



**Theatrical & Festival Booking Contacts:**

Nancy Gerstman & Emily Russo, Zeitgeist Films  
212-274-1989 • [nancy@zeitgeistfilms.com](mailto:nancy@zeitgeistfilms.com) • [emily@zeitgeistfilms.com](mailto:emily@zeitgeistfilms.com)

**Publicity Contact, New York:**

Brian Geldin, BGPR  
917-549-2953 • [brian@briangeldin.com](mailto:brian@briangeldin.com)

**A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE  
in association with KINO LORBER**

# WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

## SYNOPSIS

Coming at a moment of profound political and social crisis, *What Is Democracy?* reflects on a word we too often take for granted. Director Astra Taylor's idiosyncratic, philosophical journey spans millennia and continents: from ancient Athens' groundbreaking experiment in self-government to capitalism's roots in medieval Italy; from modern-day Greece grappling with financial collapse and a mounting refugee crisis to the United States reckoning with its racist past and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Featuring a diverse cast—including celebrated theorists, trauma surgeons, activists, factory workers, asylum seekers, and former prime ministers—this urgent film connects the past and the present, the emotional and the intellectual, the personal and the political, in order to provoke and inspire. If we want to live in democracy, we must first ask what the word even means.

From the director of *Zizek!* and *Examined Life*.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

*What Is Democracy?* has a question for a title because I undertook it in the spirit of genuine inquiry. A word we say and hear all the time but rarely reflect on, democracy is both an ideal and a reality, a rousing aspiration and a devastating disappointment. Broken down to its ancient Greek origins, democracy means the people (*demos*) have power (*cratia*). But who are the people, especially in this moment of increasing hostility and division? And what about the fact that, as wealth and influence concentrate, the people are not very powerful at all?

While there's currently a broad consensus that we are living in a moment of profound political crisis, and that democracy is faltering globally, I began working on the film's proposal before the now-pervasive sense of emergency set in. While my 2014 book, *The People's Platform*, asks what a more democratic Internet might look like, what really launched me on the course of making this film was becoming a more committed activist. Like countless others, I was swept up in the 2011 wave of social movements—people around the world occupied public streets and squares and called for “real democracy.” But after a few years devoted to economic-justice organizing, I wanted to step back and take stock. What, I wondered, did that word “democracy” actually mean?

The result is an admittedly idiosyncratic inquiry into what democracy has been and might still become. My film does not attempt to provide a straightforward answer or a ten-point plan. Nor is it a chronological account of democracy's development, or a shocking exposé of democracy's many failings. And even though it has a very strong political point of view and moral core, it doesn't tell people what to think. Instead I wanted to approach the topic of democracy philosophically, aiming less to persuade than to prod and unsettle. By opening space for people from all walks of life to speak, it turns the titular query back on the audience.

In pursuit of its elusive subject, the movie covers a wide territory and a vast time horizon, examining self-government's origins in ancient Athens and capitalism's roots in pre-Renaissance Italy. An extended conversation I had with the socialist-feminist scholar Silvia Federici threads through the film. We puzzle over a mysterious mural called *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, the first secular fresco, which hangs in the public building in Siena, Italy. The painting is rich in symbolism, but Siena itself is

also symbolic. It is one of the centres where banking as we know it first developed. The growing power of finance, and inequality more broadly, are some of the film's recurring and foundational themes.

When investigating modern-day dilemmas, I focused on the United States and Greece. I chose these two countries because they are widely regarded as both historical cradles and contemporary beacons of democracy. Reality, of course, is more complex.

They also provided perfect forums for exploring ideas expressed in Plato's *Republic*, the founding text of political philosophy and a text the film features prominently. Over 2,500 years after it was written, the *Republic's* warning about the destructive divide between rich and poor remains as prescient as ever: both the United States and Greece have been beset by economic instability and recently elected leaders that Plato would have probably described as demagogues. Instead of getting lost in specifics, I present such stories as parables. My goal was to tease out the universal resonance of each particular place and person, and by doing so, to evoke timeless democratic challenges and paradoxes. Is democracy a means or an end? Can self-government ever live up to its promise of universal inclusion? Do we even want to rule ourselves? Are capitalism and democracy at odds? The numerous conflicts and contradictions presented may also serve as warnings for others to heed.

More than anything else, ***What Is Democracy?*** is an invitation to think. We live in overwhelming, confounding times and are bombarded by information and bad news. My hope is that this film opens a contemplative space, allowing the viewer to consider the challenge of ruling ourselves from a variety of angles. I took a digressive, prismatic approach, allowing each subject and scene to add a new perspective and way of understanding. A feature-length film seemed like the right medium to link the personal and the political, the subjective and the structural, and to represent the polyphony of voices any ostensibly democratic project demands.

–Astra Taylor, September 2018

## **BIOS - PARTICIPANTS**

### **WENDY BROWN**

Professor Brown's fields of interest include the history of political theory, 19th- and 20th-century Continental theory, critical theory, and theories of contemporary capitalism. She is best known for intertwining the insights of Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, Frankfurt School theorists, Foucault, and contemporary Continental philosophers to critically interrogate formations of power, political identity, citizenship, and political subjectivity in contemporary liberal democracies. In recent years, her scholarship has focused on neoliberalism and the political formations to which it gives rise.

