

Democratic Hope¹

Richard J. Bernstein

My theme is democratic hope, but I want to begin with some reflections about utopia—or more precisely what I will call the utopian or emancipatory impulse. “Utopia,” which literally means “no place” in Greek, is the word that Sir Thomas More invented to name an imaginary island in which there is presumably a perfect social, legal, and political system, but it is a term that has taken on a much more general significance. It isn’t fashionable today, except as a subject of academic dissertations, to talk about utopia, but because of the popularity of Tom Stoppard’s trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*, the topic of utopia has achieved some currency. If you have seen or read the plays, you may well have complex reactions. You may have experienced a sense of charming remoteness—how distant we are from a time when an eccentric group of intellectuals drunk on philosophical ideas acted as if their heady talk and proclamations could bring about a radical social and political transformation of backward Russia. But for all the high talk of Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling, you might also think how naive they were about the brute realities and repressive power of the world in which they lived.

Isaiah Berlin in his classic essays on the Russian intelligentsia—one of Stoppard’s sources of inspiration—beautifully captures the spirit of the time: the hopes, dreams, passions, illusions, confusions, and contradictions of these remarkable intellectuals. Berlin’s great hero is Alexander Herzen. Berlin’s prose is so lively and vivid that it is worth quoting his description of Herzen.

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Herzen delighted in independence, variety, the free play of individual temperament. He desired the richest possible development of personal characteristics, valued spontaneity, directness, distinction, pride, passion, sincerity, the style and colour of free individuals; he detested conformism, cowardice, submission to the tyranny of brute force or pressure of opinion, arbitrary violence, and anxious submissiveness; he hated the worship of power, blind reverence for the past, for institutions, for mysteries or myths; the humiliation of the weak by the strong, sectarianism, philistinism, the resentment and envy of majorities, the brutal arrogance of minorities. He desired social justice, economic efficiency, political stability, but these must always remain secondary to the need for protecting human dignity, the upholding of civilized values, the protection of individuals from aggression, the preservation of sensibility and genius from individual or institutional bullying.²

In short, Herzen was a utopian, but a utopian who never compromised his vision of individual liberty and human dignity.

Another thinker who has reflected deeply about the meaning and the vicissitudes of utopia is the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski. He tells us that

It is an interesting cultural process whereby a word of which the history is well known and which emerged as an artificially concocted proper name has acquired, in the last two centuries, a sense so extended that it refers not only to a literary genre but to a way of thinking, to a mentality, to a philosophical attitude, and is being employed in depicting cultural phenomena going back to Antiquity, far beyond the historical moment of its invention.³

What is this extended sense of utopia as a way of thinking, a mentality, a philosophical attitude? We can begin to answer this question by turning to the description that Kołakowski gives in an earlier essay.

By utopia I mean a state of consciousness, a mental counterpart to the social movement striving for radical change in the world.... It endows the real movement with the sense of realizing an ideal born in the realm of pure spirit and not in current historical experience.... As long as this tendency lives only in clandestine existence, without finding expression in mass social movements, it gives birth to utopias in the narrower sense, that is, to individually constructed models of the world, as it *should* be. But in time utopia becomes actual social consciousness; it invades the consciousness of a mass movement and becomes one of its essential driving forces. Utopia, then, crosses over from the domain of theoretical

² Isaiah Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelley (New York: Viking, 1978) 87.

³ Leszek Kołakowski, "The Death of Utopia Reconsidered," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 3, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983) 229.

and moral thought into the field of practical thinking, and itself begins to govern human action.... Utopia is the striving for changes which “realistically” cannot be brought about by immediate action, which lie beyond the foreseeable future and defy planning. Still, utopia is a tool of action upon reality and of planning social activity.⁴

The utopian impulse requires what philosophers call negativity or critique—a refusal to accept the status quo, a condemnation of social injustice, and a defiant creative imagination that dares to project an ideal of a more socially just world. As Kołakowski emphasizes, a crucial stage in the development of the utopian impulse is the transition from moral and theoretical indignation to practical thinking that begins to *inform* present human action. The point that I want to emphasize is that the utopian impulse is not about the future: it is directed to the present and to concrete reality. It is the source of energy and motivation for the practical striving to transform existing reality in order to approximate a more ideal, socially just world.

