

THE REPRESSION OF CONFLICT AND THE LIMITS OF UNIVERSALIST ETHICS. A CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY OF CONSENSUS

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Abstract

This essay examines the contemporary crisis of democracy from a psycho-philosophical perspective. It argues that democracy is not threatened only by external anti-democratic actors or institutional erosion, but also by theoretical frameworks that render conflict normatively suspect. Drawing on Arendt's account of plurality, Crouch's diagnosis of post-democracy, Habermas's deliberative model, and Mouffe's agonistic critique, the essay shows how consensus-oriented liberal theories and its implicit ethical universalism risks depoliticizing conflict, marginalizing affect, and moralizing disagreement. Against this tendency, the essay develops an alternative reading of democratic life as an open, conflictual, and demanding practice of coexistence. Democracy requires not the elimination of conflict, but the cultivation of institutions, affects, and forms of judgment that can transform antagonism into agonism. The essay concludes that democratic renewal depends on subject formation, philosophical self-examination, and participatory spaces that bring democracy back into everyday life.

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Over the past decade, a wide array of comparative indices has documented a sustained deterioration in democratic quality worldwide. *Freedom House* reports that global freedom declined for the twentieth consecutive year in 2025, with more countries registering net declines than gains (*Freedom House* 2025). *Demo Finland* similarly finds that autocratization has intensified and that, for the first time in two decades, autocracies now outnumber democracies (Tilli 2025). These trends have prompted an urgent reconsideration of the conceptual foundations upon

which contemporary democracies rely, especially the normative theories that silently guide our expectations about how democratic politics ought to work.

It is commonly believed that fascists and anti-democrats are the worst enemies of our democracies. This essay approaches the present crisis from a different angle. While openly anti-democratic movements undoubtedly pose real dangers, I contend that they are often symptoms rather than root causes of democratic fatigue. The argument advanced here is that a specific family of liberal-democratic theories, especially those associated with deliberative and consensus-oriented models such as Habermas' (Habermas 1996) and Rawls' (Rawls 1993), misapprehend the constitutive role of conflict in democratic life. Disagreement is too often seen as a deficit to be overcome through more refined procedures of deliberation. The consequence, paradoxically, is that democratic agency gets hollowed out, as I will show in detail.

20 As a point of departure, I adopt Colin Crouch's (Crouch 2004; 2020) diagnosis of "post-democracy", in which the formal apparatus of elections and rights persists while substantive agenda-setting migrates to insulated centers of economic and technocratic power. Crouch's account is sociologically illuminating, but it is also conceptually important because it highlights the mismatch between democratic forms that stage participation and background theories that normalize consensus-seeking as a measure of political maturity. In such a setting, the liberal fixation on consensus can function as a filter that privileges articulate, institutionally proximate, and culturally dominant voices. The corrective proposed in this paper re-frames legitimacy around conflict-competent institutions and public cultures. Consensus is episodic, not telic. The common legal ground is procedural: nonviolence, reversibility, opponent recognition, transparency, division of powers, freedom of speech, institutional accountability, and the protection of rights. Reasons and affects are co-constitutive inputs to public judgment. Agenda-setting and implementation must be brought under public justification, with visible dissent protocols where agreement cannot be reached. In short, recovering democratic substance requires dethroning consensus as the measure of political maturity and designing forms that render constitutive conflicts civil, accountable, and revisable. I propose

that what threatens democracy today is not only the visible rise of anti-democratic actors, but also the less visible theoretical commitments that render democratic conflict normatively suspect. Furthermore, I will argue for an alternative psycho-philosophical reading that situates democratic conflict within the broader conditions of subject formation, affective orientation, and normative interpretation. The aim is not to abandon reason, institutions, or democratic norms, but to understand the psychological, philosophical, and social conditions under which conflict can become democratically productive rather than destructively antagonistic.

