world achieves self-knowledge'. The democratic dynamic which, we are told, 'continually develops before our eyes, one sector after another', would seem to imply that, I quote, 'it is becoming more and more necessary to know how to argue'. 'Philosophy has a duty to educate students in a type of discourse, the study of which is part of the construction of the democratic conscience.' A robust intention, which is conveyed for example by the following item from this syllabus (the so-called 'advanced questions'): 'POLITICAL FREEDOM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: a) citizenship ancient and modern: the question of slavery, b) human rights and their criticism: equality and difference'. Everything is there: the self-importance of the ethnocentrism of the present, which throws the whole of human history into the darkness of superstition and inhuman inequality, the contemporary apotheosis of modernity, which means we can have our cake and eat it, equality *and* difference.

That is not to say that the opacity of democratic man to himself is irreversible. Democracy can be tamed – this is what concerns the Republican Tocqueville, who saw in political freedom and the participation of citizens in government the antidote to the evils of equality<sup>9</sup> – and it can be educated, but that education, which calls for 'a new politics', begins by recognizing democratic passions, i.e. the intrinsic irrationality of democratic values, which we should learn to control but which it would be useless to try to rationalise.

The proponents of the rational foundation of norms are half-smart Tocquevillians. They retain the analysis of the irresistible logic of individualism, but they do not see the framework of self-deception which accompanies it, or they think they are cleverer than this self-deception. As far as Rawls and Habermas are concerned, the business of establishing of norms endeavours to keep a critical perspective, a distance between the ideal and reality. But other philosophers of liberalism only provide a weak legitimization, trailing along behind the tendencies of the present, which is adorned with the prestige of the end of history, that is to say, in common parlance, with the idea that we live in wonderful times, because we know that we do. Their implicit motto is 'these mysteries are beyond us, let us pretend that we organized them'.

Recognition of the passion for equality, that is to say, of the democratic predicament for what it is, forbids us to give in to this foundationalist intoxication. The universality, rationality and functionality of modern principles contained in the cry from the heart 'Who can be against the creation of a new human right?', are not just so many insights into the collective life and levers for its control, rather they show a serious lessening of our understanding of ourselves. To judge from appearances, we have the most lucid and most intelligent political philosophers that there have ever been, capable of reflecting on the organization of society and the principles of government, and of pushing them critically to their ideal of justice and democracy, and the most disappointing and mediocre politicians, lacking in vision, erratic administrators of technostructures which are beyond them, only just able to win small battles at 100–1 on. Jürgen Habermas and Chirac, Rawls and Romano Prodi – that contrast should astonish us more. It is perhaps because the hold on the reality of the philosophies of the foundation of norms is deceptive, that they are an apology for a present which baffles them as well as the politicians.

Thus we have our work cut out to decipher this world. We should put a little more anthropological description into it and a little less rationalization of the norms.

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Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear

## Notes

- 1 A. de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique (On American democracy)*, II, p.14, in the Garnier-Flammarion edition.
- 2 Cf. 'L'art du spectateur: voir les sons et écouter les visions' ('The art of the spectator: seeing sounds and hearing sights') by Piergiorgio Giacchè, in *Diogenes*, No.193, January-March 2001, Paris, PUF.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 4 DA II, 2, ch.13, and 4, ch.3, p.173–4 and 361.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.15.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.16.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.17.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.18.
- 9 DA, II, p.135.