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AGAINST THE MASSES

VARIETIES OF ANTI-DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT SINCE THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Joseph V. Femia

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Varieties of Anti-Democratic Thought since the French Revolution

JOSEPH V. FEMIA

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Given the vast amount of literature devoted to democracy, we might assume that the arguments *against* placing our faith in 'the people' would, by now, be familiar territory, explored and re-explored to the point of tedium. But this is not the case. While individual critics of democracy have received much scholarly attention, efforts to examine anti-democratic thought as such have been few and far between. The need for a systematic and detailed treatment of the topic is clear and compelling; my aim in what follows is to satisfy that need. To those who say that highlighting criticisms of democracy can undermine what is obviously a moral imperative, I merely repeat the point made by J. S. Mill. Knowing an opinion to be true presupposes knowing the reasons, not only for, but also against it. Even a true opinion, when protected from critical analysis, will become a dead dogma, a set of lifeless phrases, with no capacity to inspire.

Intellectual resistance to the democratic forces shaping modern Europe did not begin, in earnest, until the French Revolution. Before then, the idea of political authority depending on the overt will of the common people had few supporters and posed no significant threat to dynastic rule or existing social hierarchies. Anti-democratic arguments took shape only when democracy became a real possibility. Because the French Revolution put popular rule on the political agenda, it serves as a convenient watershed, allowing me to define the temporal boundaries of my discussion. Of course, democracy—albeit of a rigidly exclusive kind—existed in ancient Athens, and it was memorably attacked by Plato (for its irrationality and divisiveness) and Aristotle (for its tyrannical tendencies). But these arguments were absorbed by modern critics of democracy—those responding to the ideals of the French Revolution—and given a contemporary resonance.

My thanks are due to a number of friends and colleagues who offered helpful suggestions and criticisms, sometimes after reading draft chapters. I am especially indebted to Richard Bellamy, Maurice Finocchiaro, Steven Lukes, and Jules Townshend. The main ideas set out in the book were presented in the form of a guest lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) in February of 1998. Comments made by various members of the audience after the lecture stimulated me to clarify and refine my ideas. I am grateful to those listeners for their thoughtful attention,

and to Sudipta Kaviraj for kindly extending the invitation to me. My greatest debt is to the Nuffield Foundation, whose generous support, in the form of two Social Science Research Fellowships, enabled me to take a year of sabbatical leave in 1995–6 and carry out extensive research at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Finally, I would like to thank Jean Davenport who produced the typescript with remarkable efficiency.

In Chapter 3, I have borrowed material from two of my published articles: 'Pareto's Concept of Demagogic Plutocracy', in *Government and Opposition*, 30, No. 3 (Summer 1995), 370–92; and 'Complexity and Deliberative Democracy', in *Inquiry*, 39, Nos. 3–4 (December 1996), 359–97. Acknowledgement is gratefully made to the appropriate editors and publishers.

J. V. F.

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1

Introduction and Preview

> Democratic theory is the moral Esperanto of the present nation-state system, the language in which all Nations are truly United, the public cant of the modern world . . .
>
> (John Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*[1]).

Approval for democracy is now almost universally expressed—to the point where it has become a 'hurrah' word, a way of signifying approbation for this or that political system. Most regimes stake out some sort of claim to the title of 'democracy', and those that do not often insist that their particular instance of deviation from the democratic norm is a temporary, if necessary, detour on the journey to their ultimate destination of free elections and popular rule. 'In our times', as Robert Dahl notes, 'even dictators appear to believe that an indispensable ingredient for their legitimacy is a dash or two of the language of democracy'.[2] 'Democratization', a new buzz-word, is unequivocally considered a 'good thing', the *sine qua non* of human development, as if the history of mankind were merely the logical unfolding of some democratic 'essence'.

But does democracy really deserve its exalted status? After all, for most of human history, the democratic idea has been universally reviled, and democratic *practice* has flourished only in recent times. In the annals of human experience, 'hierarchy has been the rule, democracy the exception'.[3] Even George Washington, the founder of the American republic, described the latter as 'a most disreputable system'. As a term of self-identification, 'democrat' does not appear in any Western European language until the 1780s.[4] Throughout the nineteenth century, the struggle for democracy faced ferocious resistance, not just from the well-born and the powerful, but from a veritable army of intellectuals as well. If democracy is really as attractive as it is now claimed to be, why should so many thinkers throughout history have rejected it? Champions of democracy, even those who write books on the subject, often ignore

1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.

2 R. A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 2.

3 Ibid. 52.

4 Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, 6.

this awkward question, thus conveying the impression that the historic hostility to such a noble ideal is somehow beneath their notice.[5] In an age when democracy has become an ideology uniting people on all points of the political spectrum, there is a case for revisiting anti-democratic thought, if only to make sure that we can answer its many objections to our conventional wisdom.

Some may say that the transformation of 'democracy' into an honorific label, attached to diverse political forms, has been purchased at the expense of clarity and precision, that this warm, congratulatory term has been emptied of all descriptive content. True, even Stalinist regimes referred to themselves as 'people's democracies'. Still, just about everyone would agree that, at the most abstract level, democracy means 'rule by the people'. It was first used in the fifth century BC by the Greek historian Herodotus, combining the Greek words *demos*, meaning 'the people', and *kratein*, meaning 'to rule'. What is necessary, in practice, for such rule to exist is a matter of vigorous dispute, however. The myriad definitions and theories can be crudely reduced to two major ones: the 'classical theory' and the 'competitive' or 'elitist' theory. In the classical sense, democracy is an ideal form of self-government, characterized by active involvement of the citizenry in decision-making. Thus understood, democracy is primarily associated with ancient Athens, where all citizens gathered in public forums to vote on public policy directly. However, in order to make it applicable to the realities of the nation-state (as distinct from the city-state), the classical model is usually held to include an indirect or representative element, provided that the elected representatives are bound by the expressed wishes of their constituents. Policies would reflect the 'will of the people', not the will of the elected few.[6] Despite the inclusion of the representative principle, democracy in this strong sense remains more of an abstract ideal than a realistic expectation about the human future. In modern usage, though, the term democracy also refers to regimes that fall considerably short of the ideal. In recognition of this linguistic fact, empirically-minded theorists have settled upon a 'revised' definition of democracy, one drawing its fundamental features from a comparative survey of those countries known as 'democracies'.[7] Democracy thus becomes no more than a system of compet-

[5] Advocates of *participatory* democracy are the worst offenders. See, for example, C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); and J. Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). In both books, discussion of anti-democratic thought is conspicuous by its absence.

[6] J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd edn. (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 250.

[7] Modern usage is implicitly adopting a Hegelian view of the relationship between concepts and actuality: 'Philosophy has to do with Ideas, and therefore not with what are commonly dubbed "mere concepts" . . . The shapes which the concept assumes in the course of its actualization are indispensable for the knowledge of the concept itself.' G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (1821), trans. T. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), para. 1, p. 14.

ing elites in which the public merely confirms or validates through infrequent elections a particular minority's title to govern. The democratic method, according to Schumpeter, the pioneer of this new model, 'is that constitutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'.[8] On this conception, it is almost misleading to say that the people 'rule'; rather, they periodically call their rulers to account.

Opponents of democracy might be expected to applaud this transformation of the democratic ideal into an attainable actuality, as it represents a more or less explicit admission that hierarchy and leadership are both natural and beneficial. Certainly, ever since Schumpeter formulated his more realistic definition in the early 1940s, democracy has been short of the kind of adversaries who provided a strident chorus of opposition as universal suffrage extended its sway across Europe. Their ire and contempt were motivated by the classical *ideal* of democracy and by early attempts—starting with the French Revolution—to make it a reality. Whereas democracy, as we know it, is synonymous with the status quo, the critics saw democracy as, at best, a fraudulent justification for new elites, or, at worst, a frightening doctrine of subversion and decay. For them, democracy was not just a set of political institutions. What distinguished it from other forms of rule was its cult of equality, its theoretical commitment to an egalitarian concept of justice. Democracy was a radical social ideal as well as a form of governance; and to the critics, this is what made it particularly objectionable. Since the label 'democracy' is now applied to societies that are hierarchical in every area of life, from politics to culture, it is small wonder that the critics have more or less fallen silent. Their most doom-laden prophecies concerning the evils of democracy never came to pass. Whether this was due to their timely warnings or to their hysterical obtuseness is a question that will be considered in the course of this work. But democracy accommodated itself to competing values and interests with a flexibility that would have astonished those who feared its consequences.

However, we must resist the temptation to speak about anti-democratic thinkers as if they comprised a unified tradition or a single paradigm. The classical elitists, for example, attacked democracy not for its potentially disastrous consequences but because of its false and hypocritical claims. Universal suffrage, they said, could not change the 'natural' structure of power in society; the most it could do was to substitute one ruling class for another. Even what we might call the 'normative' critics of democracy (those who see it as dangerous or undesirable) have differed greatly amongst themselves. Some have been authoritarian reactionaries, others market liberals; some harbour a

[8] *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 269.

certain residual sympathy for the object of their criticism, others are fiercely adversarial; some berate democracy for its individualism, others because it is not individualistic enough. Among recent *defenders* of democracy, the few who take anti-democratic thought seriously prescind from its infinite variety in a misguided search for 'the generic anti-democratic argument'. Michael Saward, to take the best example, is categorical that the different criticisms (at least the *normative* ones) 'can be reduced to a common form of claim: that one person or group of people, by virtue of some specified characteristic, knows better than the rest how to maximize the achievement of the interest of a community'. In other words, 'all genuine anti-democratic arguments are, at base, arguments from superior knowledge'—a proposition, he adds, that 'is widely accepted today'.[9] It is indeed accepted by Robert Dahl, the doyen of democratic theorists, who, in common with Saward, thinks that all arguments for exclusive rule are reducible to knowledge claims, or 'an idea of guardianship'.[10] Both theorists duly proceed to develop powerful epistemic arguments against the superior knowledge claim, demonstrating, for example, that theories of 'the good' are inherently contestable, that individuals must be regarded as the best judges of their own interests, and so on.

The problem for Dahl and Saward is that anti-democratic thinkers have not, as a rule, followed the Platonic example of justifying elite domination on grounds of superior knowledge. To the contrary, most of them have regarded democracy itself as an abstract concept dreamt up by irresponsible intellectuals anxious to impose their rational schemes on a passive populace. It was the arrogant intellectuals, not the people, who wished to overturn traditional allegiances and customary habits in the name of an *a priori*, ideal model. It was the democratic intellectuals, not the people, who were the true heirs of Plato, who—to borrow Polanyi's distinction—gave priority to the *articulated* knowledge of the elite (that knowledge which can be expressed precisely in the form of words and symbols) over the tacit knowledge embodied in daily activities (unformulated knowledge, such as we have of something we are doing).[11] Around the time of the French Revolution, critics of democracy started attributing their 'hate object' to a pathological tendency, derived from Plato, to abstract from the normal understandings and patterns of everyday life in order to speculate about ideal forms, the most absurd being 'man-in-general'. This intellectual construct, removed from all inherited sources of identity, reduced to an individual essence, inhabits a world of uniformity, where there are no natural hierarchies, and where everyone is the equal of everyone else. Democracy, on this unfriendly view, is a logical deduction from

[9] M. Saward, *The Terms of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 23.
[10] *Democracy and Its Critics*, 52, 63–4.
[11] M. Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 59.

the abstract 'man' of speculative philosophy; it has no basis in ordinary human experience.