1 *The Democratic Narcissistic Wound*

Democracy demands an existential effort from its citizens, the radical nature of which is often underestimated. To inhabit democracy is to accept that political life is constitutively unfinished. Meanings are contestable, priorities are reversible, and outcomes are open to revision. It requires the cultivated capacity to tolerate ambiguity, to endure uncertainty, contradiction, and the incompleteness of collective decisions. Authoritarian regimes offer the narcotic of closure: clear truths, fixed hierarchies, and well-defined enemies. Democracy, by contrast, exposes us to contingency, reminding us that every compromise has an expiration date, every majority may become a minority, and every certainty is destined to be called into question.

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Arendt gives the classical formulation of this demand in her account of plurality: the world is shared by a multiplicity of perspectives, none of which can claim a God's-eye view, and this plurality is not a deficit to be redeemed by higher synthesis but the positive condition of politics itself (Arendt 1958: 7). As Arendt writes, «plurality is the condition – not only the *condicio sine qua non*, but the *condicio per quam* – of all political life» (Arendt 1958: 7). Plurality signals the irreducible difference in standpoint, memory, and meaning that renders action and judgment intrinsically perspectival (Arendt 1958: 175–181).

This realization inflicts what might be called a *democratic narcissistic wound*. It means the acknowledgment that one's own perspective is not universal, one's group not central, one's way of life not given. Freud described the civilizing process as a domes-

tication of instinct that produces lasting discontent (*Unbehagen in der Kultur*) in societies (Freud 1930). The democratic analogue is a curbing of certainty that produces lasting ambivalence. The temptation to flee from this ambivalence and to exchange the fragility of judgment for the comfort of dogma is perennial. As William James suggested in his reflections on the will to believe, human beings are drawn toward beliefs that still the «buzzing, blooming confusion» of experience (James 1986: 462). Politics is one of the principal theaters in which this gravitational pull is felt.

Contemporary crises magnify this pull. Under conditions of poly-crisis (climate emergency, war, migration, economic insecurity) the cognitive and affective costs of uncertainty rise. Behavioral research shows that heightened threat environments amplify loss aversion and preference for clear, identity-congruent cues. The appeal of anti-democratic movements feeds on the promise of psychological relief: certainty instead of ambivalence, identity instead of plurality, belonging instead of individuation and so on. Such movements offer what democracy, by its very structure, cannot: the erasure of contingency through the purification of the collective “we”. Schmitt’s infamous friend-enemy distinction captures the existential allure of this purification. By naming the enemy, the political community secures its self-identity against the intractability of plural claims (Schmitt 1932).

Democracy, by contrast, requires the cultivation of dispositions that do not come naturally under stress. Ambiguity tolerance is a discipline of judgment that sustains deliberation in the face of incomplete information and clashing values. It is akin to what Dewey called experimentalism: treating collective choices as hypotheses to be tested rather than dogmas to be enforced (Dewey 1927). It also entails Nussbaum’s education of the emotions, where anger, fear, and compassion are not repressed as irrational but reflected upon as evaluative perceptions that can be shaped toward justice through their articulation and transformation within public forms (Nussbaum 2013).

2 *The Hidden Normativity of Deliberative Democracy*

Crouch’s post-democracy thesis maintains that while electoral rituals and rights persist, substantive agenda-setting migrates to insulated economic and technocratic centers (Crouch 2004:

4–7). Habermas’s deliberative ideal, by contrast, presupposes a rationally ordered, power-sensitive public sphere in which the «unforced force of the better argument» guides will-formation (Habermas 1984: 25). The linkage between these two frameworks is straightforward: when real publics are structured by inequality, strategic communication, platform architectures, and lobbying, the consensus ideal can translate open power struggles into administratively “reasonable” discourses. The institutional form remains intact, but conflict is recoded into expertocratic formats, stabilizing the post-democratic condition. For Crouch, politics is increasingly displaced into pre-parliamentary arenas of consultancy, think tanks, and executive negotiation (Crouch 2004: 4–7). In Habermas’s framework, consensus functions as a regulative telos, with dissent treated as a provisional stage en route to rational agreement (Habermas 1996: 304–308). Normatively enthroning consensus has a predictable practical effect: antagonistic projects and affective mobilizations are downgraded as immature, while actors with discursive capital (economic resources, institutional proximity, and cultural fluency) set the terms of reasonable disagreement. Post-democratic arrangements are thereby stabilized because conflict is absorbed into procedural rationality.

