

Nancy, J. (2010) The Truth of Democracy. Fordham University Press.

Translator's Note

The three texts were written over 9 years, from 1999 to 2008. 1968 (and Sarkozy's attempt to impugn it) hovers over all the texts. Nancy is a big defender of 68 as having provided a glimpse into the spirit of democracy. Democracy is not a political regime, but something that opens the experience of being in common. It must be founded on a freedom that is based not in the autonomous subject [of liberalism], but on Pascal's idea of man as infinitely transcending himself. It is an opening of each to all others in an experience of inequality and incommensurability, and this is the truth of democracy [which political regimes (especially capitalism) try to cover up by asserting the equivalence of individuals and values]. The truth of democracy is a communism of common being together, an exposure of singularities to being with each other in various ways, but not through politics. This state of incommensurable sharing makes the political possible, but is not itself the political. Democracy is the demand for a future that cannot arrive in actual time, but that nonetheless is present, conditions every aspect of the present. Nancy's favorite themes: community, communism, being in common, partage, singularity, singular-plural, sense, world, freedom, and democracy.

I-The Truth of Democracy (2008)

1: 68-08

68 is very much still alive, and what it was was a rejection of revolution and reform and protest and rebellion--it was the expression of a profound disappointment in liberal democracy, one that pointed toward the need for a grand reconstruction of the idea and practice of democracy.

2: Inadequate Democracy

Liberal democracy is inadequate to its own Idea, and so workers councils, self-management, direct democracy were experimented with. These were a way to try and discover the truth of demos and kratein (and the right way to link them).

3: Democracy Exposed

68 and after was about how to break with Stalinism without accepting bourgeois democracy and also without succumbing to nihilism (Nietzsche). The way to do this is to seriously re-evaluate democracy through "a profound mutation of thought".

4: On the Subject of Democracy

Part of this profound re-thinking of democracy was to blow apart the autonomous liberal individual subject using Pascal's idea that 'man infinitely transcends man'. This new subject, who finds himself already surpassed by events, is seen to be at the heart of democracy. [This Pascal approach to the subject could be understood as more or less D&G's blowing the subject apart to fully appreciate the myriad ways each of us is several, each of us is made up (culturally, intellectually, and materially) of things that come from outside of ourselves...]

(The accepted way of doing politics--political parties and labor unions--were becoming exhausted.)

5: The Potential of Being

68 was not a program that didn't get enacted. It was a rupture/event that did

not install a new agent or figure or authority, but left the ground open for the possibility of being all together, each among all [immanently]. The sense of democracy is to have available to it no identifiable authority other than a desire for the true possibility of being all together, all and each among all. Communism came to bear the hopes that democracy (as liberal democracy) could no longer bear. But, he seems to be suggesting, there is reason to think we can recapture the truth of both, and, he is implying that, down deep, those truths might be close to identical.

6: The Infinite and the Common

Democracy needs to realize that it must also be communist. Rousseau's common body is joined by intelligent beings [who surrender their natural liberty for civil liberty] but we must see these beings not as the liberal individual, but as Pascal's man infinitely transcending man. This is the spirit of democracy. This infinite man cannot be defined or fully manifested [or figured], but it does have to find its exigency, its immediate demand; and this exigency must come about in a kairos, an event, an encounter that opens up possibilities and allows them to be present together in a moment. It is not at all a question of realization, reification, codification of this new man, this new common.

7: The Sharing (Out) [partage] of the Incalculable

That which is incalculable, that does not fit into the [capitalist] measurement of equivalences, that is unexchangeable, unshareable, unvaluable, exceeds politics [by which I am guessing he means what R means by the partage du sensible]. The incalculable can only be shared through art or love or friendship...but not politics. But we expect democratic politics to share the incalculable, and so we are disappointed. The incalculable remains outside politics, in a realm of truth or sense, a world outside the world [the a venir? that which is to come?]. This truth or sense opens our existences to each other [which is to say (?) it allows them to be in common.]

[translating to R: politics = the police and the incalculable = politics/democracy?]

8: The Infinite in the Finite

The infinite is not an ever receding horizon, but an effective presence operating and open inside the finite. Man is not a God, but he does infinitely transcend himself, that is his root. And the social production of man by man is an infinite process, value is infinite, the way out of alienation is infinite. The common or the demos can be sovereign only under a different condition than the sovereign state (or any political configuration). [He does not specify what that difference is.]

9: Distinguished Politics

Politics is not everything and not nothing. It is not something that should disappear [Marx]; but we must not let it be reified in a fixed figure or signification. We must distinguish it from what it is not. Making distinctions in this way allows for democracy, and allows us to clear a path out of nihilism, since values require distinctions to be made, a) must be non-equivalent to b).

Also: power is not all pouvoir (enemy of the people) nor is it dispersed/multiplied micropowers. There is a specificity of political power.

