

RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND MODERNITY

My intention in this paper is to present some reflections on the current debate about modernity and post-modernity, specifically from the point of view of the radical democratic project. My aim is to show that the critique of rationalism, the critique of the founding subject, of the unified totality and a series of other themes which are usually related to the so-called post-modern critique do not have to lead necessarily to political conservatism, as some people — the best known is Habermas — have argued, but that it is on the contrary the very condition to think of the political in a really new and more adequate way and to be able to articulate a project of radical and plural democracy.

Let's begin with the term »modernity«. I've used the terms »modern« and »post-modern«, but must say that I am far from being happy with them. And in fact the first thing I want to do is to scrutinize them and in this way to proceed to their deconstruction. First let's see what we understand by »modernity«.

I think there are almost as many definitions of modernity as authors using the term. And according to what components are seen as defining modernity and the type of relation which is established among them, we have, of course, very different conceptions of what modernity is and obviously as a consequence of what our attitude to modernity should be. Usually the main components that we find defining or related to modernity are, Enlightenment, rationalism, democracy, capitalism, liberalism, individualism, universalism; so, basically we can, in fact, put them into three categories: On one side we have democratic politics, on the other side rationalist universalistic epistemology and there is a third component which is, of course, not present in all definitions of modernity, which is the component referring to capitalism. For somebody like Habermas, the central positive aspect to be defended is democratic politics and he believes that this can only be done through the defence of rationalism and universalism. And for him what is really the obstacle — the danger or the wrong thing in modernity — is capitalism and we've got to try to find a way to really limit or get rid of the effects of capitalism. From somebody like Richard Rorty, we get a different picture, because he identifies Enlightenment

with liberalism and with democracy. All those aspects for him are positive and must be defended.

The specificity of Rorty's position is that he affirms that they are independent of rationalism and universalism, and those are for him the negative aspects that need to be dropped. So, in fact, following Blumenberg, Rorty made a distinction in Enlightenment between self-assertion and self-grounding.

Self-assertion is a political project of democracy, self-grounding, an epistemological one, and he says that they are not necessarily related, so we can perfectly well get rid of one while defending the other. Hence he proposes to get rid of universalism and rationalism.

We still have a very different picture with somebody like Alisdair MacIntyre in his very influential book *After Virtue* where he is calling modernity into question. Because MacIntyre identifies modernity with liberal individualism plus rationalist epistemology, he affirms that the whole project of the Enlightenment and modernity was a mistake. It failed and now we should go back to Aristotle. Still another point of view can be found as the conservative critique of modernity of the Burkean type and here, of course, both democratic politics and rationalist and universalist epistemology must be questioned and abandoned. Thus, you can see that one can define modernity in different ways and have a very different attitude towards it according to these definitions.

I think that the real question is: is there a necessary link between the political and the epistemological aspect of the Enlightenment? And: Can we defend advances of one side — that is democratic politics — while criticizing rationalism and humanism? I am going to follow Rorty because I believe he is right in saying that they are not necessarily linked. They were articulated at a given moment, but they are not necessarily linked. And therefore it is perfectly possible to abandon rationalism and humanism while defending democratic politics, which is, of course, what Habermas believed, is impossible. But I want to say something more about that distinction: modern — post-modern. Because usually what is referred to as post-modern in this kind of field — because post-modern again is used in so many different ways, depending on whether we are going to speak of aesthetics, or architecture, or anything referring to the field of politics and philosophy — is really a series of trends which have in common a critique of the rationalism and the humanism of the Enlightenment, of what we have called essentialism. We find here very different traditions, because within the category of post-modern we can put not only what is usually called post-structuralism, but also post-Heideggerian phenomenology (and Gadamer certainly belongs to that) and also Wittgensteinian language philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Thus, it's a very wide field. The thing that they've all got in common is the critique of essentialism. I want to argue that in fact, the distinction modern—post-modern is not very useful. And it is artificial. Because a double logic operated from the start of modernity and if we see it from that point of view, one could say that the very principle of post-modernity was already present at the birth of modernity. I think that it becomes clear when we realize that the best level to distinguish the emergence of modernity (here again there are many different levels) is at the level of the political. I've used the term »political« in the sense in which in France we distinguish between »le politique« and »la politique«, »la politique« being a much more global term which has really to do with

the symbolic ordering of social relations and I think that that's really the crucial level to define the emergence of modernity.