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Another problem lies in the ethical universalism which is implicit to Habermas’ deliberative ideal because he derives democratic legitimacy from supposedly universal conditions of rational communication. His model assumes that all valid political norms must be justifiable to all affected persons through procedures of free and equal deliberation (Habermas 1983: 127). An ethical universalist approach necessarily remains blind to its own cultural, historical, and epistemic presuppositions. Universalism presents its moral claims as if they emerged from a neutral standpoint of pure reason, while in fact they are always shaped by particular traditions, social imaginaries, institutional histories, and certain forms of life. The particularity of one’s own position is silently transformed into the measure of the human as such. What appears as rational, moral, or civilized is then often nothing more than the self-generalization of a specific cultural horizon. This produces a distorted image of universality: instead of opening a space for genuinely shared ethical reflection, it imposes a pre-given model of reason, autonomy, progress, or human flourishing onto contexts whose moral grammars may be organized differently. The result is a form of epistemic arrogance

and other ways of knowing, valuing or organizing social life are dismissed as irrational, emotional, or backward. Ethical universalism thereby risks becoming an instrument of domination. It speaks the language of morality while reproducing hierarchies of recognition. In democracies, we should be able to distinguish between the aspiration to formulate claims that can be shared across contexts and the illegitimate elevation of one particular context into a universal norm. The former is indispensable for democratic coexistence. The latter risks transforming liberal morality into a concealed form of cultural domination.

24 Further difficulty concerns the unequal distribution of voice, recognition, and concrete participation within democratic discourse. Deliberative models often presuppose that political participants enter the public sphere as formally equal subjects who can exchange reasons and allow the “better argument” to prevail. Yet this assumption risks obscuring the social and material conditions that determine whose speech is heard, whose concerns appear legitimate, and whose form of expression is recognized as rational in the first place. What counts as reasonable, objective, moderate, or relevant is never entirely neutral because this too reflects dominant cultural expectations, epistemic habits, and institutional priorities. This raises a deeper question: who decides what the “better argument” is, and according to which criteria? An argument may appear better from the standpoint of efficiency, but worse from the standpoint of justice, better from the perspective of economic growth, but worse from the perspective of ecological sustainability and so on and so on. If participants do not merely disagree about means, but about the values and priorities or the background assumptions that define the problem itself, then rational consensus becomes much more fragile than deliberative theory often assumes. In such cases, disagreement is not simply the result of insufficient information or poor reasoning. It arises from fundamentally different experiences of reality, different social positions, and different conceptions of what matters at that particular moment. Power asymmetries therefore affect deliberation at a deeper level than the unequal opportunity to speak.

Another weakness of the deliberative model lies in its tendency to treat affects solely as politically dangerous elements that must be disciplined, neutralized, or excluded from legitimate political judgment. This view misunderstands the role of affect in political life. Emotions such as fear, anger, hope, resent-

ment or belonging are not external disturbances of politics, they are among the very forces through which political identities are formed and become meaningful. No political order is sustained by reason alone. Even constitutional principles, human rights, democratic institutions, and ideals of justice require affective attachment if they are to become socially effective. Citizens must not only understand democracy, but they must also care about it and experience it as relevant to their own lives. When democratic theory imagines the political subject primarily as a rational participant in discourse, it risks leaving passions to be mobilized by anti-democratic forces. Populist and fascist movements understand very well that politics is never merely a matter of arguments, programs, or institutions. If democratic theory has no adequate language for these affective dynamics, it cannot understand why such movements become attractive, nor can it develop meaningful strategies against them.

This does not mean that affects should be romanticized. Affects can indeed be politically dangerous. They can be manipulated, intensified, and directed toward exclusion, hatred, and violence. But the danger of affects is precisely why they must be theoretically understood. What is excluded from theory does not disappear from politics. It returns in uncontrolled and often destructive forms. The question is how affect can be shaped by democratic norms and how reason can remain responsive to lived experience.