Why have we become so suspicious and skeptical of utopianism and the utopian impulse? There are good reasons. Anyone who has lived through the horrors of the twentieth century and the anxieties of the twentieth-first century will be wary of the deformation of utopianism. When utopianism turns into fanaticism—a fanaticism that will justify any means of terror and the murder of innocents—to achieve its goals, it has become thoroughly malignant. Anyone who actually reads the pronouncements of Osama bin Laden and his inner circle may well shudder at the apocalyptic utopianism of their vision of the ultimate triumph of Islam. What Kołakowski wrote about the twentieth-century “totalitarian utopias” is just as relevant for our time:

What made utopias look malignant in our century was clearly not the very dream of perfection; whether self-contradictory or not, descriptions of a celestial felicity on earth were in themselves no more than harmless literary exercises. They have become ideologically poisonous to the extent that their advocates managed to convince themselves that they had discovered a genuine technology of apocalypse, a technical device to force the door of paradise.⁵

So given the horrors committed in the name of utopias, we might conclude that we are all better off without them. And yet matters are not so simple. If we focus on those glorious moments of social progress in modern history, we discover that they have been inspired and motivated by utopian impulses. Below I will try to show this with reference to the founding of our Republic and the more recent Civil Rights movement. Here again Kołakowski—who personally lived through a malignant Communist “utopianism”—is insightful:

⁴ Leszek Kołakowski, “The Concept of the Left,” *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, trans. Jane Zielonko Peel (New York: Grove, 1968) 69–70. There is a significant change in the evaluation of utopia by Kołakowski between 1968 and 1982. This is due, in part, to Kołakowski’s disillusionment with Marxism and the “Left.” Nevertheless, Kołakowski continues to defend the need for utopian thinking.

⁵ Kołakowski, “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered,” 242.

It is too easy to use all the well-founded anti-utopian arguments as a device whereby we may accept or even sanctify any kind of oppression and of blatant injustice if only they are not supported by utopian phraseology. . . . For centuries the intrinsic evil of human nature not only has been invoked as an argument against the attempts to restore the paradisiacal conditions on earth but has justified resistance to all social reforms and democratic institutions as well. . . . The utopian dogma stating that the evil in us has resulted from defective social institutions and will vanish with them is indeed not only puerile but dangerous. . . . Yet it might be no less pernicious to replace this optimistic fantasy with the opposite one, implying that in all human relationships there is nothing but hostility, greed, the lust for domination, and that all expressions of love, friendship, fraternity, and sacrifice are no more than deceptive appearances concealing the “real,” invariably selfish, motivations.⁶

Without a utopian impulse, without the imagination to conceive of a more ideal world and the courage and commitment to strive to attain it, we are always in danger of accepting blatant injustices—as if that is just “human nature”—the way things have to be. Utopian hopes always seem to exceed concrete historical achievements, and when this happens, there is a temptation to retreat into despair and cynicism. There is a tension, a paradox at the heart of utopianism. On the one hand, the lack of the so-called “realism” of the utopian impulse—the historical disparity between one’s hopes and the actual achievements of communal *praxis*—can all too easily lead to disillusionment and a sense of hopelessness. Yet without the utopian impulse, the melioration of concrete injustices might never be achieved. We need both utopian impulse and a robust skepticism about what it can achieve.