In truth, anti-democratic thought has generally been hostile to the 'learned barbarism' of intellectuals and experts who claim to be in possession of 'objective' truths—conceived on the model of logical or mathematical or physical laws—about how to organize society. Such claims are dismissed as metaphysical sophistry, of the sort that brought us democracy in the first place. Joseph de Maistre, a harsh critic of the French Jacobins, was hardly untypical when he asserted that durable institutions must be rooted in superstition, since philosophy is 'an essentially disruptive force'.[12] To reduce all anti-democratic arguments to arguments from superior knowledge is therefore grossly misleading, even if we interpret the word 'knowledge' with considerable latitude. During the past two centuries, democracy has been condemned for a variety of reasons: it violates God's will, it uproots traditional values and practices that have stood the test of time, it goes against the 'natural' law of hierarchy, it promotes selfishness and isolation, it unchains passions and licenses vain hopes, it destroys individual liberty and initiative, it brings economic chaos, it encourages cultural mediocrity and drab uniformity. None of these criticisms is properly addressed by the Dahl/Saward efforts to show that democracy is not, after all, epistemologically inferior to 'guardianship'.

My purpose in this book is to analyse the vast and diverse body of anti-democratic thought since the French Revolution. How, then, shall I proceed? One approach would be to emulate Dahl and Saward by collapsing the various arguments against democracy into their bare essentials and setting them out in abstract form. This would be to conduct the analysis without reference (or at least much reference) to proper names—though it need not entail a fruitless search for '*the* generic anti-democratic argument', as Saward puts it.[13] It would be possible to divide the criticisms of democracy into a number of *different* categories, each comprising a distinctive set of perceived facts, general propositions, hypotheses, and methods of argument. While this approach would help us to isolate the underlying structures of the manifold arguments, it has its drawbacks. For one thing, disembodied arguments do not easily engage the reader's attention. Just as a finished fresco, with its colour and detail, is more attractive and memorable than its preparatory cartoon, so ideas—especially those from the past—are more likely to be grasped and appreciated when they are attached to particular spokesmen or advocates and located in a particular intellectual or historical context. It is surely difficult to assess the meaning, let alone the validity, of an argument if we detach it from

[12] J. de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, ed. and trans. R. A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40, 41. First published in 1797.

[13] *The Terms of Democracy*, 23 (my emphasis).

the conditions and circumstances that helped to shape it. Was it historically or culturally specific? If so, to what extent? Questions like this cannot be answered in the absence of some contextual information.

What is perhaps worse, the process of abstraction would obliterate the subtle differences between apparently similar arguments, lumping them together without regard to nuance or shading. The individual or personal element that gives an argument its distinctive quality would be lost. Unity would be transmuted into dull sameness, and a preoccupation with form over substance, the general over the particular, would diminish our capacity to re-enact within ourselves the states of mind of those who attack democracy. This, I think, is essential. Democracy itself presupposes a willingness to engage in meaningful discourse, a readiness to modify opinions in the light of counter-arguments. Without imagining ourselves into the perspective of our political or ideological opponents, we can only confront them with our own preconceptions. This is not democratic discourse or deliberation; it is a 'dialogue of the deaf'. In what follows, I shall endeavour to understand the critics of democracy in their own terms; and while my aim is to be critical, my criticisms will be mostly internal, focusing on logical inconsistencies and factual errors, and on the inadequacy of the practical alternatives suggested. Our ability to criticize the critics is not enhanced by the reductionist approach of Dahl and Saward. Their respective descriptions of the anti-democratic case are so abstract, in my opinion, that their subsequent rebuttals apply to no one in particular. Of course, the ever-present danger of trying to construct 'the generic anti-democratic argument' from the raw materials supplied by actual arguments is that we end up creating the proverbial 'straw-man', a fictitious antagonist, corresponding to no real person.

By now the reader might infer that I have written a narrative history of anti-democratic thought, a comprehensive survey of a multifaceted tradition. This is not the case. My interests are much more theoretical than historical. Where it is convenient to depart from a strict chronological sequence, I do not hesitate to do so. Contextual detail is kept to a minimum, and several important anti-democratic thinkers are left out or mentioned only *en passant*. What I have tried to do is to steer a middle course between abstract analysis and historical exegesis. While my main task is to examine anti-democratic arguments as such, I do so through consideration of the individual authors who expressed those arguments in their most powerful form. Where appropriate, I point out parallels and differences between the various authors, but—to repeat—my focus is on ideas, not on the thinkers who exemplify them. In some instances, citations or quotations from prominent philosophers are offered more for flavour than for substance. What follows is not a history so much as an *anatomy* of anti-democratic thought.

For purposes of classifying and evaluating our subject matter, I have

adopted an analytical framework put forward by A. O. Hirschman, who identifies three broad forms of 'reactionary' thought, each obeying its own logical imperatives.[14] He calls them the *perversity thesis*, the *futility thesis*, and the *jeopardy thesis*. These 'major polemical postures and maneuvers likely to be engaged in by those who set out to debunk and overturn "progressive" policies and movements of ideas' will constitute the basic subdivisions of my text.[15] While Hirschman applies his classification scheme to 'reactionary' thought in general, he explicitly recognizes its relevance to anti-democratic thought in particular. I have therefore taken the liberty of developing some of his examples and suggestions during the course of my exposition.

According to the perversity thesis, 'any purposive action to improve some feature of the political, social, or economic order only serves to exacerbate the condition one wishes to remedy'. Indeed, 'this action will produce, via a chain of unintended consequences, the *exact contrary* of the object being proclaimed and pursued'.[16] Speculating on the genealogy of the perverse effect, Hirschman maintains that its influence on our way of thinking may have ancient roots. One parable is familiar from Greek mythology: the famous Hubris–Nemesis sequence, where punishment for man's arrogance and overweening ambition is meted out by scornful gods.[17] In this ancient myth, the disastrous outcome of human aspirations for change is an instance of divine retribution. Thomas Hobbes, writing in 1651, concurred with this idea, illustrating his point with yet another Greek myth:

> And they that go about by disobedience, to do no more than reform the commonwealth, shall find they do thereby destroy it; like the foolish daughters of Peleus, in the fable; which desiring to renew the youth of their decrepit father, did by the counsel of Medea, cut him in pieces, and boil him, together with strange herbs, but made not of him a new man. This desire of change, is like the breach of the first of God's commandments . . .[18]

[14] A. O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). Hirschman expresses concern over the derogatory meaning that attaches to the term 'reactionary'. Anxious to use it 'without constantly injecting a value judgment' (ibid. 7), he often employs scare quotes to signal his detachment from its unfortunate connotations. It might have been advisable for him to settle for 'conservative' instead, though he does occasionally deploy this word as a synonym for 'reactionary'. To be sure, some critics of democracy could hardly be described as 'reactionaries' if this word is taken to designate those who wish 'to turn the clock back'. Nevertheless, I shall adhere to Hirschman's usage in order to avoid confusion.

[15] Ibid. 6. We must note that Hirschman's progressive/reactionary divide does not always correspond to the conventional left/right divide. On certain issues—privatization is one—people on the left will borrow 'reactionary' arguments in the hope of preventing change. But, generally speaking, the frame of mind that fears or opposes reform has always been more common on the right of the political spectrum.

[16] Ibid. 7, 11. [17] Ibid. 37.

[18] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. Plamenatz (London: Collins, 1962), ch. 30, p. 298.

A secular version of the perverse effect was formulated more than a century earlier by Machiavelli, who believed that, in matters of statecraft, moral vice and moral virtue often switch places. The prince who is prepared to take harsh action to keep his people loyal and united is infinitely more merciful (and, by implication, moral) than the prince who, 'through excessive kindness, allows disorders to arise from which murder and rapine ensue'. Rulers who preach 'nothing but peace and faith' usually turn out to be 'the extreme enemy of both'.[19]

Whether or not we agree with Machiavelli or Hobbes, their reasoning will strike a familiar chord. The perversity thesis derives its power from the common observation that, however lofty or noble our intentions may be, our actions often have counter-productive (and counter-intuitive) effects. We witness this in our everyday life, and, on the level of public policy, it is undoubtedly true that supposedly progressive policies or innovations sometimes generate perverse outcomes: governments raise the tax rates of the wealthy only to discover that total tax revenue declines; Americans prohibit the sale of alcohol only to find that consumption of the banned substance increases; NATO bombs Yugoslavia to avert a humanitarian catastrophe only to end up precipitating one. And let us not forget the most perverse of all perverse effects in modern history: the degradation of the Marxist quest for human emancipation into a justification for totalitarian oppression. Reactionaries or conservatives tend to assume that such perversity is the rule, not the exception. Since everything backfires, since our pathetic delusions and ridiculous aspirations are gleefully mocked by God or by fortune, striving after democracy is bound—on this logic—to engender nothing but oligarchy and tyranny.

This type of argument, once quite common, will be explored in Chapter 2. As we shall see, its partisans can be divided into two camps. First, there were the romantic conservatives, including Burke, who set out to demolish the contractual model of society, which construes the state as an artificial device whose purpose is to satisfy the wants and needs of naturally equal and independent human beings. For Burke and those inspired by him, society was not like a machine; it could not be deliberately constructed to embody abstract principles derived from the pure exercise of reason. Rather, it was more appropriately compared to an organism, growing over time, and consisting not of isolated individuals with 'rights' but of organs—King, Church, aristocracy—each contributing in different ways to the life of the whole. The idea of natural growth implied an emphasis on tradition, on continuity, on a reverence for the past. For human beings were seen as emotional and wayward creatures,

[19] N. Machiavelli, *The Prince and Selected Discourses*, trans. D. Donno (New York: Bantam Books, 1966). Quotations taken from *The Prince*, ch. 17, p. 59, and ch. 18, p. 64.

kept in check only by ancient prejudices and fears. Disrupting the natural rhythms of society in the name of equality or democracy would have disastrously perverse effects, rather like attempting to cure a limp by amputating the patient's leg.

The destruction of traditional social bonds, implicit in the theory and practice of democracy, was also the main source of concern for the second group of critics who deployed the perversity thesis. Tocqueville and Hegel introduced the idea of a 'mass society', a society devoid of internal social structure or an integrating tradition—a society of unconnected, insecure individuals, isolable human atoms, ripe for exploitation by aspiring despots who would transform democracy into an all-encompassing plebiscitary dictatorship. 'Mass society' theorists were not as 'reactionary' as the romantic conservatives; they exhibited little nostalgia for an aristocratic past and were not unreservedly hostile to 'the people' or to the basic assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism. But they were acutely aware of the paradox that democratic government, despite being a logical derivation from the liberal value of individual autonomy, could easily degenerate into the tyranny of an unbridled majority.