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The next problem concerns the conceptual confusion between compromise and consensus. These two notions are often treated as if they belonged to the same democratic logic, yet they imply fundamentally different understandings of political disagreement. The ideal of consensus suggests that conflicting positions can ultimately be resolved into a shared rational agreement, as if political conflict were merely a temporary deviation from a truth that all reasonable participants should eventually recognize. Compromise, by contrast, does not require the disappearance of disagreement. This distinction is crucial for democratic theory. The ideal of consensus can poison democratic discourse when it implies that whoever resists agreement must be irrational, unreasonable, or morally defective. If there is presumed to be only one rational endpoint of discussion, then persistent disagreement becomes suspect. At least one party must then appear as incapable of reason, unwilling to ac-

cept truth, or driven by bad faith. This transforms political conflict into a hierarchy of rationality, where one side appears enlightened, while the other seems to be backward. Under such conditions, democratic opponents are no longer encountered as adversaries with different priorities, but as obstacles to the realization of reason itself.

26 Compromise has a different ethical and political structure. It does not demand that opponents abandon their deepest commitments or pretend to share the same interpretation of the common good. Rather, it requires an approach toward the opponent without the fantasy of complete reconciliation. In compromise, one recognizes that the other's position has political reality even when one does not accept its moral or theoretical foundations. This recognition is a form of democratic discipline. It means the capacity to act with others despite unresolved disagreement. It is emotionally difficult because the conflicts at stake may still be burning. Nonetheless compromise preserves the plurality of political life more honestly than consensus, because it acknowledges that democratic co-existence often depends on negotiated arrangements among conflicting perspectives. Compromise thus is one of the central arts of democratic life. It recognizes that democracy is a political form in which people who disagree about truth, value, and priority nevertheless remain bound to one another. A democratic culture that confuses consensus with compromise risks destroying the very conditions of pluralism it claims to defend. This does not mean that consensus should be excluded altogether. Consensus, for example, is fundamental regarding basic democratic framework conditions, such as legal institutions, the division of power, freedom of speech, accountability, and the recognition of equal political standing, but this refers only to the playground of democratic politics and not its content.

3 The Agonistic Transformation of Conflict

One of the central arguments developed in this essay is that democracy does not fail primarily because of the presence of external enemies or even solely because of the deterioration of institutions. Rather, democracy becomes vulnerable when it loses the capacity to give political form to conflict. Following

Mouffe's diagnosis, one of the principal weaknesses of liberal theories of democracy lies in their tendency to repress, neutralize, or moralize conflict instead of acknowledging it as constitutive of the political (Mouffe 2008: 60). This critique is directed especially at the deliberative model of Habermas, which places rational discourse, argumentative justification, and the possibility of consensus at the center of democratic legitimacy. While he rightly emphasizes communication, publicity, and the importance of reason-giving, he risks underestimating the irreducibly conflictual and affective dimensions of political life.

The liberal ideal of consensus often rests on the assumption that political disagreements can, in principle, be resolved through rational deliberation among free and equal participants. Yet, from Mouffe's perspective, this assumption misconstrues the nature of the political. Democratic societies are not merely composed of rational individuals exchanging arguments in search of mutually acceptable solutions. They are also shaped by collective identities, historical wounds, social antagonisms, material inequalities, political passions, and competing visions of the good life, as we heard before. Many conflicts are not simply the result of misunderstanding or insufficient information; they emerge from incompatible interests, divergent values, and struggles over power, recognition, and belonging. Mouffe's critique challenges the idea that democracy should aim at the elimination of conflict. For her, the political is constituted by the ever-present possibility of antagonism. Every social order is based on exclusions, hierarchies, and contingent decisions that could have been otherwise. The attempt to imagine democracy as rational consensus risks concealing the very struggles through which democratic life is animated. The repression of conflict does not pacify society, but it merely displaces conflict into less visible and often even more destructive forms (Mouffe 2006: 100–106).