10: Nonequivalence

Capitalism is the regime of commensurability, and so democracy must help mutate that regime, introduce a nonequivalence, a possibility of being an incomparable,

unsubstitutable value or sense. The common must affirm each in an affirmation that holds among everyone: all have value [recall Clastres, p. 186: you are worth no more and no less than anyone else], but each of those values is incommensurable. Absolute valuing; nothing's the same; each one is unique, but that uniqueness obligates it infinitely to be put into actuality.

11: A Space Formed for the Infinite

Politics does not affirm non-equivalence, it makes a space for that to happen, leaves open that possibility. Democracy does not take on a Figure, an Identity, it opens the possibility for multiple figures and identities to come into existence and be partaged. The good life, the polis, the common, these can be discussed and defined, but never made into a paradigm, a settled Figure. It makes possible the emergence of new forms of the good life, polis, etc. [I worry that 'the new' is his only value, and possibility-for-its-own-sake is all he desires.]

12: Praxis

In democracy the people are sovereign, but that sovereignty has no figure: it is simply the supreme. It is neither God nor master. And so democracy = anarchy, which rigorously maintains the absence of any arche. The democratic kratein is the people's power to 1) ward off the arche, and then to 2) take responsibility (all together and each individually) for the possibilities that are thus opened up. We are capable of desiring death as well as the good life [we are both Gods and monsters], and so this responsibility is a serious one.

Democracy starts from the polis and goes beyond the political order. Part of this process must be to nullify general equivalence and the economic foundation of politics.

13: Truth

Concluding chapter: democracy is not a political form but a refoundation of politics that reengenders man and the world [and their relationship]. Democracy withdraws from all assumptions. It understands everything that exists is a finite burst [apollonian order] of the infinite [dionysian chaos]. Democracy is a regime of sense that wholly engages man in a dance over the abyss. It is a duty to invent a wholly new politics, not of the end but of the means to keep open the possibility of new political bursts. For example, there is nothing given about health. It is our responsibility to choose what health is and how it works among us.

Democracy is first a metaphysics (a thought) and then a politics.

II-The Senses of Democracy (1999)

Democracy has become consensus and so has anomie. We need to rethink it. If democracy means people have political power: 1) people can mean an oppressed part--and so democracy is revolt in which demos gets active. Permanent revolution, never ends in law/institution. Always a return to the breach. 2) People could = everyone. Here, people must first self-constitute, then they can act for themselves, either as polity (Rousseau) or society (Marx). Both of these ways of understanding democracy are a withdrawal, a negative index.

Democracy could also be a being in common founded on a mutual recognition of fellows and their independence. A commune, and there are two ways of thinking this: 1) as pre-political life, 2) as the State. [unclear here]

We can think in terms of a theological-political (either transcendent-negative or positive-immanent) or in terms of a break with the theological-political,

which Nancy supports [though the theo-polit. is quite vague, and the problem with it is not made clear--probably that it Figures/reifies/institutionalizes].

After the break with the theological-political: a deciding on the nature, stakes, and place of politics. A thinking of the common, and a careful distinguishing of the common (sense) from the political (power). These are fused a priori in the theological-political.

A whole new relationship of man with himself, distancing himself from himself in order to go beyond.

[This is way too notional and vague and elliptical to be of much real use. Especially when he impugns whole areas of thought, like 'the theological-political', without saying at all clearly what it is, or who thinks that way, why it is wrong, and how his way of thinking is better. He is like this in the communism book as well. There are some good ideas here, but they will need to be ideas that are worked out by someone else, because he is not going to do it.]

III-Is Everything Political? (a simple note) (2000)

Short answer: no. Politics is limited, it is the place where incommensurability is kept open, it is the place of an in-common, but one that is never subsumed under a union/community/subject. Politics is where a non-unity is articulated, where a lack of a figure is affirmed. Ends and essences are continually *not* accomplished in politics. [Popular] power is the force that sustains this nonunity according to a incommensurable justice. Politics keeps open the act of regulating according to a universal that is not given and must be produced. Politics is a place of detotalization, the place of the exercise of power in view of an incommensurable justice.

Politics was never totalizing for the ancients [and so we might learn from them in this era of totalizing politics].

[The lesson here is for those on the left who imagine either a (communist) society without politics (politics is nothing) or (communism of) a multitude that produces and rules itself (politics is everything). Either way they miss the point, that politics is something, but not everything.]

Another lesson is that man is not 'alienated' from his 'proper' self. This comes as no surprise, since one would expect people like Nancy to reject the idea of an origin or end that is embedded in the idea of a 'proper' self. But OK, even if that 'proper' is not absolute and fixed, why can't it be constructed, a proper as we define it together and then use it to measure our actual selves. In that latter approach, alienation would be the distance between our idea of what our proper self is and the self we actually are. His way forward is to continually work on the definition of an incommensurable justice, to continually work on claiming the in-finity of being man and being world.