POLITICS OF DIALOGUE

NON-CONSENSUAL DEMOCRACY AND CRITICAL COMMUNITY

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The book you are going to read features no biographical details, and yet it is a deeply personal one. Many of its theses have been inspired by my own experience. Of course, a biography can never serve as an ultimate substantiation of an argument, but it always remains a powerful source of inspiration, especially for people who, like myself, have lived through a tectonic social transformation. Slightly hyperbolising perhaps, Fyodor Tyutchev, an outstanding Russian poet, envisaged such an experience as partaking of a feast of gods:

He’s blessed who visited this world
In moments of its destination –
Like for the feast or celebration,
He was invited there by gods

In East and Central Europe, my generation’s significant experience was that of democracy. Born in the 1950s of the twentieth century, for a long time we had acutely felt its lack, and in the wake of systemic changes we started to feel keenly how taxing that political system might be. Democracy is a unique but still indeterminate project, which keeps being contested and challenged. The democratic project has millions of people invest their hopes and desires in it, and at the same time it is a source of disappointment for the millions, too. While many people still suffer and die for democracy, democratic societies are visibly growing disaffected with, and impatient about, democratic procedures, which increasingly appear tedious and barren. My own life has unfolded in such a way that I could, and still can, witness both stages and try to make sense of their dynamics. My biographical experience inclines me to think of political systems as forms or ways of life. Institutional changes triggered by democracy have gone hand in hand, inextricably intertwined and interdependent, with changes in lifestyles. This has reasserted my conviction that democracy, and politics in general, is something more than just a struggle for power or for one or other system of institutions. It is a form of
life, a way in which people organise their experiences and activities across the spectrum of their existence.

This experience has also made me realise a paradox inherent in the theory of democracy. For political theory, democracy is ‘an impossible object’, an aberration that eludes any clear categories or formulas. Which societies and political systems are indeed democratic – and which are not yet quite so – is an issue that continues to spark fervent disputes. Nonetheless, people themselves seem to be magically able to state whether they live in a democratic society or not. Propagandist efforts and indoctrination through a controlled education system fail to deliver expected results if they diverge from our everyday experience, which verifies the pronouncements of theorists, ideologues, and various regime mouthpieces. And still, it is not entirely clear what kind of everyday experience can be defined as democratic. We can surmise, however, that democratic experience is somehow linked to dialogue.

Dialogue is another category whose gravity has deeply imprinted itself on my experience. Theories of totalitarianism, which depict it as a system wherein the state exercises absolute control over individuals, fail to capture the fact that any totalitarian power needs to have its opposite pole – a concealed society of bonds, dialogue, everyday communication, spontaneous solidarity and help. This hidden society evades the gaze because it is so thoroughly evident that it becomes transparent and eludes all attempts at conceptualisation and control. It pops into visibility very occasionally, when anger and rebellion erupt momentarily, only to withdraw promptly into the penumbra of abstract ideologies. The concealed society is first and foremost a society of dialogue. A perennial problem is how to make a transition from everyday dialogue, which permeates all human relationships, to political dialogue, which could institute rules of political struggle. Though fundamentally predicated upon introducing dialogue into the public space, democracy can hardly come to terms with the very notion of dialogue. The dialogical potential inherent in society is either constrained or downright squandered. For me, a theorist of society, it is a definitional problem, a problem of (and with) how we understand dialogue and its ends. Even though dialogue is one of the essential concepts in liberal democracy, neither its nature nor its social role has been studied in tolerably satisfying detail. My objective is thus to compensate for this negligence, partly at least, and highlight the manifestations of the dialogical social potential in politics. Both my experience and my theoretical intuition
make me posit that dialogue itself – that is, a decision to engage in a dialogical situation – is more important that any outcomes dialogue may produce. This intuition will be explored and substantiated in my book. I will also seek to consider the implications such a thesis has for the concepts of community and democracy as its political form.

Community is another central category of my argument. Born into a nation that had to fight for its independence, I have no doubt that communal thinking is vital to the development of social bonds. At the same time, I have seen communal notions, particularly those pertaining to nation and religion, abused and pushing a community into a xenophobic self-enclosure that precludes any free debate. Community is thus a prerequisite of democracy, but it is also its gravest hazard. Hence, I devote a lot of attention to this category and propose a concept of critical community. Characterised by a ceaseless, self-reflective interrogation of its own foundations, a critical community develops through critical inclusion of ever novel values and meanings, rather than by fortifying itself against external influences.