This is why Mouffe warns against what she calls a moralized conception of politics. When political conflict is interpreted primarily as a failure of rationality, civility, or moral understanding, opponents are no longer encountered as legitimate political adversaries. They are instead treated as irrational, backward, dangerous, or morally deficient (Mouffe 2006: 103).

The danger of the deliberative model lies in its tendency to morally elevate the notion of "good reasons". In principle, the demand that political claims be justified through reasons is in-

dispensable for democratic life because it protects public discourse from arbitrariness. Once political legitimacy is tied too strongly to the possession of rationally acceptable arguments, those who do not share these arguments are easily portrayed as irresponsible or morally deficient. This dynamic is particularly dangerous. If one side understands itself as speaking from the standpoint of moral correctness, then opposition appears as resistance to justice or humanity itself. In this way, it contributes to the moralization of political conflict: the opponent is first classified as unreasonable, then as morally suspect, and finally, in the most extreme case, as dangerous or evil. When political opponents are framed as irrational and immoral, the threshold between adversarial conflict and enemy construction becomes dangerously thin. Of course, democracy must be capable of drawing normative boundaries. But there is a crucial difference between criticizing a position and denying the political humanity of the person who holds it. To dismiss the other too quickly as irrational is to avoid the harder psychological task of understanding the conditions and reasons under which their position may appear meaningful and unveil its implicit logic.

Under such conditions, political disagreement is no longer processed as disagreement within a shared democratic space, but it risks getting pathologized. The paradox is that a political model that seeks to overcome conflict in the name of rational consensus can itself intensify polarization, because it deprives conflict of recognized democratic channels. Against this background, Mouffe proposes the distinction between antagonism and agonism. Antagonism names a relation between enemies: a conflict in which the other is perceived as a threat to be destroyed or excluded. Agonism, by contrast, names a relation between adversaries: a conflict in which opponents struggle intensely, but recognize one another as legitimate participants in a shared political order. As she writes, «the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism» (Mouffe 2005: 20). Democracy, then, does not consist in the overcoming of conflict, but in its institutional, symbolic, and affective transformation. Its task is to create forms in which conflict can be expressed without turning into civil war, exclusion, or annihilation. This transformation requires more than procedural arrangements. It also requires profound emotional and cultural work. Citizens must learn to endure disagreement without interpreting it as existential threat.

They must develop the capacity to engage in conflict without dehumanizing their opponents, to defend commitments passionately without collapsing politics into moral absolutism, and to recognize that democratic coexistence does not require the disappearance of opposition. In this sense, agonistic democracy presupposes a political education of the affects. Democratic subjects must be capable of passion, identification, and collective attachment, but these passions must be articulated in ways that sustain pluralistic institutions.

The problem is that liberal democratic discourse often fails precisely at this point. By presenting political conflict as a technical problem to be managed, politics is reduced to administration, expertise, legality, or procedural consensus. Citizens may experience democratic institutions as emotionally empty and politically disempowering. Their grievances may appear unheard, their identities unrecognized, and their conflicts depoliticized. This creates an opening for anti-democratic and populist movements, which promise to restore the political in its most immediate and affectively charged form.

The appeal of such movements lies in the psychological relief they provide. They offer clear narratives of blame, visible enemies, collective belonging, and an emotionally satisfying distinction between “us” and “them”. The complex plurality of democratic conflict is reduced to a binary opposition between the pure people and the corrupt elite, the nation and its enemies, the authentic community and those who allegedly threaten it. Yet its attraction becomes understandable, anti-democratic movements become thus visible as the failures of liberal depoliticization. Where citizens are told that there is no alternative, that political decisions are merely technical necessities, or that disagreement signals moral backwardness, political energies do not disappear. They accumulate elsewhere. They return in distorted forms: resentment, conspiracy thinking, authoritarian longing, and the desire for decisive exclusion. Populisms capture conflicts that liberal democracy has failed (denied, ignored or neglected) to articulate democratically.

Mouffe’s argument is therefore a warning about the conditions of democracy’s survival. Democratic conflict must be structured by institutions, symbolic forms, and civic dispositions that allow opponents to remain adversaries rather than enemies. Conflict is not external to democracy, but its lifeblood.

