

Below is an excerpt from an essay entitled, ‘Does Democracy Still Mean Anything? (And in Case It Does, What Is It?)’, by the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Please recap Bauman’s diagnosis of western democracy in your own words (up to one paragraph)(40%), and then draw on current affairs to reflect how liberal values such as ‘freedom’, ‘tolerance’, ‘progress’ might be rethought within democracy in the East Asian context. (60%)

Does Democracy still mean anything? The question is anything but new. In *Arrow in the Blue*, a 1952 book that summarizes the bitter lessons of 20 years of frustrated hopes and lost chances recorded by historiographers under the moniker “inter-war period,” Arthur Koestler reminisces:

We fought our battle of words and did not see that the familiar words had lost their bearing and pointed in the wrong directions. We said “democracy” solemnly as in a prayer, and soon afterwards the greatest nation of Europe voted, by perfectly democratic methods, its assassins into power. We worshipped the will of The Masses, and their will turned out to be death and self-destruction... The social progress for which we fought became a progress towards the slave labour camp; our liberalism made us accomplices of tyrants and oppressors; our love for peace invited aggression and led to war.

Let’s try to understand what sets in motion that bizarre process – uncannily reminiscent of the alleged habit of chicken to go on running for several minutes after their heads have been chopped off. Signifiers may abandon, cut off and change their “signifieds” (the “referents” to which they are meant to “refer”) without losing their constituency, even when it comes to such defining concepts of our “Western civilization” as “democracy,” “freedom,” “progress,” “tolerance” and “peace.”

Propelled and given momentum by the enthusiastic support of their electorate for the causes and promises they originally stood for, the signifiers may be switched and tied to targets that are remote from – or even opposite to – the original ones, without losing much public support. Once these signifiers have been honed, cultivated and set in place, loyalty, conformity and herd-style discipline attach themselves to the words

embroidered on the banners. Followers spring into action at the mere sound of those words being spoken.

From names of causes, those words turn into the names of camps, and obedience can be (and is) demanded by invoking them and recalling the ultimate confrontation between “us” and “them” – without the cause and the purpose of the ongoing war being mentioned, let alone subjected to a test.