Whereas the perversity thesis asserts that efforts to push society in a certain direction will cause it to move in the opposite direction, the futility thesis 'holds that attempts at social transformation will be unavailing', that attempts to 'right' a social or political 'wrong' will have no appreciable effect. Any alleged change, to quote Hirschman, 'is, was, or will be largely surface, façade, cosmetic, hence illusory, as the deep structures of society remain wholly untouched'.[20] He refers to this as a 'law of no-motion' and remarks that it is illustrated by one of the best jokes about communism: 'Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man; communism is the opposite.'[21] The futility thesis underlines and perhaps celebrates the resilience of the status quo. It expresses a world-weary cynicism, completely at odds with the 'can-do' optimism of the purveyor of 'change', confident that he can bend reality to fit some prefabricated mould. An illustrious exemplar of the futility thesis was Max Weber, who, by placing capitalism and socialism under the same conceptual umbrella of bureaucracy, disturbed the reveries of those who demanded the socialization of the means of production. For if capitalism and socialism were similar in being bureaucratic, then there would be little profit (or loss) in substituting one for the other.

With respect to democracy, the greatest proponents of the futility thesis were a trio of Italian (or quasi-Italian) thinkers known as the classical elitists, who heaped derision on democratic ambitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the perversity thesis, in response to the apparently

[20] *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, 7, 43. [21] Ibid. 44.

inexorable drift to democracy, predicted the deification of the state and all manner of disaster, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels—whose ideas will be examined in Chapter 3—argued that universal suffrage would change little: democracy of any kind was a chimera because of the inevitability of elite rule. They were not making the trivial observation that the machinery of government must always be in the hands of a minority, but the more substantial point that this minority could never be accountable to the majority, and that genuine choice between alternatives was impossible. Pareto used psychological factors to explain this 'law' of oligarchy, while Mosca and Michels stressed organizational factors, but they all agreed on the existence of a 'natural' structure of power, an immanent hierarchical order of things, which meant that 'democratic' institutions were either exercises in futility or expressions of rank hypocrisy. Still, it must be remembered that the futility thesis does not attack democracy as undesirable. The criticism is *empirical* rather than *normative*.

It is perhaps no accident that the main exponents of the futility thesis were Italian (by birth, ancestry, or citizenship), for the urge to demystify political abstractions, to reduce them to the underlying and universal facts of power, represents a strain of Machiavellian cynicism that has pervaded Italian political culture ever since the Renaissance. There is an old Italian saying that perfectly encapsulates this attitude: *Si cambia il maestro di cappella | Ma la musica è sempre quella*. (The choirmaster may change, but the music is always the same.) As Hirschman recognizes, there is something disturbingly radical and subversive about the futility thesis. Heavy use is made of such metaphors as 'mask', 'veil', and 'disguise'. All is not as it seems: we must tear off the mask, lift the veil, penetrate the disguise.[22] Futility theorists share with Marxists a malicious determination to uncover basic structural 'laws' that puncture the illusions of smug and complacent 'progressives'.

Hirschman points out that the perversity thesis and the futility thesis are based on 'almost opposite views of the social universe and of purposive human and social action'.[23] The perverse effect, betraying its affinity to myth and religion, posits a fluid, volatile world where human identity is fragile and human behaviour is shaped by deep-seated emotions, fears, and insecurities. The futility thesis, on the other hand, invokes science to depict the world as highly structured and predictable, evolving according to unbreakable laws. Both approaches, however, denigrate man's ability to manipulate his environment, albeit for diametrically opposed reasons: one because the complexities and mysteries of social life will channel our efforts in unforeseen and unwelcome ways; the other because the constancy and essential predictability of social life means that human behaviour follows a pattern of endlessly repetitive cycles.

[22] *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, 79–80. [23] Ibid. 72.

By comparison with the other types of reactionary argument and rhetoric, the jeopardy thesis seems relatively commonsensical: it asserts that the proposed change, however desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs or consequences of one sort or another. Progress in human societies is so problematic that any newly proposed 'forward move' will endanger, or (on a stronger version of the thesis) cause serious injury to, one or more esteemed values. The jeopardy thesis is, in principle, more moderate than its two rivals, embodying assumptions and rhetorical strategies that could easily find favour with progressive thinkers. Isaiah Berlin, for example, built his brand of pluralistic liberalism around the assumption that our cherished values will often conflict with one another, forcing us to make difficult choices in practice.

'Ceci tuera cela' (This will kill that), the title of a chapter in Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, neatly summarizes the jeopardy thesis, which draws strength from its connection with various popular myths and stereotypical formulas. As Hirschman observes, recourse to *ceci-tuera-cela* type statements is rooted in a stubborn 'zero-sum mentality'.[24] The zero-sum game, where the gains of the winner are mathematically equal to the losses of the loser, exerts a powerful grip on our strategic imagination. It was, for instance, the assumption behind Marx's doctrine of irreconcilable class struggle, and it accounts for the intractability of ethnic disputes all over the globe. Where there can only be winners and losers, concepts such as harmony and mutual coexistence have no relevance. *Ceci tuera cela* sometimes takes the form of a belief that the good things in the life of an individual or group are bound to be counterbalanced by bad things. This explains the obstinate human assumption, despite countless examples to the contrary, that beautiful women or brilliant athletes cannot also be intelligent. The idea that there can be 'too much of a good thing' seems to be embedded in our mental processes. According to Montaigne, it was amusingly prevalent in the medical profession of his day (the late sixteenth century). It was an article of faith that a 'superabundance of health' must be 'artificially reduced and abated' by 'purgings and bleedings', as 'there is nothing stable in us' and therefore our health 'may retreat in disorder and too suddenly' if doctors do not take the initiative.[25] These well-meaning medics were acting out the Hegelian dialectic (before Hegel), since they apparently viewed 'good' and 'bad' as inseparably connected opposites! Something in our ancestral folk memory inoculates us against excessive optimism. For example, when railways were invented, it was widely claimed, and believed, that the passing trains could cause cows' udders to dry up, or even

[24] Ibid. 122.

[25] 'Of Evil Means Employed to a Good End', in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. D. Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965), 517.

provoke miscarriages in women. There had to be a 'downside' to what otherwise appeared as an unalloyed good. The near-panic over a non-existent millennium 'bug' no doubt reflected a similar ambivalence with respect to computer technology. Aphorisms such as 'Don't push your luck', 'It all balances out in the end', 'It is possible to have too much of a good thing' express our primal fear that what is beneficial is fragile, easily lost or damaged, and likely to be incompatible with other things we hold in high regard.

The denial that 'all good things go together', while not exclusive to the reactionary mentality, is nevertheless an enduring feature of anti-democratic thought. Democracy, it has been contended, represents the triumph of mediocrity in every walk of life. Although it may bring some benefits to the common people, it extinguishes cultural creativity and belittles noble and heroic deeds. It destroys economic efficiency and elevates mass appetites and prejudices above rigorous thought. It threatens civil liberties—not just property rights but those associated with freedom of expression in the largest sense. Of all these arguments—which will be considered in Chapter 4—the most intellectually varied and interesting are those that accuse democracy of cultural vandalism, and the bulk of the chapter will be devoted to elucidating and evaluating this assault on the idea of a democratic culture. The main protagonists—Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Maurras, T. S. Eliot, José Ortega y Gasset—are singled out for special attention, though the minor characters are not ignored.

Adopting Hirschman's classificatory scheme of course exposes me to the criticisms this scheme has received over the years. It is claimed, first of all, that the tripartite division draws arbitrary distinctions. (Has there ever been a classificatory scheme which has not been attacked for this reason?) Critics of democracy do not necessarily fall into one category or another; some will combine arguments from perversity and jeopardy, or futility and jeopardy. Take Pareto. While he insisted that any move towards universal citizenship via the franchise would be futile, he also evinced disgust for the very idea of mass suffrage, since it would give power to the 'wrong' people, a new elite of unprincipled politicians who would wreck the economy, if necessary, in order to buy votes and secure their dominance.

Up to a point, this criticism of Hirschman commands assent. Using his framework to pigeon-hole anti-democratic thinkers, including Pareto, would indeed distort the truth. But my main intention, as I have said, is to analyse arguments, not to offer a comprehensive or rounded exegesis of what any particular thinker actually thought about democracy. In the case of Pareto, I am primarily interested in his argument from futility, as he expressed that *type* of argument with memorable force. On the other hand, some thinkers (e.g. Burke, Tocqueville) *are* dealt with under more than one of the three categories. The purpose of the framework is to classify arguments rather than people.

Another criticism, first made by John Dunn, questions whether Hirschman's categories are completely distinguishable. Burke and Maistre argue, for example, that the search for democracy will end in tyranny. This, as Hirschman explains, is an illustration of the perversity thesis. But is it not also an illustration of the jeopardy thesis, since they are saying that such tyranny will wipe out traditional rights?[26]

It is true that arguments from perversity can normally be recast as arguments from jeopardy—and there are instances where an observer may feel that an argument can be fit into either category. But Dunn, I think, overlooks a subtle distinction. In the case before us, the aim of the perversity thesis is to lay bare the paradoxical logic of democracy, by showing how misguided attempts to achieve popular control achieve nothing but popular submission to a monstrous state. The argument exposes the process whereby the democratic idea, through the pitiless logic of its own contradictions, produces a travesty of what was intended. Criticism is directed at the self-delusion, not the malevolence or irresponsibility, of democratic reformers. The perversity thesis, in whatever form, does not, strictly speaking, depend on attachment to a particular set of values. In contrast, the jeopardy thesis must, by definition, uphold the values that are threatened or destroyed by the innovation in question. Why would we criticize democracy for endangering a value we regarded with contempt? In response to Dunn, we can say that one argument (perversity) highlights the absurdity of democratic ambitions, whereas the other (jeopardy) laments what is lost (ancient rights and privileges) when democrats set about their task. No doubt a similar point is being made, but from a different angle of vision.