What I am calling the utopian impulse is very close to what Jürgen Habermas once called the emancipatory interest that is the basis for critique. And like Habermas, I want to stress that the emancipatory interest is not merely cognitive and discursive; it also involves an affective-motivational moment. It must speak to people’s deeply felt emotions and passions and motivate them to act collectively. The moral insight of the emancipatory interest is critique. “Critique,” Habermas writes, “terminates in a transformation of the affective-motivational basis, just as it begins with the need for practical transformation. Critique would not have the power to break up false consciousness if it were not impelled by a *passion for critique*.”⁷

But what do these reflections on the utopian or emancipatory impulse have to do with democratic hope? Everything! As I hope to show. But first we need to say something about that much-abused word “democracy.” We frequently forget that through most of history, political thinkers (including the Founders of the American Republic) were skeptical about democracy. Democracy meant the unbridled rule of the demos,

⁶ Kolakowski, “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered,” 245.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971) 234.

the uneducated mob, and it could easily turn into tyranny. Even the great liberal John Stuart Mill and the most perspicacious commentator on American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, worried about the tyranny of majorities and democratic leveling that encouraged mediocrity. But in the nineteenth century “democracy” began to take on a positive aura—although there had always been an undercurrent by “democratic realists” who argued that a democracy that involves *all* the people is unworkable and undesirable. “Democracy” took on such a “positive” aura that at the very height of Soviet totalitarianism, Stalin claimed that the Soviet Union was the only “true” democracy. In our popular political rhetoric, the word has been so emptied of meaningful content that it takes on almost any meaning. For some, democracy means “free elections”; for others, democracy is the capitalist “free market.” For still others democracy means the liberty to do whatever one wants without interference by the government. Although in recent years there has been a lively academic debate about the meaning and conditions of democracy, this academic discussion frequently seems very remote from the everyday concerns of ordinary people.

I want to explore a few themes about democracy by two thinkers who thought deeply about its meaning—thinkers who managed to speak to a wider audience than their academic colleagues: Hannah Arendt and John Dewey. Hannah Arendt has been criticized for the claims that she makes about the American and French Revolutions in *On Revolution*, but I believe that she captures something vital about the spirit of the American Revolution that we are in danger of forgetting. When she speaks of

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the American Revolution, she is not referring exclusively to what happened in 1776 but rather to the events that culminated in the writing and ratification of the Constitution. She argues that one of the primary reasons why the American Revolution was so “successful” was because Americans already had a long history of the practices of self-government, of making promises, covenants and compacts with each other. She traces the events of the Revolution from its initial “conservatism”—demanding the legitimate rights of Englishmen—to a more revolutionary idea when the

Founders realized that they were creating something that had never before existed in history. What Arendt stresses most is what she calls “public freedom.” Public freedom is not to be confused with one’s internal sense of freedom or what philosophers call “free will”; it is the tangible worldly freedom that arises in those public spaces when human beings debate, argue and form opinions, and act together. The Enlightenment *philosophes* captured this type of public freedom that was exemplified in the American Revolution:

Their public freedom was not an inner realm into which men might escape at will from the pressures of the world, nor was it the *liberum arbitrium* which makes the will choose between alternatives. Freedom for them could exist only in public; it was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity, it was the man-made public space or market-place which

antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all.⁸

Public freedom must be sharply distinguished from liberty. Liberty, for Arendt, is always liberty *from* something, whether it is liberation *from* oppressive rulers, tyrants, and dictators or liberation *from* poverty and need. Liberty is a necessary condition for freedom, not a *sufficient* condition. Freedom is a *positive* achievement of individuals acting together, and this tangible worldly freedom is extremely fragile. It exists only as long as citizens deliberate, debate, and act together; it exists only in those public spaces where citizens encounter each other as equals. The distinction between liberty and freedom is one of Arendt's most important, enduring, and relevant insights. Over and over again—especially after the fall of Communism in 1989—we have had to learn the bitter lesson that liberation from oppression does not automatically lead to tangible public freedom and to the creation of democratic public spaces. One of the greatest disasters of the “political rhetoric” justifying the military invasion of Iraq was the false belief that liberation from the tyrannical oppression of Saddam Hussein would immediately initiate democratic public freedom in Iraq and spread to the rest of the Middle East. Public freedom requires far more than formal elections. It requires the cultivation of those habits and practices where individuals debate, deliberate, compromise, and act together. It is only with the creation of such public spaces that worldly freedom flourishes.

