

ANARCHY

EXPLAINED TO MY FATHER

FRANCIS DUPUIS-DÉRI & THOMAS DÉRI

Translated from the French by JOHN GILMORE



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THOMAS DÉRI: Almost a thousand years ago the French philosopher Bernard de Chartres said, “We are dwarfs, standing on the shoulders of giants.” He meant that every generation builds on the achievements of previous generations. Now that I’m old and can look back at all the changes and discoveries that have taken place over the past fifty years, I wonder if the real giants today aren’t the younger generations. Everything is changing so fast that even simple words change their meanings, and new concepts force us to question many things we’ve taken for granted.

There was a time, in the Western world, when we used to respect our elders. We believed that with age came experience and wisdom. Now we label them “senior citizens” and “the elderly,” and put them in special residences, out of the way.

When I was a child, I was always pestering my parents to explain the world to me. “Why, why?” I kept asking. Sometimes they knew the answer. Other times,

exasperated, they just said, “Because!” Now that I’m retired (from work, though not from life), I have ample time to reflect on the meaning of things, and consider why people behave the way they do.

One thing I’ve noticed: when I’m discussing things with younger people, we often use the same words, but with different meanings. Simple words like *love*, *family*, *man*, *woman*, and *education* have new meanings now. Adjectives like *young*, *old*, *masculine*, and *feminine* no longer qualify nouns in the same way. Other words and expressions have become politically incorrect, replaced by circumlocutions or metaphors devoid of substance, like the word *deaf* replaced by *hard of hearing*, or *student* replaced by *learner*.

For a long time I puzzled over the meaning of *democracy*, a key word that everyone lays claim to. Eventually I realized there are as many democracies as there are self-proclaimed democrats, and I was wasting my time trying to pin down a word used by chameleons everywhere.

I’m fortunate to have a daughter and a son who don’t consider me an old fogey. We can discuss things without descending into intergenerational conflict. My daughter is a senior officer in the Canadian military and intensely interested in questions of leadership. My son teaches political science at a university and wrote a doctoral dissertation on democracy. I observed his thesis defence, four days before 9/11 — that day when the world changed and the word *democracy* suddenly took on several new meanings. And then *terrorism* became the new key word.

But life went on . . . The news is arriving faster and faster. Everyone is flying off in different directions these

days, and we no longer seem capable of making thoughtful connections between events, of seeing cause and effect. And so I've started wondering whether the key word in these early years of the twenty-first century shouldn't be *anarchy*.

Luckily, my son teaches a seminar called "Theories and Practices of Anarchism," which introduces students to the political and philosophical questions posed by anarchism. So, I turn to you now, Francis, and invite you to explain anarchy to me. Think of me, if you want, as representative of the generation molded by the experience of the Second World War. But I'm warning you right at the start—I won't accept "because" for an answer!

Democracy and Anarchism

FRANCIS DUPUIS-DÉRI: It's interesting: you used the word *democracy* before mentioning *anarchy*. For a long time the two words were almost synonymous, especially in the United States and France. Until the mid-nineteenth century, *democracy* referred to a political system in ancient Athens, where power was exercised by a popular assembly in which all citizens could participate in decisions affecting their common affairs. But this concept of democracy had a pejorative taint in the West. The problem with Athenian democracy, according to its detractors, was not just that women, slaves, and foreigners didn't have the right to enter the agora and participate in debates. The problem went much deeper: it was an irrational and chaotic system

of government, and inherently violent. Why? Because it was a system controlled by the majority, and the poor are always in the majority. So, critics argued, Athenian-style democracy would give the poor power, which they would use to attack the rich and destroy private property. Hence the idea of chaos and violence; hence the idea that democracy is anarchy, because the poor would never respect legitimate authority or the established hierarchical social order. To the elite, the very idea of democracy was scandalous.

The eighteenth century gave us the American War of Independence (1775–1783) and the French Revolution (1789). But almost no one at that time used the word *democracy* in a positive sense. The people we think of as the founding fathers of “modern democracy” in the United States and France were openly anti-democratic. They used the word *democracy* as a bogeyman in their speeches and writings; to call someone a *democrat* was an insult. They wanted to create a republic that was opposed to the monarchy and the aristocracy, but also to democracy, understood as a system in which the people, the majority of them poor, govern themselves without leaders. The republican elite considered this idea a political aberration and a moral threat. They insisted that the people needed enlightened leaders who were morally and intellectually superior to the ordinary people. In saying that, they were simply legitimizing their own power, for in their view power naturally resided in the upper class. Hence an observer remarked in 1790 that the French Revolution had simply replaced the “hereditary aristocracy” with an “elected aristocracy.” In other words, the newly

elected representatives in France's National Assembly had become the new elite, the new aristocracy.

That new elite believed that "the people" was a mass of selfish and irrational individuals who had no clear vision for society and were incapable of understanding the idea of "the common good." That explains why, when you delve into eighteenth-century archives, you find so many anti-democratic statements. For example, John Adams, one of the most important leaders of the American independence movement and the second president of the United States, said, "I was always for a free republic, not a democracy, which is . . . arbitrary, tyrannical, bloody, cruel, and intolerable." Can you imagine an American president saying that today?

Many ordinary people are convinced they need leaders to guide them. They get swept up in admiration for their leaders. They venerate them, even sacrifice their lives in their name. In the United States and France, the first people to call themselves *democrats* and lay claim to the word *democracy* were egalitarians who dreamt of doing away with distinctions between rich and poor, between the governed and those who govern. During the French Revolution, for example, Sylvain Maréchal put forth such radical ideas in his *Manifesto of the Equals*: "Disappear at least, revolting distinctions between rich and poor, great and small, masters and servants, *rulers* and *ruled*. Let there no longer be any difference between people except those of age and sex."

THOMAS: So when did we start using the word *democracy* in a positive sense, to describe our political systems?