A third criticism of Hirschman's scheme relates to his polemical intentions. Although he explicitly denies it,[27] he sometimes gives the impression that his exposé of the standard interpretive formulas and rhetorical manœuvres deployed by 'reactionaries' serves in itself to refute the substantive arguments. No such assumption is made in *this* book. Much that happens in life is explicable in terms of the three reactionary theses; and the fact that arguments are used repeatedly, or correspond to prevalent myths and mental stereotypes, is no proof that they are wrong in any particular instance. Nevertheless, Hirschman's scheme does shed light on the mental universe of those who consistently oppose change, and the suspicion must be that their arguments are not exclusively motivated by evidence and logic. The gifted historian of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy, acutely observed that every social or political theory is associated with a set of sentiments which those subscribing to the theory could only dimly sense. Lovejoy called this the 'metaphysical pathos' of ideas, a

[26] J. Dunn, 'A New Book by Albert Hirschman', *Government and Opposition*, 26 (1991), 522.
[27] *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, 164.

pathos 'exemplified in any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, evoke through their associations and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feelings'.[28] Commitment to a theory may be, and generally is, made because the theory is congruent with the mood or underlying sentiments of its adherents, rather than because of its empirical and logical validity. To simplify greatly, the metaphysical pathos of anti-democratic thought is that of pessimism and fatalism, a feeling of impotence before great historical or natural forces, a feeling that the world is a hostile, alien place, full of dangers and obstacles, and generally unresponsive to our collective desires, however noble.[29]

The metaphysical pathos of democratic thought is precisely the opposite. Champions of 'the people' display a boundless confidence in the human ability to mould and remould society at will. They do not fear change because they believe that forward movement, or progress, is 'natural'. Convinced as they are that 'all good things go together', the zero-sum mentality of the reactionaries is foreign to them. The more radical advocates of democracy sometimes appear to believe that a perfect democracy would be a perfect society—prosperous, free, happy, thoughtful, and just. Reactionaries or conservatives see their task as one of pouring cold water over this optimistic scenario. Reality, from their unsentimental perspective, is determined to play dirty tricks on the ardent democrats. In the main, anti-democratic arguments rely on the idea of unanticipated consequences. Democratic reformers obviously intend to achieve a glorious state of affairs called 'rule by the people' (X). The perversity thesis claims that they will achieve the exact reverse of X; the futility thesis tells us that they will achieve nothing of substance; and the jeopardy thesis asserts that, while they may succeed in achieving a version of X, they will do so at the expense of diminishing our collective life. According to each type of criticism, the intentions of the reformers are thwarted by the refractory nature of social reality, by the deep structures and mysterious interactions that make light of our progressive schemes.

It is therefore ironic that anti-democratic thinkers themselves indulged

[28] A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 11. For an interesting application of Lovejoy's concept to the theory of group organization (with special reference to Michels), see A. W. Gouldner, 'Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy', *American Political Science Review*, 49 (1955), 496–507.

[29] Fascism—which I consider at length in Chapter 4—might be deemed an exception here. But, while retaining a certain optimism about the efficacy of human will, fascists (and Nazis) did not, like the progressives, envisage a happy future of peace and harmony. On the contrary, they saw life as an eternal struggle against the dark, relentless forces trying to deflect the nation or race from its path of glory. Nor did they believe that social life was infinitely malleable. Social possibilities were limited by the essential qualities of the national or racial 'soul'. Fascism does seem to incorporate a large measure of pessimism and fatalism.

freely in the hazardous game of prophecy. Their confident forecasts about the effects of democratic reform were rarely borne out. Whether they predicted that it would bring about tyranny, or that it would have no appreciable effect on the immemorial structures of political subordination, or that it would have a malign impact on our most esteemed values and cultural achievements, they were by and large proved wrong. In a bizarre reversal of roles, democrats could plausibly accuse *them* of arrogantly expecting reality to follow a specified course. This does not mean, however, that advocates of democracy are immune from criticism. In my final chapter, I shall draw some general conclusions by examining the various ways in which both democrats and their numerous critics have fallen foul of the phenomenon of unanticipated consequences. What, if anything, can we learn from anti-democratic ideas? It is worth bearing in mind that theories can contain much that is true even when they are essentially false. One of my purposes in this book is to separate 'what is living' from 'what is dead' in anti-democratic thought. The futility thesis, I shall argue, has made the most profound contribution to democratic theory. In establishing an inverse relationship between complexity and popular control, the classical elitists provided good reason to feel pessimistic about the future of democracy. As we shall see, globalization, the erosion of national sovereignty, and the fragmentation of the political community due to social and geographic mobility—all manifestations of increased complexity—pose a grave threat to such democracy as we have. While the material analysed by the elitists did not justify their conclusion that democracy was *impossible*, their analytical framework is helpful in showing us why democracy is *imperilled*.

2

The Perversity Thesis

THOSE who insisted on the paradoxical consequences of democracy were all opposed, in varying degrees, to the rationalistic and 'enlightened' mode of thought that reached its apogee in the eighteenth century. Whereas Marxists have always assumed that Enlightenment liberals, being bourgeois, were the 'objective' enemies of popular self-determination, the truth is precisely the opposite. Liberalism and democracy are linked, not just empirically but logically. This connection was not lost on the romantic conservatives who, in the wake of the French Revolution, took it upon themselves to expose the depravity of liberal egalitarianism.

The Enlightenment was both cause and effect of the process known as modernity. Within the more advanced parts of Europe, customary models of authority were progressively undermined by the commercialization of land, labour, and capital; the growth of the market economy; great scientific discoveries, such as the Copernican system; and the Protestant Reformation, which destroyed the corporate unity of the Catholic *ecumene*. The break with ancient traditions and customs, as the binding forces of society, engendered the search for new principles of moral unity. By the time of the Renaissance, artists and thinkers were already beginning to cast off old mental habits. As the authority of orthodox religious dogma declined, faith in the explanatory and creative potential of human reason grew. With the 'scientific revolution' of the late seventeenth century, the so-called 'Age of Reason' had well and truly commenced. The fashionable thinkers of the period were more divided in their opinions than is commonly supposed: some, like Holbach, were atheists; most were not. Many considered natural rights to be self-evident truths; others, notably Hume, dismissed them as metaphysical nonsense. Nevertheless, all were united in their hostility to 'superstition' and intolerance. Unlike its Latinate cousin, 'illumination', enlightenment carries no suggestion of the occult or the supernatural. Only the faculty of reason aided by sense perception—not mystical inner light or the worship of tradition or the dictates of divine authority, whether made known by direct revelation or recorded in sacred texts—only that faculty could provide answers to the great questions which had occupied humanity since the dawn of history.

Because of the gradual detachment of individual human beings from their defining social matrix, from the primordial givens of existence—kith, kin, membership in the Universal Church—there emerged a tendency to conceive people in terms of their humanity alone. In the words of Hegel, a shrewd if critical analyst of Enlightenment thought, 'the ego comes to be apprehended as a universal person in which all are identical'.[1] On the level of political theory, this focus on equal and autonomous individuals manifested itself in the idea of the 'contract' as the basis of political authority. Listen to Locke:

> Where-ever . . . any number of Men are so united into one Society, as to quit every one his Executive Power of the Law of Nature, and to resign it to the publick, there and there only is a *Political, or Civil* Society. And this is done where-ever any number of Men, in the state of Nature, enter into Society to make one People, one Body Politick under one Supreme Government, . . .[2]

The 'state of Nature' is not so much a historical conjecture as a hypothetical construct which enabled the contract theorist to imagine what things would be like if men lived without society and without government. The 'contract' that ends this natural state, rather than God or tradition, defines the principles and purposes of political life. Social contract theory is the ultimate expression of the rationalist mind-set. The political philosopher, soaring above the established values and practices of his own time and place, adopts the perspective of eternity, like some kind of ersatz deity. Since all human beings are seen as essentially identical, sharing the same motivations and needs, the hypothetical contractors will deliver immutable and universally applicable truths about how we should organize our collective existence. And since, on this conception, all men are of equal moral worth, since differences in rank or station merely reflect historical accident and artifice, no one can be said to have natural authority over anyone else. Human beings were no longer defined by their allotted place in the Great Chain of Being, by their specific role in God's eternal plan. While the medieval view accorded society a corporate reality distinct from its individual members, the Lockean or liberal view construed society as a fiction—nothing more than a collection of individuals, rival centres of consciousness, whose interactions are governed by self-interest. Political authority, instead of being a necessary instrument of divine will, is therefore contingent: individuals, who are equal in all vital respects, must *choose* to submit. As Locke memorably put it: 'Men being . . . by Nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this Estate, and subjected to the Political Power of another, without his own

[1] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (1821), trans. T. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), para. 209, p. 134.

[2] J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett (New York: Mentor, 1965). Citation from *Second Treatise*, sect. 89, p. 368.

Consent.'[3] However, Locke recognizes that consent, once given, imposes contractual obligations which cannot easily be renounced: 'When any number of Men have so *consented to make one Community* or Government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make *one Body Politick*, wherein the *Majority* have a Right to act and conclude the rest.'[4]

This and other references to majority rule suggest that Locke was a champion of democracy, but his texts do not, it seems, permit us to draw this inference. He makes no mention of universal manhood suffrage and even says (rather oddly) that the 'Majority' may, if it so wishes, 'put the power of making Laws' into the hands of either one man 'and his Heirs' (monarchy) or else 'a few select Men, and their Heirs or Successors' (oligarchy).[5] For Locke, these undemocratic forms of government would be legitimate, as they would depend on the consent of the governed. However, once the 'social contract' is 'signed, sealed and delivered', this consent, Locke admits, is likely to be 'tacit' rather than expressed: anyone who enjoys protection of the law, if only by 'travelling freely on the Highway', can be presumed to consent to the existing political order.[6] While consent, so defined, may seem like a meaningless concept, Locke does specify conditions under which rebellion or civil disobedience is justified. The people retain the right to resist any government that behaves despotically or systematically breaks the law. But where the ruling authority acts in good faith, where it does not trample on natural rights or otherwise violate the terms of the social contract, the people need not control or even influence public policy.[7]

Locke himself clearly wanted legislation to emanate from an elected representative body of some kind, although he told us nothing about how they were to be chosen or by whom. According to C. B. Macpherson,[8] he saw the labouring class as a class apart, with only a subordinate status in civil society. The 'majority' to which he referred was therefore only a majority within the 'community' of substantial property owners. But there appears to be no explicit textual evidence to support the idea that Locke distinguished between full and subordinate citizenship. Macpherson's thesis depends on what Althusser would call a 'symptomatic reading' of Locke—reading between the lines, so to speak. Macpherson too readily assumes that the 'possessive individualists' gave expression to the prevalent values within their specific social context. It is well known that Locke was a supporter of the 'Glorious Revolution' and the subsequent constitutional settlement. The parliamentary system he defended restricted the franchise to a small minority of the adult male population, and

[3] J. Locke, sect. 95, p. 374.
[4] Ibid. 375.
[5] Ibid., sect. 132, p. 399.
[6] Ibid., sect. 119, p. 392.
[7] Ibid., sect. 168 (pp. 425–7), sect. 222 (pp. 460–2), sect. 230 (pp. 466–7), sect. 243 (p. 477).
[8] C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), ch. 5.