And if we agree to define the emergence of modernity at the level, clearly, of course, we've got to conclude that the central event for the emergence of modernity was the democratic revolution. That's the term, of course, that comes from Tocqueville. We have used it in our book to indicate the moment when the democratic principle of liberty and equality becomes the new matrix of the political imagination and begins to constitute the fundamental point in the construction of the political. That is when the logic of equivalence becomes the dominant one. But in this paper I'm going to refer to that term »democratic revolution« in a slightly different way. Because I'm referring really to its use by Claude Lefort who has shown that the democratic revolution was the beginning of what he calls a new mode of institution of the social. For Lefort modern democratic society is basically a society in which there is a dissolution, of the landmarks of certainty. It is a society in which power becomes an empty space and is separated from law and knowledge, and that is something which is linked to the fact that there is a break with a kind of political logic which was typical of the *ancien régime*, and that has been qualified of theological political logic; there was a cosmos, and order that was grounded either in divine will or in nature, and it was a hierarchical type of society, in which there was one single logic, in which power, law and knowledge were united. For Lefort the emergence of the modern democratic society is the separation of those three levels and the fact that power becomes an empty space; as a consequence, power, law and knowledge are therefore exposed to a radical indeterminacy. And that is for Lefort the main characteristic of modern democratic society — the fact of radical indeterminacy. Such a society becomes the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure, so that what is instituted never becomes definitively established, the known always remains undermined by the unknown and the present proves to be undefinable. With the emergence of the democratic revolution there is no more possibility of providing a final guarantee, a definite legitimation, and that's because there is no more power incorporated in the person of the prince and related to a transcendental instance. An important consequence of that is that the possibility of a society defined as a substance having an organic identity disappears. From then on there is only a society whose shape and nature escape to a general knowledge that could be uttered from an unique view point. I think that if we accept the democratic revolution as being the central feature of modernity, it is evident that what is now called post-modernity is in fact only the recognition of that impossibility of final grounding, of establishing a suture which is constitutive of the very advent of modern democratic societies. So, it's not a new stage, it's something that was present at the very emergence of that society. But, of course, what takes place today is the recognition of that impossibility, after the failure of different attempts to replace the traditional transcendental grounding in God or in Nature, which were the pre-modern ones, by an alternative grounding in man and his reason. And, of course, that's the epistemological project of the Enlightenment. But it's a project that was doomed to fail from the beginning because of the very characteristic of the democratic revolution: the indeterminacy and impossibility of final grounding. So, what is seen today as a crisis of rationalism and humanism and the post-modern critique, is only the crisis of a particular project within modernity.

Nietzsche, for instance, was the first one to recognize that when he said that death of God is already death of man, we could not replace God or Nature by man, it was impossible, it was doomed to fail, as I've just said. But, of course, that does not mean that because there is that crisis of rationalism and humanism, we have to give up the political aspect of modernity and the gains of the democratic revolution, or that — and that's the fear of Habermas — it is the very project of modernity that is undermined by the critique of rationalism. I think that to believe that is really to remain trapped in the very problematic of rationalism, that people are trying to avoid. And that, of course, is true for Habermas, but it is true also for several post-modern authors, for instance Lyotard. It is not because we cannot ground the rights of man on a human essence, that we should not fight to defend and extend them. Or is it not because, as MacIntyre very convincingly argued, the project to ground morality in reason has failed, that we should give up morality and that everything becomes possible. I think, there's a kind of apocalyptic pathos in some post-modern thinkers, which is the reverse of the rationalism that they oppose and still live from the very rationalistic metaphysics which they set off to destroy. And there are ways in which we can think about morality and rights, which are not linked to the problematic of rationalism and humanism. For such a project there are conservative authors who are quite useful, for instance Gadamer and Oakeshott. In their critique of Enlightenment rationalism they show us how to think about morality and politics in a new way. And contrary to what some people say about their revalorization of the concept of tradition, it does not necessarily have conservative consequence. Of course, we can't just take the concept of tradition in Oakeshott and Gadamer as it is, but we can reformulate it in terms of the language game of Wittgenstein, and also introduce Gramsci's idea of articulation—disarticulation. If we do that we could perfectly arrive at a concept of tradition seen not as monolithic Burkean traditionalism but as a multiplicity of heterogeneous discourses that open the way to many different uses and strategies. So tradition can be articulated in a left wing direction or in a right wing direction and the political project should be within tradition to try to establish different kinds of articulation. Such a conception has been accused of relativism. I agree with Rorty when he says that the real question is not between people who think that one view is as good as any other, the so called relativists, and people who do not, but between those who think our culture, our purposes and institutions cannot be supported except conversationally and people who still search for some other sort of support and attempt to establish some final grounding. It is only within the problematic of rationalism that relativism makes sense, and the critique of Enlightenment rationalism does not lead necessarily to irrationalism and relativism and to the destruction of the political project of modernity.