Critical community finds its political form in non-consensual democracy. Non-consensual democracy is a politics of dialogue in social action. In the chapter on non-consensual democracy, I take on board two theoretical approaches to democracy. On the one hand, I polemicise with a vision of democracy as procedures that head primarily toward a consensus; on the other, I take issue with a concept of democracy as an ongoing conflict, which, in democratic society, is channelled into milder, civilised forms. Non-consensual democracy is an attempt at providing an alternative to both positions in this controversy. An ethical decision to engage in a dialogical situation refracts the trajectory of political struggle and allows a better understanding of our adversary’s intents and objectives. All these reflections and categories are underpinned by my arguably pre-eminent biographic experience – the experience of solidarity, both in the sense of a vast social movement from 1980 to 1981 and in the sense of the idea that kindled this movement.

My theoretical discourse develops in reference to two ostensibly divergent traditions: American pragmatism and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories. Volumes could be filled with the similarities of, and differences between, the two conceptual tendencies, but I hope it will suffice here to reveal why they have become my sources of inspiration. The two concepts envision a social world with dialogue and communication as their centre and axis. For pragmatists – and in
This book I draw mainly on John Dewey and George Herbert Mead – this vision can be translated into a theory of democracy as an universalisation of everyday life interactions. Democracy is thus a political form of communal life. Bakhtin, for obvious reasons, did not write about democracy, but his entire oeuvre is permeated with ‘a democratic imagination’. The enormous effort that he invested in analysing dialogical ways of language use, which emerge from social life and return to it, can be transposed onto social theory. It turns out, then, that varieties of dialogue that Bakhtin so meticulously discussed are fully enacted in a democratic society, and carnival – one of Bakhtin’s central notions – can be comprehended, as I argue, as a liminal case (utopia) of democracy.

Consequently, the first two chapters explore pragmatism and Bakhtin’s ideas. The third chapter develops on my concept of critical community in dialogue with other notions of community. And the fourth chapter is devoted to non-consensual democracy as a political form of critical community.

* * *

This book would not have been possible without a grant that I received from Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej (Foundation for Polish Science), which enabled me to set up a research team with whom I could discuss my ideas and, consequently, refine them. In seminar discussions and informal conversations, my colleagues on the team – Katarzyna Liszka, Ewa Jupowiecka, Rafał Włodarczyk, Rafał Nahirny and Michał Paździora – prompted me to hone and modify my original standpoints. And although the ultimate responsibility for the shape this book has taken rests with me, it also bears an indelible imprint of more than two years of those fruitful intercourses. The grant of Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej also funded a cycle of meetings with invited lecturers, including Carlin Romano, Stefan Jonsson, Tomasz Kitliński, Paweł Leszkowicz, Avishai Margalit, Daniel Colleran, Danielle Carlo and Adam Czarnota and a conference co-financed by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. Co-organised by Katarzyna Jezierska, the conference took place in Wrocław and focused on ‘Democracy in dialogue, dialogue in democracy’. The contributions were delivered by Jacek Koltan, Paweł Dybel, Ewa Jupowiecka, Torill Strand, Lovisa Bergdahl, Margarita Palacios and Mikael Carleheden. I was also able to present my ideas at seminars organised by the Department of Comparative Literature at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Buffalo, the
Department of Political Sciences at the University of Gothenburg and
the Critical Theory Group at the University of California in Berkeley,
as well as at conferences held by the Society for Advancement of
American Philosophy and the Central European Pragmatist Forum.
In all these places, I discussed dialogue and non-consensual democ-

cracy with Rodolphe Gasché, Krzysztof Ziarek, Ewa Płonowska
Ziarek, Martin Jay, Hans Sluga, John Ryder and many other col-

teagues. Acknowledgement is also due to my faculty authorities at
the University of Social Sciences and Humanities for their unfailing
support and help. The book received its final shape in cooperation
with Patrycja Poniatowska, who assisted me in rendering my ideas in
English, and Katarzyna Liszka, who edited my manuscript. My son
Tadeusz, a graduate student of sociology and cultural studies, offered
me a lot of useful, soundly critical feedback. But my greatest thank-
you goes to my wife Dorota, without whose help this book would
never have come into being.

Notes

1. Fyodor Tyutchev, ‘Cicero’, trans. Yevgeny Bonver. Available online at:
http://www.poetryloverspage.com/yevgeny/tyutchev/cicero.html (acces-
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