Corresponding to this idea of tangible public freedom, Arendt develops her distinctive concept of political power. She criticizes the traditional idea of power, where power is understood as the domination of an individual or a group over other individuals and groups. Power, which she distinguishes from strength, force, authority, and violence, arises and grows spontaneously through the participation of citizens. Power springs up when individuals act together. She writes,

power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another. Hence, binding and promising, combining and covenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence; where and when men succeed in keeping intact the power which sprang up between them during the course of any particular act or deed, they are already in the process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action.⁹

This is what the Founders of our Constitution sought to achieve—to create “a stable worldly structure to house...their combined power of action” and to perpetuate public freedom. Arendt continues,

the course of the American Revolution tells an unforgettable story and is apt to teach a unique lesson; for this revolution did not break out but was made by men in common deliberation and on the strength of

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963) 120.

⁹ Arendt 174.

mutual pledges. The principle which came to light during those fateful years when foundations were laid—not by the strength of one architect but by the combined power of many—was the interconnected principle of mutual promise and common deliberation; and the event itself decided indeed, as Hamilton had insisted, that men “are really capable . . . of establishing good government from reflection and choice,” that they are not “forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”¹⁰

None of this would have been achieved without the utopian impulse of the Founders who were creating a new order—a utopian impulse that was tempered with a sense of worldly realism. One of Arendt’s great heroes is Thomas Jefferson, not so much the Jefferson of the *Declaration of Independence*, but the Jefferson who hoped that the Constitution would house those “small republics”—what he called “wards”—where public freedom and the revolutionary spirit would be kept alive and flourish. This was Jefferson’s democratic hope—a hope that Arendt thinks was soon betrayed and forgotten. She calls this “the lost treasure” of the revolutionary spirit. Arendt, at times, is quite skeptical about the potential flourishing of this revolutionary spirit. Her analysis of totalitarianism and the social forces at work in modernity focuses on how plurality and public freedom are being smothered, repressed, and defeated. But at the same time, Arendt rejects all claims about historical necessity. The potential for public, tangible, worldly freedom and the spontaneous emergence of the revolutionary spirit is rooted in our natality, our capacity to initiate, to begin something new.

Arendt felt that she witnessed this “miracle” again in the 1956 Budapest uprising and in the early days of the Civil Rights movement. Her vision of what individuals can achieve when they act together was one of the sources of inspiration for the Solidarity movement in Poland. When Adam Michnik was still in prison, he was reading Hannah Arendt. On those rare occasions when the revolutionary spirit becomes manifest, there is the spontaneous formation of what Arendt calls “councils.” These councils keep alive democratic politics. This is what she has to say about the councils in an American context:

The councils say: We want to participate, we want to debate, we want to make our voices heard in public, and we want to have a possibility to determine the political course of our country. Since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it. The booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one. The parties are completely unsuitable; there we are, most of us, nothing but the manipulated electorate. But if only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinion of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place through the exchange of opinions.¹¹

¹⁰ Arendt 215.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969) 232–3.

There are many striking differences between Hannah Arendt and John Dewey, but I want to focus on what they shared in common. If ever there was a philosopher of democratic hope, it was Dewey. Virtually everything he wrote and did in his long life sprang from his vision and commitment to a democracy in which all share and all participate.¹² In response to the criticism that his faith in democracy was utopian, Dewey responded with words that reinforce what we have learned from Arendt:

I have been accused more than once and from opposed quarters of an undue, a utopian, faith in the possibilities of intelligence and in education as a correlate of intelligence. At all events, I did not invent this faith. I acquired it from my surroundings as far as those surroundings were animated by the democratic spirit. For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication?¹³

What Dewey wrote in 1939 is even more urgent for us today. “We have to re-create by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origin one hundred and fifty years ago was largely a product of a fortunate combination of men and circumstances.” He goes on to declare:

If I emphasize that the task can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity, it is in part because the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically.... We acted as if our democracy were something that took place mainly at Washington and Albany—or some other state capital—under the impetus of what happened when men and women went to the polls once a year or so.... [W]e can escape from this external way of thinking only as we realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life.¹⁴

Jefferson was one of Dewey’s heroes because Jefferson’s conception of democracy was ethical through and through in its foundations, methods, and ends. At the age of eighty, Dewey reiterated his life-long faith and commitment to democracy. He spoke of creative democracy as a *task before us*—a task that can have no end. Dewey never gave

¹² This is the thesis of Robert B. Westbrook’s splendid book, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹³ John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” (1939), *John Dewey, The Later Works 1925–1953*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) 227.

¹⁴ Dewey 225–6.



John Dewey, 1950. © Sylvia Salmi/Bettmann/CORBIS.

up on his democratic hope and the need to keep it alive in the face of all obstacles and defeats.

The reason why I think that Arendt's and Dewey's reflections on freedom, citizen participation, and democracy are so important and relevant for us today is not because they offer blueprints or "solutions" for our current problems. They do not. But they summon us to *revitalize* existing democracies. They help us cut through the fog of clichés that dominate so much of our current political rhetoric; they remind us of what is most vital in our own democratic tradition. There are never any guarantees that democracy will prevail. Democracy as a way of life requires constant effort, commitment, and creative imagination. The importance of these reminders is not for the sake of the past, but rather for the present and the imagined future. They enliven possibilities to which we can still dedicate ourselves. They provide the kind of hope that can still guide our actions—our *praxis*.

I would like to illustrate the above with reference to my own experience in the Civil Rights movement—especially to an event that reinforced my own democratic hope. I went to Yale as a graduate student in philosophy in 1953. The Yale of more than fifty years ago might seem as remote as the Russia of Alexander Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin. No women undergraduates—women were not allowed in one of the most popular reading rooms in Sterling library. There was still a strict Jewish quota for undergraduates; one or two Jewish professors teaching in Yale College; scarcely any African-American, Hispanic, or Asian-American faces among the undergraduates. Yale was a thoroughly WASP institution; there were not even many Catholics. John Courtney Murray, one of the most famous and insightful commentators on American political life, was denied a teaching position at Yale because he was a Catholic priest.

Coming from the streets of Brooklyn where I had grown up and from the University of Chicago where I had been an undergraduate, Yale initially struck me as a stage set for an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel or a Cole Porter musical rather than a "real" place. It was the height of the McCarthy period. One of my most depressing memories was a public debate between the recent precocious Yale undergraduate William F. Buckley, Jr., and some Yale Law School professors. The Law School auditorium was packed with students. What was most depressing was that the majority of the students attending the debate were clearly enthusiastic about Buckley's defense of McCarthy and his nefarious

tactics. These were also the Eisenhower years, and when I started teaching in a program called Directed Studies, many Yale students had little more ambition than to succeed in the corporate world—and little or no social concern.

But things began to change—even at Yale. (A decade later, in 1964, a not-very-attentive freshman by the name of George W. Bush was a member of my introductory philosophy lecture course.) The changes taking place at Yale in the early 1960s were epitomized by the appointment, as campus chaplain, of the charismatic and dynamic social activist, William Sloan Coffin, Jr. Throughout the country students were beginning to get involved in the Civil Rights movement. Bill Coffin was the leader of the movement at Yale. In the summer of 1964, shortly after the murders of Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, and James Carney, a Yale contingent joined volunteers from all over the country to participate in the famous “Freedom Summer” in Mississippi. The Mississippi Freedom Project had two primary objectives: to register blacks to vote and to organize “Freedom Schools” for local black youths. I joined the Yale group for a short time—as a gesture of solidarity with the students who spent the long hot summer in Mississippi. When I returned from Mississippi, *The Nation* asked me to write about my time in Mississippi. I described my experience helping with voter registration of blacks (we used the word “Negroes” at the time). I wrote about a memorable meeting for the election of local black representatives to the Freedom Democratic Party that took place at Morningside Baptist Church, the headquarters for the Eaton precinct of Forest County.