There is another way in which the critique of modernity is taking place. And it is taking place basically among the political philosophers in USA and it's the so-called Communitarian critique of liberal individualism. The main target is John Rawls (Rawls' well-known book is *Theory of Justice*) who is the most sophisticated liberal philosopher today. The communitarians want to attack liberalism, because they believe that liberalism is essentially individualist and that, as a consequence of the hegemony of liberal individualism in the USA, there has been an erosion of solidarities, and that individualism has today reached the point in which the very social fabric is called into question. They

consider that there is an urgent need to fight against that liberal individualism and to recover another tradition which is the tradition of civic republicanism. That tradition has just been rediscovered in the States, because for a long time people believed that the USA was completely dominated from the beginning on by Lockean liberalism, and the American revolution was seen in that light. But recent American historiography has shown on the contrary that the American revolution had been very influenced by the presence of that civic republican or civic humanist type of tradition. The communitarians propose to criticize liberal individualism and revive a sense of citizenship, through the reactivation of that civic republican tradition which was present at the time of the American revolution, but went underground later on when liberalism in the 19th century became the dominant ideology.

What I want to argue with respect to the communitarians is that there is a serious problem in their attempt to revive the civic republican tradition. On the one hand, I think, it's an interesting critique of modernity, you see, of course, that in this case it's a different way again to define modernity, it's really modernity seen in term of liberal individualism, hence they are against it. But their solution — the revival of the civic republican tradition is very problematic, indeed. — First: It is a completely heteroclit notion that has been defined by Pocock (who has been one of the main theorists of its reconstruction in his book *The Machiavellian Moment*) as a synthesis of Aristotle and Machiavelli, which is already rather curious because whether we accentuate the Machiavellian aspect or the Aristotelian aspect, we can really come to very different proposals. And the problem is that most of the people have really accentuated the Aristotelian aspect. People like Sandel and MacIntyre, for instance, propose in fact to go back to some kind of pre-modern form of politics. They are against liberalism, against individualism and, of course, against pluralism and the very idea of rights and they want to go back to a kind of politics based on the community unified by one single moral order, by one single common good. I think that's extremely dangerous because if it is true that there are things we criticize in liberal individualism, we cannot criticize them by just going back before liberalism, before the democratic revolution. We cannot sacrifice the individual to the citizen, but we must find the way to articulate them: that's really the crucial problem for a new modern democratic political philosophy. And it is from that point of view that our project of radical and plural democracy seems to me to be addressing those issues. I agree that there are serious problems with liberal individualism but the solution is not simply to replace liberal individualism by the civic republican tradition. There are important elements in both traditions that must be incorporated into a new public philosophy and that is what a project of radical democracy is attempting to do in a way that I want to indicate as a conclusion.

I think, first, that a new political philosophy requires a conception of the subject, which is neither the Rawlsian »unencumbered self«, nor the Communitarian »situated« one. Because in both cases they maintain the idea of the unitary subject, and that's the real problem. Many Communitarians seem to believe that we belong only to one community, empirically and geographically defined, and that it could be unified by one single idea of the common good. But we, in fact, always belong to a multiplicity of communities, we are always multiple and contradictory subjects and the multiplicity of the community to which we belong is as wide as the social relations we participate in and the

subject positions they define. So, we are constructed by a variety of discourses and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of all those subject positions. I think that such a conception of the subject is crucial for radical democratic politics, because only such a conception allows us to theorize the multiplicity of relations, of subordination of which a single individual can be a bearer, and to understand the fact that one can be dominant in one type of social relation while subordinated into another, then understanding the range of social relations where the extension of the democratic principles is needed. It is also necessary to give up the idea of a unique space of constitution of the political which is common both to the liberal and the civic republican tradition because it's inadequate. We are witnessing today a politization far more radical than in the past with the proliferation of radically new and different political spaces, we are confronted with the emergence of a plurality of subjects whose form of construction and diversity it is only possible to think if we really abolish the category of the subject as unified essence. That's why, I believe that — far from putting into question the very project of modernity — the democratic project — the post-modern critique of essentialism provide the very condition to further that project today because it provides the very condition for understanding the way in which politics must be formulated and rethought if we want to take into account the widening of social conflicts that is characteristic of the new social movements in the two last decades. Contrary to Habermas, who believes that the only way to further the democratic project is to stick to the rationalism and universalism of the Enlightenment, I want to argue that if we do not abandon that universalism and that rationalism and take over the post-modern critique, we are not going to be able to understand what is happening politically, we are not going to be able to formulate an adequate conception of politics. Therefore that post-modern critique is in fact the very condition for furthering the modern project today and the project of radical democracy is really both modern and post-modern because it wants to further the modern democratic revolution using the tools of the post-modern critique.