Locke, anxious as he was to protect property rights, never advocated any significant extension. But if, as he wrote, men are 'by Nature, all free, equal and independent',[9] then democracy would seem to be the only legitimate form of government—even if he was reluctant to take his premisses to their logical conclusion. Like all his fellow Whigs, Locke thought that progress depended on the entrepreneurial activities of landowners and capitalists, whose wealth and privileges could be endangered by a wider franchise. The idea of a mass electorate driven by envy and stupidity induced a state of terror in the hearts of the propertied classes. If Locke shared this fear, he had no theoretical reason for doing so. For his epistemology rejected Augustinian pessimism and the doctrine of original sin. The mind, he argued, was essentially a *tabula rasa*, to be moulded and fashioned by environmental influences. It followed that men were not innately sinful but became so through the impressions and ideas which they received from the outside world. By tipping the balance in favour of nurture over nature, Locke implicitly conceded that man was perfectible, that his inner potentialities are frustrated at present by defects in the society he inhabits, and that benign and rational surroundings would create benign and rational human beings.

The perfectibility of man was a recurrent theme of the French Enlightenment. Building on Locke's sensationalism, thinkers such as Condorcet and Helvetius held up the image of the ideal citizen. Human beings, it was said, are endowed by nature with the capacity to be rational and sociable, to follow rules of conduct that make for stable and harmonious human associations. If ordinary folk seem unfit for self-rule, it is only because they have been kept in ignorance by the forces of darkness, by the knaves whose power and privileges are sustained by superstition and idolatry.

All the key elements of enlightened and liberal thought—individualism, faith in human reason, the equal value of all persons—point in the direction of democracy. Not every *philosophe* reached this conclusion, however. Voltaire, for example, defended monarchical absolutism, dedicated to the pursuit of scientific policies and individual liberty, as the best way to further progressive values. Indeed, up to 1789, most *philosophes* were suspicious of democracy, at least in its more populistic forms, or else considered it a utopian ideal—fine in principle but unrealistic in present circumstances. Once the revolution began, though, these doubts rapidly dwindled. Swept away by the mood of idealism, and encouraged by America's post-colonial experience, many enlightened people came to believe that democracy was not only just and proper but also practical. Condorcet and others now advocated a unicameral legislature elected by universal and equal suffrage. The constitutional experiments of the revolutionaries were all grounded in the conviction that 'the

[9] *Second Treatise*, sect. 95, p. 374.

people' should be included in the electoral process.[10] And this conviction, in turn, reflected the classical liberal conception of the state as a voluntary association, held together by the mutual consent of its members rather than the ties of deference to social superiors.

Perversity Thesis (1): The Romantic Variant

The French Revolution was, as Isaiah Berlin points out, 'an event unique in human history, if only because it was perhaps the most persistently anticipated, discussed, deliberately undertaken reversal of an entire form of life in the west since the rise of Christianity'.[11] To radical and liberal intellectuals, it was, at any rate in its early stages, a long awaited deliverance, heralding the demise of an age of privilege. But the revolution did not bring about the desired result. In a perverse twist of fate, the pursuit of liberty and tolerance brought violence and terror—and no appreciable decrease in the sum total of human misery. Some apologists attributed the debacle to unpropitious circumstances or to the fanaticism of rabble-rousing demagogues, not to the underlying principles of the revolution itself. A new generation of conservatives and reactionaries begged to differ. For them, the revolutionaries, along with their intellectual supporters and precursors, were in the grip of a spectacular misconception about the nature of both man and society. Reason, in the sense of a faculty capable of developing an empirical or deductive science of human interaction, was a figment of the *philosophes*' fevered imagination. In a world polluted by illusory abstractions—equality, natural rights, the brotherhood of man, popular sovereignty—we could expect to find nothing but cultural decay and moral disintegration. Out of this chaos and corruption would come tyranny, not the liberation of the people.

Such criticisms signalled a profound ideological shift from Enlightenment to romanticism. The latter may be thought of as the first great protest against the 'modern world'; that is, the rational-scientific civilization which assumed major proportions in the eighteenth century and furnished the theoretical premisses of the French, Revolution. Romanticism was a European-wide movement, doubtless affecting Germany most deeply but by no means exclusively, since it became a major influence nearly everywhere in Europe. There was in fact a fairly free flow of ideas among English, French, and German romantics. Romanticism started out as an artistic and literary movement but,

[10] See F. L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600–1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), Pt. III, ch. 5.

[11] 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', in I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1990), 97.

galvanized by the French Revolution and its aftermath, it became a philosophical and political movement as well. A seminal figure in this development was Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790, argued that violence and oppression were immanent and implicit in the revolutionaries' commitment to abstract reason. With remarkable prescience, he predicted the Jacobin Reign of Terror three years before it actually happened. But, while his demolition of Enlightenment ideals exerted tremendous influence on the romantic reactionaries of the early nineteenth century, Burke himself was too much of a British empiricist to share their penchant for the mysterious or their proneness to metaphysical ramblings about the 'Infinite' and the 'Absolute'. What he did bequeath to the romantic movement was the idea of society as an organic unity, a bewilderingly complex and unanalysable network of social and spiritual relationships. Hence, by meddling with society, by treating politics as if it were a 'geometrical demonstration', the French revolutionaries, like the sorcerer's apprentice in Goethe's poem, had unleashed forces which, once freed, could no longer be mastered. It is the classic perversity scenario: human ambitions are thwarted by a paradoxical and terrible logic which transforms idealistic dreams into living nightmares. Let us explore the argument in more detail.

Coleridge, a disciple of Burke, once observed that 'the general conceit' of Enlightenment thought was 'that states and governments might be and ought to be constructed as machines, every movement of which might be foreseen and taken into previous calculations'.[12] We can label this the 'engineering model' of politics. If the social machine is malfunctioning, it can be mended; if it is deemed obsolete, it can simply be replaced by a new one. States or societies become artefacts—the artificial products of man's ingenuity. To this 'machine' or 'engineering' conceit, Burke, like Coleridge after him, opposed the idea of the state as a moral unit or organic whole. The English constitution, for instance, was not *made* as a machine is made; rather, it *grew* as an organism grows over a period of time. To interfere with this normal pattern of development is to defy nature itself, to insult the Divine Creator by trying to elevate frail human reason above His stupendous wisdom.[13] The state

[12] S. T. Coleridge, *The Stateman's Manual* (1816), in *Complete Works*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1884), i. 440.

[13] The organic theory was not confined to England. Indeed, it became a quite common view among German romantics. In 1808, Adam Müller ridiculed the idea of the state as an artificial contraption, 'one of the thousand inventions for the profit and pleasure of civil life'—like, say, fire insurance. Rather, it is an 'infinitely active and living whole' ('Elements of Politics', in H. S. Reiss (ed.), *The Political Thought of the German Romantics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,1955), 143–58). In 1814, F. E. D. Schleiermacher attacked contemporary political 'engineers' who thought 'that a perfect state could be created by man himself proceeding from a theoretical model'. States are not 'made'; they are 'historical formations of nature' ('On the Concepts of Different Forms of the State', in Reiss (ed.), *The Political Thought of the German Romantics*, 175).

further resembled an organism in consisting not of atomic individuals, each pursuing his own private interest, but of 'organs'—King, Church, proprietage—each contributing in different ways to the integrated whole. The organic society transforms and gives identity to its members, not the other way round. Instead of taking the individual as his point of departure, Burke insists on the priority of the social whole over its component elements. In isolation from society, the individual is a mere abstraction, bereft of purpose or function. Enlightenment thinkers, on the other hand, spoke of 'man' as such, man as nature made him, whose basic attributes and needs could be uncovered and analysed by rational methods; it was on the satisfaction of his requirements that all progress depended. The contrast between Burke and the abstract theoreticians of the social contract tradition is instructive: whereas they deduced consequences from the content of ideas, and portrayed men acting as rational calculators of their interest, he saw men as creatures of habit, and stressed the unpredictability of responses to new ideas which break those habits. In Burke's opinion, human behaviour is grounded less in reason than in myth and memory. The ties that bind us together in society are thus affective attachments of loyalty and sentiment rather than naked instinct or 'contracts' motivated by enlightened self-interest. Obedience must be located in men's hearts, which is why prejudice is so important:

> We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.[14]

If individuals figure only as ingredient parts of a larger conception, and if, furthermore, that larger conception is an organic, evolving whole, then it is not only wise but *natural* for the individual to take his bearings from the traditional institutions and ways of thinking in his society:

> We fear God; we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is *natural* to be affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious, and tend to corrupt our minds, . . .[15]

Where the German romantics differed from Burke, as Noel O'Sullivan has pointed out, was in their conversion of the state into an all-embracing whole which submerged the individual personality and destroyed the distinction between 'public' and 'private'. Burke never saw human existence and civil existence as 'one and the same thing' (Müller's words) (*Conservatism* (London: Dent, 1976), 66–7). It must be borne in mind that the German romantics were influenced not only by Burke but also by Herder's nationalistic notions of an organic culture—a culture possessing the unity of a moral person.

[14] E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. C. Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 183.

[15] Ibid. 182.

Clearly, Burke's hostility to the abstract natural 'man' of the Enlightenment did not prevent him from invoking nature as a rhetorical device. Quite the reverse. What is natural is healthy and enduring; what is unnatural is corrupt and decadent. Government must therefore follow 'the pattern of nature'.[16] Just as the physical traits of plants and animals and human beings are passed down from one generation to another, so we should 'transmit our government and our privileges' in the same manner. This will ensure that our 'political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world'.[17] But Burke is not simply saying that the hereditary principle is justified by its naturalness; he is also claiming that nature is itself hierarchical, which means that society is *naturally* divided into ranks. An egalitarian society would therefore 'pervert the natural order of things'. The doctrine of prescription, the legitimization of existing hierarchies, forms 'part of the law of nature', which is of course God's law.[18]

The outlines of Burke's perversity argument are now beginning to emerge. Democratic reformers, by violating 'the natural order of things', as decreed by God, are bound to suffer the consequences of divine wrath. Nevertheless, we could detach God from the argument and it would still work on the level of political sociology. Burke, it should be noted, was not always on the side of reaction, and many were surprised by the illiberality of his *Reflections*. A Whig rather than a Tory, he was steeped in the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment, which had stressed the importance of the unintended effects of human action. The best-known application of this notion was the 'Invisible Hand' doctrine of Adam Smith, with whose economic views Burke had expressed complete agreement. Smith had described how individual actions motivated by self-interest can have a positive social result in the shape of a more prosperous commonwealth. Burke's contribution was to argue that unintended consequences could be negative as well as positive, that the outcome of the revolutionaries' obsession with democracy would be wholly contrary to the goals they were professing. Why should this be so? According to Burke, the divisive individualism implicit in democracy dissipates the bonds of society and therefore undermines its collective identity and solidarity. Society can never be held together by the harmonious convergence of interests, as defined by pure reason. Expediency or utility is a fickle basis for political order: an individual's attachment to the political system would be contingent upon whether or not it agreed with his 'fleeting projects' or 'momentary opinion'.[19] And where these projects and opinions clashed with those of others, there would be no collective myths or symbols—by their very nature irrational—to soften the edge of disagreement and promote unity. The democratic values of equality and rational scrutiny are incompatible with the 'pleasing illusions'