The question is whether democracy can provide forms through which conflict becomes productive (Mouffe 2007: 45–46). Her agonistic model shows that democracy does not require the fantasy of a fully reconciled society.

*4 Critical Philosophy and Democratic Subject Formation.
From Abstract Principle to Lived Democratic Practice*

30 The defense of democracy cannot be reduced to the preservation of institutional procedures alone. It requires sincere and sustained engagement with the social, psychological, and political demands that democratic life places upon individuals and communities. Democracy depends, of course, on functioning institutions: constitutional limits, independent courts, public deliberation, free media, and mechanisms of accountability. Yet these institutions cannot sustain themselves in isolation. They presuppose citizens who are capable of understanding, valuing, and defending the principles upon which democratic life rests. A democratic order requires individuals who grasp that power must be shared, that the abuse of power must be made structurally difficult, that collective decisions must be open to public scrutiny, and that accountability must be more than a formal ideal: it must be verifiable in practice.

This awareness does not emerge automatically. It must be cultivated through education, culture, and public life. A society that invokes democracy rhetorically while neglecting the formation of democratic subjects risks hollowing out the very form of life it claims to defend. In such a case, democracy becomes a set of symbols detached from the habits, virtues, and interpretive capacities that make democratic coexistence possible. Democratic fragility is rarely the result of institutional failure alone. It is often rooted in deeper experiences of social dislocation, economic insecurity, cultural humiliation, epistemic confusion, and the erosion of trust.

Therefor it's crucial to cultivate forms of life and education, that create spaces in which individuals can express themselves and their interest and where they can develop the capacities democratic life requires: to be able to translate ones interests in political demands, the capacity to think critically, to deliberate with others, to tolerate ambiguity, to recognize power, and to be

open to different worldviews. Democracy must be defended by law and policy, but also at the level of subject formation, which is a question of culture, and collective imagination. Its survival depends on whether societies can produce citizens who understand and sustain the ethical and political demands that these institutions embody.

When citizens come to perceive politics as an empty form of administration, as a domain in which their fears, anger, needs, and hopes find no meaningful articulation, democratic discourse becomes increasingly vulnerable to moralization. Politics that no longer appears capable of addressing real conflicts displaces them into symbolic, affective, and moral registers. In such a situation, disagreement is no longer experienced primarily as a contestation over interests, resources, values, or institutional arrangements, but as a confrontation between the righteous and the corrupt, the enlightened and the ignorant, the morally pure and the morally deficient.

The media often intensify this dynamic. By privileging immediacy, visibility, emotional charge, and simplified narratives, media systems tend to replace complexity with clarity of a deceptive kind. Ambivalence, hesitation, and contradiction are difficult to sustain within communicative environments structured by speed and polarization. Positions are quickly classified as acceptable or unacceptable, rational or irrational, progressive or reactionary, legitimate or dangerous. Practices commonly described as “cancel culture” are symptomatic of this broader tendency: they draw a boundary between what may be said and what must not be said, often before the political or philosophical meaning of a position has been adequately examined. This does not mean that all speech must be treated as equally valid, nor that democratic societies should tolerate incitement, dehumanization, or violence. But it does mean that democratic culture is weakened when exclusion replaces argument and moral classification replaces serious inquiry.

In this context, moral self-clarification becomes more urgent than ever. It is not only the absence of morality that threatens democracy, but also its excess. Moralism is not the same as ethical reflection. Ethical reflection concerns the examination of values, duties and responsibilities. Moralism, by contrast, tends to replace argumentation with conviction. The moralistic attitude is attractive because it relieves individuals of the burden

of thinking. It allows them to experience themselves as already on the right side, without undergoing the difficult work of examining the motives, fears, interests, and contradictions that structure their own judgments.

This distinction is crucial for democratic theory. Politics is not the realm of absolute truth in the same way that mathematics aims at truth. Politics is about opinions, interests, and values; but in a democratic society, these must remain open to justification, criticism, revision, and confrontation with reality.

