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What Does Democracy Mean?

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Contents

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Democracy means police.</i> | 5 |
| <i>Democracy means borders.</i> | 5 |
| <i>Democracy means prisons.</i> | 6 |
| <i>Democracy means surveillance.</i> | 6 |
| <i>Democracy means war.</i> | 7 |

cannot be beaten separately. –Nightmares of Capitalism, Pipe Dreams of Democracy

Our forebears overthrew kings and dictators, but they didn't abolish the institutions by which kings and dictators ruled: they *democratized* them. Yet whoever operates these institutions—whether it's a king, a president, or an electorate—the experience on the receiving end is roughly the same. Laws, bureaucracy, and police came before democracy; they function the same way in a democracy as in a dictatorship. The only difference is that, because we can cast ballots about how they should be applied, we're supposed to regard them as *ours* even when they're used against us.

Democracy means police.

Democracy doesn't just mean public participation in making decisions. It presumes that all power and legitimacy is vested in one decision-making structure, and it requires a way to impose those decisions. As long as anyone might defy them, there have to be armed personnel to *regulate*, to *discipline*, to *control*.

Without police, there would be *anarchy*: people would act on their own initiative, only implementing decisions they felt to be in their best interest. Conflicts would have to be resolved to the mutual satisfaction of all parties involved, not suppressed by a gang with a monopoly on force.

Democracy means borders.

Democracy presumes a line between participants and outsiders, between legitimate and illegitimate. Only a fraction of the men could vote in ancient Athens; the Founding Fathers owned slaves. Citizenship still imposes a barrier between included and excluded, shutting over 10 million undocumented residents out of the decisions that shape their lives.

The liberal answer is to expand the lines of inclusion, extending rights and privileges until everyone is integrated into one vast democratic project. But as long as all power must flow through one bottleneck, there are bound to be imbalances and outsiders. The alternative would be *anarchy*: abolishing centralized power structures and all the borders they impose. Without borders, people would only live and work together of their own free will, flowing freely between communities without top-down control.

Democracy means prisons.

Those who don't accept the authority of the state must be isolated, lest their disobedience spread to the rest of the population. We're told that prisons protect us, but the only constant since their invention has been that they protect the state from those who might threaten it. In practice, by breaking up communities and fostering antisocial tendencies, they only endanger us—even those of us who aren't behind bars.

Without prisons, there would be *anarchy*: people would have to work out conflicts directly rather than calling in the authorities, and it would no longer be possible to sweep the inequalities of this society under the rug.

Democracy means surveillance.

Democracy presumes transparency: a marketplace of ideas, in which decisions are made in the open. Of course, in an unequal society, transparency puts some people at risk—the employee who could be fired for expressing the wrong opinion, the immigrant who fears deportation—while the powerful can feign transparency as they make back-room deals. In practice, political transparency simply equips intelligence agencies to monitor the populace, preparing reprisals for when dissidents get out of hand—and what

government could maintain its authority without intelligence agencies?

Without surveillance, there would be *anarchy*: people would say and do what they really believe in. Those who defend centralized power fear nothing more than privacy—the keeping of secrets—which they call *conspiracy*.

Democracy means war.

Democracy means constant competition. Just as corporations contend for resources in the marketplace, politicians and governments vie for power. When power is centralized, people have to attain domination over others in order to determine their own destinies. Those in power can only hold onto it by waging war perpetually against their own populations as well as foreign peoples: hence the National Guard troops brought back from Iraq to suppress domestic protests.

As long as we remain at a distance from our own potential, being governed rather than acting freely, being *represented* rather than acting on our own interests, people will seek power over each other as a substitute for self-determination. The alternative is *anarchy*: a world in which people fight only for themselves—not for empires, flags, or gods—and conflicts cannot produce hierarchy and oppression.

We have to be tireless in our critique of democracy, as the alternative people in this society intuitively fall back on against the excesses of capitalism. The more unpopular this is, the more important it is that we do it. Private property and government are the two great sacred cows of our age—the ones for which our lives and the earth itself are being sacrificed—and challenging the ways they monopolize legitimacy is one project, not two. They are two heads of the same beast; they