[16] Ibid. 120. [17] Ibid. [18] Ibid. 138, 260. [19] Ibid. 184.

which make power gentle and obedience willing, which harmonize 'the different shades of life' and create a sense of belonging. All 'the decent drapery of life' would be rudely torn away. All our inherited beliefs, which are 'necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature', would be contemptuously dismissed as 'ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated'.[20] Moreover, democracy inspires 'vain expectations', serving only to 'aggravate and imbitter' the 'losers' in the democratic scramble for scarce goods and positions.[21] In sum, the democratic mentality is just not conducive to sociability. If we erode the customary loyalties and attachments of people, by encouraging them to think and judge in terms of their individual interests, which continually dispose them to adopt a critical, rather than an indulgent, habit of mind towards our institutions, then the common texture of meaning on which a society depends will gradually disappear. The functional/utilitarian approach can produce only one result: a Hobbesian abyss of unbearable discord and chronic instability. What the democratic ideologists fail to realize is that giving everyone a voice in government would enfranchise precisely those passions that need to be restrained:

> the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done *by a power out of themselves*; and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue. In this sense the restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights.[22]

When this simple truth is ignored, the commonwealth is in danger of crumbling 'into the dust and powder of individuality'.[23]

However, things are unlikely to go that far. The natural response to social and political chaos is not literal collapse but tyranny. The old order may be destroyed and democratic institutions set up, but civil society without hierarchical ordering is an impossibility: 'those who attempt to level, never equalize', because the agents of levelling become themselves the apex of a new ordering of higher and lower.[24] It is a rationalist fallacy that constitutional changes can eliminate concentrations of power: 'A certain *quantum* of power must always exist in the community, in some hands and under some appellation.'[25] Once democratic revolutionists realize that their experiment is failing, they become increasingly brazen in their exercise of power, and increasingly frustrated with the fallible people they intended to liberate. Rousseau's paradoxical epigram that men whose belief-systems have been distorted by centuries of oppression must be 'forced to be free' begins to seem like the essence of wisdom. Writing in 1790, Burke maintained that the supposedly democra-

[20] E. Burke, 171. [21] Ibid. 124. [22] Ibid. 151.
[23] Ibid. 194. [24] Ibid. 138. [25] Ibid. 248–9.

tic revolution was already assuming the characteristics of dictatorship, and that things were bound to get worse. As might be expected, he builds his case upon an analogy with nature. Equality is unnatural, a 'monstrous fiction',[26] and any attempt to implement it will be about as productive (and disgusting) as attempts to cross-breed men and sheep. While you may get rid of kings, parliaments, judges, captains, priests, and aristocrats, you will simply create a new set of rulers who go by different names.[27] Within a democratic framework, the social composition of the elite would be urban and bourgeois. Universal suffrage should cause real power to 'settle in the towns among the burghers, and the moneyed directors who lead them'. Country people, whether gentlemen or peasants, lack the inclinations or experience which could lead them to share in the benefits of an extended franchise. The very nature of country life makes it difficult for them to combine in a way that would maximize their influence in the electoral process. Their geographic dispersal means that they are forever 'dissolving into individuality'. In towns and cities, on the other hand, 'combination is natural', for burghers continually come into mutual contact and organize themselves into guilds, professional associations, etc. Burke therefore predicted the ascendancy of 'an ignoble hierarchy founded on the destruction of the crown, the church, the nobility and the people'. All 'the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and rights of man' will come to hideous fruition in the iron rule of attorneys, estate agents, 'money-jobbers', speculators, and adventurers.[28]

This warning remarkably foreshadows the thesis, put forward a century later by Gaetano Mosca, that supposedly democratic procedures inevitably concentrate power in the hands of organized elites. These elites, says Burke, will be far more tyrannical than traditional elites for three basic reasons. First, where obedience is no longer based on inherited prejudices or settled habits, it must be obtained by pure force. The destruction of the 'pleasing illusions' that justified ancient hierarchies means that 'laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern, which each individual may find in them, from his own private speculations, or can spare to them from his own private interests'. Nothing is left which 'engages the affections' of the populace. Democratic institutions, supported as they are by a cold mechanistic/utilitarian philosophy, can never 'create in us love, veneration, admiration or attachment'. Without traditional loyalties or 'the old feudal and chivalrous spirit of *Fealty*' to sustain the new arrangements, rulers and subjects alike will wallow in insecurity: 'plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventive murder and preventive confiscation'. The 'barbarous philosophy' of egalitarianism, taken as gospel by democratic revolutionaries, will inexorably increase the levels of violence and coercion needed to maintain order in society. As Burke chillingly

[26] Ibid. 124. [27] Ibid. 248. [28] Ibid. 311–13.

writes, in 'the groves of *their* academy, at the end of every visto, you see nothing but the gallows'.[29]

A second reason why attempts to implement democracy would usher in tyranny focuses on the arrogance of those who speak in the name of 'the popular will'. Considering their speculative designs as of infinite value, and convinced that right and reason are on their side, they see political power as something that must be used rather than impeded. Any hindrance to their power is automatically condemned as an affront to the *demos*, as a selfish restriction on majority preferences. Democratic ideologists tend to think that 'the popular will' is the standard of right and wrong—never mind that this 'will' is likely to be the result of manipulation by power-hungry politicians.[30] But even a perfect democracy, if such were possible, would display an unhealthy attitude towards political power. Where an abuse of power is explicitly condoned by the majority, the 'share of infamy that is likely to fall to the lot of each individual . . . is small indeed'. As individuals could always hide behind collective responsibility, and thus avoid guilt or opprobrium, a 'perfect democracy' would be 'the most shameless thing in the world'.[31] Burke, for his part, believes that all power needs to be balanced and limited. Irrespective of its provenance and aims, power is to be treated as a trust, and those who exercise it are to be trusted only insofar as they are subject to constraints. It is criminally irresponsible, not to mention blasphemous, to treat the voice of the people as if it were the voice of God. Any kind of abstract perfectionism, the pure application of any particular principle, no matter how admirable, leads in practice to tyranny. Where there are 'opposed and conflicting interests', constitutional conventions or machinery should encourage compromise, interposing 'a salutary check to all precipitate resolutions' and preventing 'the sore evil of harsh, crude and unqualified reformations'.[32]

Such oppressive 'resolutions' and 'reformations' are made much more likely by the individualism inherent in democratic ideology. Here we have the third reason why the quest for political liberation is destined to be counterproductive. Modern democrats treat citizens as 'one homogeneous mass', pulling them apart from that place in the social system which gives them their acquired, or second, natures, and reducing them to 'loose counters', alone and powerless. Contract theory assumes an agreement among abstract beings who are perfectly free and perfectly equal—no antecedent rights or privileges can disturb their common understanding. For Burke, these abstract creatures are little more than mathematical units—pure intellectual constructs. Man as we know him is integrated into society through a series of voluntary associations, local attachments, and family connections. Such primary groupings comprise 'a strong barrier against the excesses of despotism'. They give people the con-

[29] E. Burke, 171–2. [30] Ibid. 155–6. [31] Ibid. 191. [32] Ibid. 122.

fidence to resist state intrusions and offer alternative networks of power. With their authority weakened or destroyed by the levelling tendencies of modern democracy, the individual becomes isolated and vulnerable, dependent on the state for his very existence.[33]

Burke's desire for a variety of formal and informal restraints on political power is rooted in the Christian doctrine of original sin. Evil has permanent causes; it is a constant presence in human nature, and crazed idealists cannot eliminate it simply by destroying its ephemeral manifestations. If you resolved that there should be no more monarchs or priests, you would not cure the wickedness they supposedly perpetuate, for the 'very same vice assumes a new body'. The 'will of the people' is just the latest pretext for corruption and arbitrary power. But it is more dangerous than other pretexts, for—in principle at any rate—it recognizes no customary or religious limits to its supremacy.[34]

To Burke, the abstract perfection of values like democracy, equality, and the 'rights of man' is precisely their practical defect. Addressing an imaginary revolutionist, he complains: 'You lay down metaphysic propositions which infer universal consequences, and then you attempt to limit logic by despotism'.[35] This is the gist of his critique: thinkers in the rationalist mould demonstrate a faulty grasp of the connection between theory and practice. It is no use extolling the wonders of 'liberty' or 'democracy' in the abstract. For circumstances give in reality to every political principle 'its distinguishing colour, and discriminating effect'. Whether a political idea or scheme is beneficial or noxious will depend on the context:

> Is it because liberty in the abstract may be classed amongst the blessings of mankind, that I am seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty? Am I to congratulate a highwayman and murderer, who has broke prison, upon the recovery of his natural rights?

Morality and religion, the 'solidity of property', peace and order—these are good things too, and without them liberty is scarcely a benefit. Before we congratulate people on attaining their liberty, we ought to see what they plan to do with it. Prudence would dictate this even in the case of 'separate insulated private men'. But liberty, when men act in association with others, is *power*. Our judgement concerning the wisdom of such power will not depend on the number of people whose wishes it expresses but on the consequences of its exercise. If these are dire, then collective liberty—democracy—is, if anything, *less* desirable than the liberty of the solitary 'highwayman and murderer'.[36]

[33] Ibid. 299–301, 135. [34] Ibid. 248–9. [35] Ibid. 345. [36] Ibid. 89–91.

This is a valid point. Democracy, like liberty, is just one good amongst others. It would be absurd to support it if it really did lead to chaos and tyranny or otherwise threatened everything we hold dear. Still, Burke's case against democracy seems to rest on a fundamental flaw. He tends to confuse the dangers and dysfunctions of a *revolutionary transition* to democracy with the workings of democracy itself. In other words, it is difficult to disentangle his anti-democratic arguments from his anti-revolutionary arguments. Admittedly, the chances of democracy succeeding will border on the non-existent if it is introduced in the context of a violent social upheaval where traditional patterns of life are disrupted or destroyed, thus unleashing much uncertainty, hatred, and bitterness. Events in this century have proved beyond peradventure that the essentially coercive and elitist character of violent revolution can transform egalitarian idealists into cynical tyrants. Burke's great contribution to political theory was to lay bare the paradoxical logic of revolutionary idealism. But what if democracy is introduced gradually—organically, almost imperceptibly, and not by great leaps and bounds? What if democratic reformers adjust their ambitions—as they did in Britain and America—to existing cultural dispositions and social arrangements? And what if democratic practices themselves become the objects of 'love, veneration, admiration, or attachment'—a unifying force in society? In these circumstances Burke would have much less reason to oppose democracy. Indeed, he believed that popular prejudices—our 'natural' deference to kings and aristocrats, for example—express the latent wisdom of tradition. He even inclined to the view that majority opinion is the safest (though not infallible) criterion of right and wrong, because the 'common feelings of men' are often more virtuous than the theories of intellectuals.[37] Burke had nothing but contempt for the individual who sets his own opinions against those of the community. As Michael Freeman has argued, this epistemological/moral populism might be thought to imply political democracy, since both commonly rest upon belief in the wisdom of the people.[38] Freeman thinks that Burke is inconsistent, but we can acquit him of contradiction when we bear in mind that he conflates revolution and democracy. If revolutions destroy customary 'sentiments, manners, and moral opinions', and if, furthermore, there can be no democracy without revolution, then the democratic electorate can hardly be relied on to harbour 'natural' prejudices.[39] To the contrary, it will be infected by the crass hatreds and shallow opinions of its revolutionary masters. Burke sees democracy as mob rule, where the mob is manipulated by a vicious and arrogant elite of parvenus.