This is what I wrote in 1964:

[I was sent out] with a 14-year-old Negro boy, one of the group of local kids who were working with COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] on the drive. At first I was a bit apprehensive (a worker had been beaten up in this neighborhood a few days before) and I wondered how my guide was going to handle the job. But when I heard him deliver his “pitch,” talk about freedom and what it would mean for Negroes to vote, chide his elders when they were hesitant to sign up, I was overwhelmed by his articulateness, earnestness, native intelligence and humor[.] And this boy was typical of a growing number who were working in the freedom movement. Talking with him, watching him function, I realized that there is no going back in Mississippi—these adolescents simply will not accept what their parents have accepted.¹⁵

After a summer of voter registration, the time had come for the local blacks to elect their delegates to the Freedom Democratic Party:

It was the culmination of weeks of work, and there was something approaching the nervousness of an “opening night” when it was called

Democracy as a way of life requires constant effort, commitment, and creative imagination.

¹⁵ Richard J. Bernstein, “Four Witnesses to a Mississippi Summer: The Educator,” *The Nation* 199.21 (28 December 1964): 513.



August 27, 1964, Atlantic City, NJ: Six members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party form a circle beside Mississippi's main delegation to the Democratic National Party in Atlantic City. The main delegation from Mississippi was opposed to desegregation. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

to order at 4 o'clock on a sweltering Saturday afternoon. For the COFO workers this meeting was a test of what they had achieved. It was the point, they felt strongly, at which the local Negroes had to take over. Would they show up for the meeting? Would they make a mess of it? That meeting turned out to be one of the most impressive political gatherings that I have ever attended.... As the woman who was chairman said, we were all a little nervous because this sort of thing had never been done before in Mississippi. It was the first political meeting open to everybody who wanted to come. Whenever in [the] future I think of

what democracy can mean in the concrete, the image of that meeting in Eaton precinct will come to mind.¹⁶

Today, more than fifty years after that meeting, it is still the vivid image that comes to mind when I think of what democracy concretely means. I have not told this story because of nostalgia for the early Civil Rights movement, but for the same reason that Arendt tells the story of those occasions in history when the revolutionary spirit suddenly came alive. Everything that I have been saying about the utopian and emancipatory impulse, about democratic hope, about the transition from imagining a better world to *doing* something to achieve it, and about the joy of acting together in solidarity to make public freedom tangible, was exemplified in the Mississippi Summer project.

That meeting in Morningside Baptist Church had the quality of a religious service filled with ringing Hallelujahs and Amens. We must never forget that without the support of the courageous black churches, there might never have been a Civil Rights movement in the South. And Bill Coffin epitomized what is best in that American religious tradition that dedicates itself to fighting social injustice. We should remember too that 1964 was still a time when the SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was truly nonviolent, when blacks and whites effectively worked together, when Christians and non-Christians joined in solidarity.

Despite all the hopes and dreams of those who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer, the Democratic National Convention refused to seat the delegates from the Mississippi Democratic Party. There was a dramatic moment when Fannie Lou Hamer, testifying before the Credentials Committee about the beating that she had received when she tried to vote, turned to the national television cameras and shouted for the entire nation to hear: “Is this America?” Considering the hopes and utopian aspirations of the movement, there were many who became disillusioned because the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party failed to accomplish its goal. This was a moment of disappointment and despair—one that all too frequently occurs when it becomes painfully apparent that there is an enormous disparity between imagined hopes and concrete “realities.” But we should not forget how what happened in Mississippi and throughout the South—despite the failure to achieve immediate objectives—significantly influenced the passing of Civil Rights legislation and helped to initiate a fundamental change in attitudes and practices about racism for many (but certainly not for all) Americans.

Kořakowski speaks of the rhythm of utopian dreams, which are energized by enthusiasm and hope and are followed by disillusionment. This is no argument against utopian aspirations, but rather an honest appraisal of its dynamics and how social reform is achieved.

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¹⁶ Bernstein 513.