The existential effort demanded by democracy is therefore double. First, it is epistemic: a willingness to revise one's beliefs in light of counterevidence and counterargument, recognizing the partiality of one's standpoint. Second, it is ethical-agonistic: a readiness to confront opponents as adversaries within shared rules rather than as enemies to be expelled, acknowledging that some conflicts are enduring and not resolvable by consensus without remainder. The mature democrat does not imagine that agreement is the default and conflict the exception; he understands that the legitimacy of outcomes rests on the fairness and visibility of the contest, the reversibility of decisions, and the accountability of those who wield power.

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Critical philosophy can provide a domain in which faith gives way to thought, moralism to insight, and self-certainty to self-examination. The philosophical attitude begins with the willingness to test oneself. It asks where we are comfortable, vain, defensive, or stubborn; where our blind spots emerge; where our affective reactions precede our reasons; where we project onto the world what we refuse to recognize in ourselves. For such work to be possible, one must be willing to look at the abyss of the world, but also at one's own inner abysses.

Philosophy can teach a mode of thinking that does not depend upon the possession of absolute truth. Its task is to create the conditions under which human beings become conscious of their judgments. It asks questions, investigates motivations, reveals implicit values, exposes contradictions, and brings into view the unconscious or unexamined elements that shape our choices. In this way can we ask whether we are still willing to affirm the convictions we hold.

A critical philosophy is a place of delay and suspension: a practice of stopping, of interrupting the immediacy of reaction in order to examine oneself and the world before acting. This

is politically important because immediacy too often becomes impulsive or ideological. In a culture that highly values fast decision-making and immediate response, philosophy should remain skeptical of the temptation to judge immediately. It can reveal the fallacies that accompany this cultural tendency.

This suspension is the condition of responsible action. To think philosophically is to set aside hasty certainties and entrenched convictions in order to make room for new possibilities of judgment. Arendt's notion of "thinking without a banister" captures precisely this condition: the need to think without relying on fixed foundations, inherited certainties, or ready-made systems of orientation (Arendt 1979: 336).

Yet thought cannot truly test itself in isolation. Already at the beginning of Western Philosophy the importance of the dialog is crucial. Socrates' life shows, that thinking requires the presence of another. A thought that never exposes itself to the question of the other risks remaining imprisoned within the circle of its own convictions. Only in dialogue, in the resistance and echo of another voice, does thinking rediscover the tension that frees it from self-satisfaction. Thus philosophical dialogue is a practice of democratic formation too. It teaches individuals not to identify themselves completely with their opinions, not to fear refutation as humiliation, and not to confuse ignorance with failure. Socrates' courage lay not in possessing the truth, but in acknowledging ignorance and opening himself to inquiry with others.

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This is why Socratic dialogue has a deeply political significance. It creates a space in which human beings can encounter one another without immediately transforming disagreement into hostility. The political realm cannot be closed by doctrinal certainty if we admit the plurality of life, values, cultures, and interests. The perspective that could help democratic politics is the shared recognition of incompleteness: the incompleteness of human systems, of our knowledge, and even of our self-understanding. The agora, or *res publica*, is the symbolic site of democratic culture; it's the space in which thought encounters itself through others.

This philosophical dimension is essential to democracy. Democracy, more than other political forms, is an open process: an art of coexistence among plural and often conflicting forms of life. Modern democracies often suffer from distance, like the distance between citizens and decision-making centers or between

local needs or everyday experiences and abstract institutions. These distances produce alienation, resentment, and the sense that politics belongs to others. If democracy is to regain its force, it must be brought back into everyday life through new and decentralized forms of participation, like local assemblies, citizens' councils, regional civic initiatives, participatory budgeting, deliberative forums, and transnational networks. They give citizens opportunities to encounter complexity directly, to listen to one another, to articulate needs, to negotiate conflicts, and to experience themselves as agents. They can restore a sense of voice and belonging to communities that often feel excluded from institutional centers of power. More importantly, they can transform democracy from an abstract principle into a lived practice.

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