[37] E. Burke, 175; E. Burke, *Works and Correspondence* (London: Rivington, 1852), iv. 534.

[38] M. Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 30–1, 46.

[39] *Reflections*, 175.

Burke's critique of the French Revolution was much admired by that other great exemplar of the perversity thesis, Joseph de Maistre, whose own polemical treatise on the upheaval was published anonymously in Switzerland in 1797.[40] He devoted his life to execrating and pillorying all that the *lumières* of the eighteenth century stood for—rationalism, individualism, and secular enlightenment. While, in common with Burke, he exerted a powerful influence on romantic thinking, many would argue that his sober and austere style, his commitment to institutional *fixité*, as opposed to emotionalism or personal expressiveness, could not be further removed from the dreamy self-indulgence of romanticism. On this view, he embodied the clear Latin spirit of classicism, the very antithesis of the tormented teutonic soul, and derived his faith and his method from the Church fathers and the teaching of the Jesuit order. This portrait of Maistre is broadly accurate—and yet this supposed paragon of classicism had much in common with the moody and restless Germans: Müller, Novalis, Schleiermacher, and others who came to symbolize romanticism. Like them, he advocated a theocratic conception of the world and feared that the secularization of man's outlook would corrode the social and spiritual bonds that keep individuals together in a stable and cohesive order. This preference for faith over intellect took the form of an instinctive aversion to science, which he also shared with romantic thinkers. Accounting for natural events by reference to atoms and molecules degrades the human spirit. Equally fatal to true understanding, says Maistre, is the scientific method itself. To classify, abstract, generalize, calculate, and reduce to uniformities is to mistake appearances for reality. His hostility to the search for universal regularities, and his corresponding exaltation of the unique or the mysterious, manifests itself in opposition to the hypothetical 'man' of social contract theory. Maistre agreed with other romantic philosophers on the absurdity of reasoning about man's state prior to the organization of society. Also like them, he subordinated the development of the individual person to that of the higher unity, the community or tradition. His tendency to glorify the Middle Ages, when individuals were defined by their social roles, struck a responsive chord in thinkers who saw the state as an extended family.[41]

Much of this bears the imprint of Burke. In particular, the idea that society

[40] J. de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, ed. and trans. R. A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994). Burke's 'formidable impact' on Maistre is ably discussed by Marco Ravera, who argues that the *Reflections* convinced the Savoyard of the 'epochal' significance of the events in France. *Il tradizionalismo francese* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991), 4–6, 12–13.

[41] See, for example, Adam Müller, who wrote in 1808: 'the state is not a mere factory, a farm, an insurance institution or mercantile society, it is the intimate association of all physical and spiritual needs, of the whole of physical and spiritual wealth, of the total internal and external life of a nation into a great, energetic, infinitely active and living whole' ('Elements of Politics', in Reiss (ed.), *The Political Thought of the German Romantics*, 150).

is not an artificial association based on calculations of self-interest, but rests at least as much on a mysterious human yearning for wholeness and communion with others—this characteristically Burkean idea was embraced by Maistre with enthusiasm. However, as Isaiah Berlin notes, he was 'not a disciple of the great Irish counter-revolutionary writer'. Maistre, a fierce Catholic, could have no truck with Burke's praise of the Act of Settlement, whereby the usurper, William of Orange, deprived the devout Catholic, James II, of the throne.[42] Nor is Burke's deference to the 'laws' of the market, or his advocacy of compromise and adjustment, to his taste. Far from being an absolutist, Burke was a Whig, who championed the historic rights of parliament. Herein lies a crucial difference between Burke's version of the perversity thesis and that of Maistre. For the latter, in the words of Carl Schmitt, reduced the state 'to a pure decision not based on reason and discussion and not justifying itself, that is, to an absolute decision created out of nothingness'.[43] Because the whole cosmos is governed autocratically by a wise and omnipotent deity, by a commander who is wholly uncommanded, by a monocratic ruler, beyond all external constraints, it follows that this deity must want his own type of authority to obtain within human communities as well. Democratic doctrine represents a revolt against heaven, and those who try to implement a democratic organization of political life will suffer divine retribution. Burke, too, thought that the French Revolution was a rebellion against God, though he added, as did Maistre, that social catastrophe is also part of the divine plan, a means by which 'the Supreme Director of this great drama' humbles and punishes us, thereby asserting his infinite dominion.[44] Still, Burke's analysis—as we have seen—is essentially sociological: the decrees of Providence are expressed through empirically discoverable laws of social action. Maistre's argument, in contrast, is essentially theocratic. Contempt for political authority, he declares, expresses hatred of divinity. To deny the necessity of a final decision-maker, above the people, is to opt for a universe without God. The 'Eternal Geometer' has determined that sovereignty must be absolute and unchallenged because of man's horribly evil nature; any departure from absolutism will lead us down the rocky path to the abyss—just deserts for those who would display an overweening pride in our feeble human powers. The argument, Hobbesian in its pessimism, is based on deduction from first principles rather than empirical observation. This indifference to factual evidence did

[42] Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', 129. Nevertheless, Maistre contrasted the Glorious Revolution of 1688 favourably with the French upheaval. At least the monarchy *itself*, he acknowledged in a tone of mild satisfaction, was not overthrown by the English rebels (*Considerations on France*, 91).

[43] Quoted in S. Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 18.

[44] Burke, *Reflections*, 175.

not, however, prevent Maistre from attacking the speculative reasoning and abstract fictions of his rationalist opponents.

According to him, the most ridiculous of these fictions is the 'social contract', which is founded on a defective understanding of the self—one rejected by common sense and normal human experience. Liberals assume that individuals, before they ever join society, can identify their own needs and strike mutually beneficial bargains to ensure their satisfaction. But the abstract 'man' of nature, the socially uninfluenced individual, is nothing but a metaphysical sophism. To talk of a state of *nature* in opposition to the social state is 'to talk nonsense voluntarily'.[45] Nature, Maistre argues, is one of those general terms which, like all abstract terms, are open to abuse:

> In its most extensive sense, this word really signifies only the totality of all the laws, power and springs of action that *make up* the world, and the *particular* nature of such and such a being is the totality of all the qualities which make it what it is and without which it would be some other thing and could no longer fulfil the intentions of its creator. Thus the combination of all the parts which make up a machine intended to tell the time forms the *nature* or the essence of a *watch*; and the *nature* or essence of the *balance wheel* is to have such and such a form, dimensions and position, otherwise it would no longer be a balance wheel and could not fulfil its functions. The *nature* of a viper is to crawl, to have a scaly skin, hollow and movable fangs which exude poisonous venom; and the *nature* of a man is to be a cognitive, religious and sociable animal. All experience teaches us this; and, to my knowledge, nothing has contradicted this experience. If someone wants to prove that the nature of the viper is to have wings and a sweet voice . . . , it is up to him to prove it. In the meantime, we will believe that what is must be and has always been.[46]

Therefore, in order to understand man's nature, we must not hark back to primitive times when a handful of savages were scattered over vast territories. What would we think of a naturalist who said that man is an animal thirty to thirty-five inches high, without strength or intelligence, and giving voice only to inarticulate cries? Yet this naturalist, in sketching man's physical and moral nature in terms of an infant's characteristics, would be no more idiotic than the philosopher who seeks the political nature of this same being in the rudiments, or infancy, of society. Every question about man's natural state must be resolved by history. Man is what he is and was, what he does and did. The philosopher who proclaims by *a priori* reasoning what man must be, or must want, or must need, is substituting abstraction for experience and his own decisions for the Creator's will.[47] Maistre thus followed Burke in deploying man's social nature as a decisive argument against contract theory. How could

[45] J. de Maistre, Extract from *The Study of Sovereignty*, in J. S. McClelland (ed.), *The French Right: From de Maistre to Maurras* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 41.

[46] Ibid. 41–2. [47] Ibid. 40.

asocial atoms deliberate collectively and decide to enter into relations of mutual restraint and civilized cooperation? How would they communicate? Language cannot exist without society, yet deliberation presupposes language. Binding contracts, moreover, rest upon the assumption that the contracting parties will keep their promises. But a promise is an act which is only intelligible, can only be conceived, within an elaborate network of already existing rules and conventions. To isolated savages in a state of nature, such rules and conventions, including promise-keeping, can have no meaning. Hence to suppose that societies are brought into being by contracts, rather than the other way round, is not only a historical but a logical absurdity.

Up to this point, Maistre seems justified in contrasting his own empirical approach to the arid metaphysical speculation of his adversaries. References to the state of nature make sense only if we assume that pre-social 'man' is somehow more 'real' or authentic than the observable variety. This assumption seems arbitrary, if not ludicrous. But Maistre's critique then trails off into the realms of dogma. As Berlin writes, the Savoyard thinker was 'consumed by the sense of original sin, the wickedness and worthlessness of the self-destructive stupidity of men left to themselves'.[48] When he insists on human sociability, he does not mean that human beings are naturally disposed to live together in peace and harmony. Rather, he means that social institutions alone have prevented us from descending into the maelstrom of utter barbarism and depravity. The incurable corruption of human beings fits into a cosmic pattern of moral putridity. 'There is nothing but violence in the universe . . . evil has tainted everything, and in a very real sense, *all is evil*.'[49] Maistre thinks it ridiculous for Rousseau and others of his ilk to see nature as inherently benign; on the contrary, the most obvious natural law is that of violent death. 'There is not an instant of time', Maistre reminds us with evident relish, 'when some living creature is not devoured by another.' And above all these numerous animal species is placed man, a creature of hideous cruelty, 'whose destructive hand spares no living thing'.[50] This is why war 'is the habitual state of mankind'.[51] It is this interpretation of human nature, not his rejection of contract theory, that forces Maistre to conclude that inherited ways of life should be accepted unthinkingly, never be questioned. Only a fool, he believes, would deny the absolute necessity of a divinely sanctioned authority to punish wicked humanity and keep it under control. The will of the individual, always inclined towards evil, must be broken by overwhelming force. Where reverence for established institutions is effaced by scepticism or democratic

[48] 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', 115.

[49] *Considerations on France*, 31.

[50] J. de Maistre, Extract from the seventh of the *St Petersburg Dialogues*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 50–1.