August 22, 1964, Atlantic City, NJ: Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate Fanny Hamer speaks out for the meeting of her delegates at a credential meeting prior to the formal meeting of the Democratic National Convention. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

The moment of disappointment and disillusionment ought to be the spur for new forms of utopian thinking that seek to overcome recalcitrant obstacles. Although “utopia” originally suggested some sort of fixed ideal, what is most important is the *dynamic process* itself—a process that involves the reiterated rhythm of the creation of utopian hopes that can energize social action, followed by disappointments when we confront the disparity between the limited achievements of this *praxis* and our utopian dreams, which in turn ought to become a stimulus for new utopian aspirations that can energize new forms of action.

Today the enthusiasm, energy, and hopes of 1964 may seem even more remote than the smug satisfied Yale of 1953. Hannah Arendt—borrowing a phrase from Bertold Brecht—speaks of living in dark times. What she meant was not simply living under totalitarianism, but living through a time when there is little hope and little illumination. Today, I believe we are living through dark times. The last seven years have seen a disastrous decline of the leadership and moral authority of the United States and a pervasive sense of frustration by those who oppose the policies that have led to this decline. Our “democratic rhetoric” strikes most of the world as hollow and hypocritical. I am convinced, as were Hannah Arendt and John Dewey, that in the darkest of times it is absolutely essential to keep alive the cultural memory of what we have been at our best—not as a lament for a lost time, but as the basis for the hope of what might still be done. I am reminded of something that Dewey wrote in 1917, but which might have been written yesterday:

We pride ourselves upon being realistic, desiring a hard-headed cognizance of facts, and devoted to mastering the means of life. We pride ourselves upon a practical idealism, a lively and easily moved faith in possibilities as yet unrealized, in willingness to make sacrifice for their realization. Idealism easily becomes a sanction of waste and carelessness, and realism a sanction of legal formalism in behalf of things as they are—the rights of the possessor. We thus tend to combine a loose and ineffective optimism with assent to the doctrine of take who take can: a deification of power. All peoples at all times have been narrowly realistic in practice and have then employed idealization to cover up in sentiment and theory their brutalities. But never, perhaps, has the tendency been so dangerous and so tempting as with ourselves. Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation. And it is a faith which must be nurtured and made articulate.¹⁷

Even in the darkest of times, there are glimpses of illumination. We do not have the luxury of despair or cynicism. There are still today—no matter how faint—utopian aspirations and democratic hopes—and some have acted upon them in community work, human rights organizations, and fighting the ever-present threats of genocide. Those of us who have been lucky enough to experience the joys and satisfactions of public, tangible freedom and the solidarity that comes with acting together to achieve social justice have a responsibility to keep memories and hope alive. I share the steadfast conviction of Hannah Arendt that we should never give in to despairing fatalism or shallow optimism. We should resist all those who claim that the type of public freedom that she so eloquently described is no longer possible. We should resist all those who think that Dewey's democratic faith was naive and passé. We should reaffirm that creative democracy is always a *task before us* and requires hope, dedicated commitment, and toughness. This is even more urgent in a globalized world where many individuals throughout the world are feeling increasingly impotent and are becoming cynical about the prospects of democracy—the type of democracy where public tangible freedom is a living everyday reality. Democratic hope must always go hand in hand with intelligent informed praxis.

...in the darkest of times it is absolutely essential to keep alive the cultural memory of what we have been at our best...

What then is democratic hope? The best definition that I know of is the moving description given by the social critic Christopher Lasch:

Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it.... The worst is always what the hopeful are prepared for.

¹⁷ John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" (1917), *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, vol. 1, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Putnam, 1973) 97.

Their trust in life would not be worth much if it had not survived disappointments in the past, while the knowledge that the future holds further disappointments demonstrates the continuing need for hope.... Improvidence, a blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best, furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through even when they don't.¹⁸

¹⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991) 81. This passage is quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) 17. Westbrook's book is an excellent source for further reflections on the pragmatic contribution to illuminating democratic hope.