### **ANGELA DAVIS**

Angela Davis is a political activist and professor emeritus at the Department of History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is regarded as one of the foremost figures in the struggle for human rights and against racial discrimination. After graduating from Brandeis University in 1965, she decided to study philosophy at J.W. Goethe University in West Germany, where she first encountered Marxist thought.

### **SILVIA FEDERICI**

Silvia Federici is a researcher, activist, and educator. She was born and raised in Italy but came to the US in 1967 on a scholarship to study Philosophy at the University of Buffalo. Since then, she has taught at several universities in the US and at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. She is now Emerita Professor at Hofstra University (Long Island, NY) and lives in Brooklyn.

### **ZOE KONSTANTOPOULOU**

Zoe Konstantopoulou is the leader of the Course to Freedom (*Plefsi Eleftherias*) political party and a former President of the Greek Parliament. She is also a lawyer and a member of the Athens and the New York bar associations, specializing in national, European, and international criminal law, public international law, and human rights.

Zoe is active at an international level, with a wide range of activities and academic, political, and professional alliances around the globe.

### **HENRY M. “MICKEY” MICHAUX, JR.**

In 1972, Durham native Henry M. “Mickey” Michaux, Jr. became Durham County’s first black representative in the North Carolina state legislature. He held office from 1973 to 1977, was elected again in 1983, and continues to serve as of 2018. He is the longest-serving member of the North Carolina House of Representatives and will retire at the end of this current term. In 1977, Michaux was appointed United States Attorney for the Middle District of North Carolina, becoming the first African-American in the South to head this office since Reconstruction.

### **CORNEL WEST**

Cornel West is a prominent and provocative democratic intellectual. He is Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy at Harvard University and holds the title of Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. He has also taught at Union Theological Seminary, Yale, Harvard, and the University of Paris. West graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in three years and obtained his M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy at Princeton. He has a passion to communicate to a vast variety of publics in order to keep alive the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.—a legacy of telling the truth and bearing witness to love and justice.

## **BIOS - FILMMAKERS**

### **ASTRA TAYLOR, DIRECTOR**

Astra Taylor is a filmmaker, writer, and political organizer. She is the director of the philosophical documentaries *What Is Democracy?*, *Examined Life* (TIFF 2008), and *Zizek!* (TIFF 2005); the author of the American Book Award winner *The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age*; and a co-founder of the Debt Collective. She has written for *The New York Times*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *The Walrus*, *The Baffler*, *n+1*, and many other outlets. She is a Shuttleworth Foundation Fellow and a former touring member of the band Neutral Milk Hotel. Her new book, *Democracy May Not Exist, but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*, will be out from Metropolitan Books in early 2019.

### **LEA MARIN, PRODUCER**

Lea Marin is an award-winning Toronto-based producer with more than 18 years' experience in the film and television industry. A graduate of the Canadian Film Centre's Producers' Lab, Lea joined the National Film Board of Canada as a producer in 2006.

Her most recent film credits include Charles Officer's *Unarmed Verses*, which won the Best Canadian Feature Documentary Award at Hot Docs 2017 and the 2018 Canada's Top Ten People's Choice Award, in addition to being nominated for two Canadian Screen Awards; and *Picture This*, directed by Jari Osborne, which screened at the Inside Out and OUTeast film festivals, winning Best Canadian Short and the Audience Award for Best Short at both festivals. She is currently in production on *Throat*, a co-collaboration between filmmaker Chelsea McMullan and artist/activist Tanya Tagaq.

### **ANITA LEE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Anita Lee is an Executive Producer at the National Film Board, Canada's 12-time Academy Award®-winning public producer of documentaries, digital media and animation. Anita leads the development and production of NFB studio productions as well as domestic and international co-productions for the Ontario Studio. She is a multi-award-winning producer with 20 years' experience in the industry, and the founder of the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. As NFB producer from 2005 to present, she worked on some of the most acclaimed and inventive productions in recent NFB history, including Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*, which garnered international recognition and was named Best Non-Fiction Film by the New York Film Critics Circle in 2013. Prior to joining the NFB, Anita produced a slate of independent films that premiered at festivals including TIFF, Sundance and Berlin before receiving theatrical releases.

The National Film Board of Canada presents

# WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

A National Film Board of Canada Production

Sound Recordist

**Sanjay Mehta**

Sound Design

**David McCallum**

Music By

**Heather McIntosh**

Director of Photography

**Maya Bankovic**

Editor

**Robert Kennedy**

Executive Producer

**Anita Lee**

Produced by

**Lea Marin**

Written and Directed by

**Astra Taylor**

Canada - 2018 - 107 mins - Color - DCP and Blu-ray

**A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE  
in association with KINO LORBER**

[www.zeitgeistfilms.com](http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com)