[51] *Considerations on France*, 23.

scrutiny, man's innate and instinctive hatreds, so deeply rooted in his psychic constitution, will come to the forefront and destroy the fragile bonds that hold society together.[52]

But is this interpretation of human nature empirically and anthropologically sound? Of course, if we think, like Maistre, that human beings are nearer to the beasts than to the angels, we shall lean to the doctrine of autocracy. It is equally natural that those who take a more favourable view of 'man' should contest the universal supremacy of force and should preach the gospel of partnership and cooperation on every plane. If the latter view is arbitrary, a product of blind faith and wishful thinking, it is by no means self-evident that the facts justify the opposing perspective. While history is certainly a record of strife and cruelty, it is also a story of mutual aid and selflessness. Indeed, it is an abiding theme of Maistre's writings that society cannot be sustained by a rational calculation of pleasures and pains. It rests, he tells us, on something much more elemental, on perpetual self-sacrifice, for the sake of family, Church, or state, with no thought of pleasure or profit. When dwelling on man's supposed wickedness, however, Maistre curiously ignores the altruism that, on his own estimation, underpins human communities. It has been said that history is like a child's box of letters, with which you can spell any word you choose. Maistre's depiction of human nature is every bit as selective as that of his ideological enemies. It stems from Jesuitical dogma, not from a sober and detached analysis of the historical record.

Having accepted that individuals are willing to sacrifice themselves for a larger purpose, having, that is, rejected the Hobbesian view that human beings are cold utility calculators, programmed by nature to maximize their individual well-being, regardless of the costs to others, Maistre would seem, at first glance, to have no reason to fear social disintegration. But, for him, man's capacity for sociability and unreflective self-sacrifice was dependent upon myths and fairy-tales; it was not a genetic endowment. Society would therefore lapse into chaos if our cultural inheritance were subjected to the harsh light of reason. Authority and obligation prosper in darkness. Some opinions must be adopted in the absence of any prior examination or rational justification. To behave properly, individuals need convictions, not puzzles. Only secular humanists would be silly enough to deny the indispensability of spellbinding dogmas and unifying mythology.[53] Social order will never be maintained if we rely on reason and a non-existent 'natural goodness'.

This is why religion is so important in human civilizations. 'Institutions are strong and durable to the degree that they are, so to speak, deified'—seen as reflecting the will and awesome power of the Divine Creator. While religion

[52] Extract from the *Study of Sovereignty*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 46.
[53] Ibid. 45–6.

is the 'glue' of society, secular philosophy, especially when it is preoccupied with the 'needs' of individuals, is the universal solvent. It is 'an essentially disruptive force'.[54] The deterioration of public spirit began with the Reformation. Protestantism encouraged human pride to revolt against papal authority; blind obedience gave way to conscience and discussion. This subversion of traditional ways could not be confined to religious matters: Protestantism amounted to political rebellion. Enlightenment philosophy continued along the same path, mocking established authority and demystifying 'the illusions of the imagination'.[55] The result, laments Maistre, has been a steady corrosion of the mythical narratives, emotional attachments, and cultural taboos that refine or check our anti-social impulses.

Modern philosophy is at the same time too materialistic and too presumptuous to perceive the real mainsprings of the political world. One of its follies is to believe that a few scribblers can constitute a nation, that a constitution is an artefact like any other, that statesmen can *make* viable political institutions in the same way that workmen make steam pumps and stocking frames. What the unspeakably obtuse *lumières* cannot grasp is that human reason is simultaneously pernicious and impotent. While it can easily destroy communities, it is helpless to create them. All it can create is anarchy.[56] To pit the fallible resources of a single intellect or group of intellects against the cosmic stream of development is to flout the divine laws of the universe. A constitution enshrining the sovereignty of the people would, if faithfully implemented, be a recipe for chronic instability. For when individuals make, or believe they make institutions, they assume they can also unmake them. Who will venerate a sovereign he can depose? Who will respect a law he can revoke? Also, the whole point of making a constitution is to bind the future. But this is manifestly impossible on liberalism's own voluntarist premisses. If one generation makes the constitution it prefers, why should the successor generation, if its tastes differ, not consign this document to the dustbin? The essential flaw in democracy is that—in principle—it can allow for no *final* authority, no ultimate court of appeal, beyond question and unaccountable to the passing fancies of the people. There would be no resting place, no order, no possibility of a tranquil, harmonious, and satisfying life.

The sheer impracticability of democracy, Maistre argued, means that it will never come into being, no matter what the constitution says. What the French got instead was 'a highly advanced despotism', drenched in the blood of its victims. Chaos eventually gave way to order—but an order bereft of all moral legitimacy and grounded in pure force.[57] What Burke predicted, Maistre

[54] *Considerations on France*, 41. [55] Ibid. 47.

[56] Ibid. 52, 57; Extract from the *Study of Sovereignty*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 44–5.

[57] *Considerations on France*, 56–8.

witnessed. The Jacobin Terror, he thought, was the logical, if perverse, outcome of the Revolution's blasphemous rejection of divine authority. The presumptuous popular demand for liberation unleashed an inexorable chain of events that led to the worst kind of servitude. Maistre identified these wayward effects as the essence of Divine Providence:

God warns us that He has reserved to Himself the establishment of sovereignties by never confiding to the masses the choice of their masters. In these great moments that decide the fate of empires, He employs them only as a passive instrument. Never do they get what they want; they always accept, they never choose. One may even notice that it is an affectation of Providence, if I may be permitted the expression, that the efforts of a people to obtain a goal are precisely the means that Providence employs to keep them from it. Thus the Roman people gave themselves masters while believing they were opposing the aristocracy by following Caesar. This is the image of all popular insurrections. In the French Revolution the people have continually been enslaved, outraged, ruined and mutilated by all parties, and the parties in their turn, working one against the other, have continually drifted, despite all their efforts, towards break-up at length on the rocks awaiting them . . . All men who have written on or reflected about history have admired this secret force that makes sport of human plans.[58]

Man is held up to ridicule by Divine Providence, for in setting out to improve the world radically, he goes radically astray. Swollen with vanity, man imagines that his own will can break through the inexorable laws by which God governs the world. For example, it is in the nature of power that it must always be centralized. Contrary to appearances, a representative system renders the idea of popular rule impossible, since a representative can never be bound by the childish and fluctuating whims of his constituents. The 'people' are much too apathetic and ignorant to know what they 'want', and are therefore in no position to present their representative with a 'mandate'. The representatives, or—more accurately—those nefarious forces who control them, are the real power-holders. Accountability to the 'sovereign' people is just another bogus invention of the 'enlightened' imagination:

So what does this vain honour of representation mean to the *nation* when it is involved so indirectly and when millions of individuals will never participate? Are sovereignty and government any less alien to them? . . . the phrase *large republic*, like *square circle*, is self-contradictory.[59]

Maistre's attitude to 'the people' calls to mind that of Machiavelli and later Machiavellians: Mosca, Pareto, Michels. The people, on this view, are analogous to the materials used by an artist or craftsman. They are there to be manipulated and shaped by men of superior ability. Thus, to Maistre, the idea

[58] Ibid. 79–80. [59] Ibid. 35–7.

of a popular revolution is an oxymoron. 'The people count for nothing in revolutions', he announces, 'or at most count only as a passive instrument'. Elsewhere he claims that 'the people as a whole participate in . . . great movements only like wood and rope used by a workman'.[60] The people may *believe* that they are in control of events, but this is a cruel illusion. God insists that earthly authority must mimic his own autocratic rule over the universe. If we are lucky, this authority will be embedded in customary practices and arrangements and will therefore enjoy the spontaneous obedience of most people. If, however, we allow ourselves to be fooled by scoundrels whose heads are filled with 'learned barbarism', then we could, like the French, find ourselves saddled with 'the most frightful despotism in history'.[61]

Yet the revolutionaries were, from Maistre's perspective, no more than automatons in the hands of Providence. Although they rebelled against the laws of the universe, they were nevertheless doing God's work: 'never has the Divinity shown itself so clearly in any human event. If the vilest instruments are employed, punishment is for the sake of regeneration.'[62] Sinful mankind deserves to suffer; and since, in Maistre's opinion, responsibility is not individual but collective, the blood of the innocent as well as of the guilty is Providence's way of redeeming us.[63] The Terror, despite its cruelty, was in fact just. Revolution—the worst of evils—is a divine process, whose purpose is to punish wickedness and regenerate our fallen nature by suffering. After periods of 'laziness, incredulity, and the gangrenous vices that follow an excess of civilization', a bout of bloodletting can restore the health of the body politic.[64] Indeed, all the great upsurges of cultural creativity have followed 'long and bloody wars'. Consistently with this analysis, Maistre interprets the 1789 revolution as a 'great purification' whence 'the metal of France, freed from its sour and impure dross, must emerge cleaner and more malleable into the hands of a future king'.[65]

Stephen Holmes argues that there is a contradiction at the heart of Maistre's thought: sometimes he represents the universe as disorderly and evil; at other times he portrays it as orderly and good. This confusion, Holmes surmises, results from Maistre's simultaneous commitment to two competing traditions: gnosticism (the belief that the world is hopelessly defiled) and Christian theodicy (the belief that all worldly events, however painful in human terms, serve a higher purpose in the Grand Scheme of Things).[66] On the one

[60] *Considerations on France*, 77, 80. [61] Ibid. 40, 6.

[62] Ibid. 8; Extract from the seventh of the *St Petersburg Dialogues*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 56.

[63] Extract from the seventh of the *St Petersburg Dialogues*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 54. Innocence, though, is a relative concept to Maistre, since in the eyes of God all human beings are guilty of some primordial transgression of divine law.

[64] *Considerations on France*, 28. [65] Ibid. 29, 14.

[66] Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 33.

hand, Maistre tells us that 'evil has tainted everything, and in a very real sense, *all is evil*'.[67] On the other, he displays complete confidence in the cunning of reason, in the benefits to be reaped from apparent evils. Either way, we might add, his critique of democracy is undermined. If the world is irredeemably rotten, if, in the great cosmic struggle between good and evil, evil has triumphed, then why should we trouble our minds over the usurpation of traditional authority? Surely *all* rulers—regardless of the methods they use or the sources of authority to which they appeal—would be permeated by the existential wickedness of the material world. None would be worthy of our trust and loyalty—concepts that would be irrelevant in a context where bad has driven out good. And why, in such a corrupt world, should we worry about the disorder or tyranny that 'democracy' may bring? Do evil men not deserve the cruellest possible fate? The Panglossian Maistre fares even worse. If everything that happens serves a positive and foreordained function in God's eternal plan, then—with hindsight—we are forced to conclude that liberal democracy is both beneficial and in tune with God's wishes. After all, the ideas championed by the Enlightenment have undeniably prevailed over Maistre's brand of reaction. Furthermore, how can he attack democrats for rebelling against God when God himself is the guiding force behind their rebellion?

On the level of detail, moreover, Maistre's empirical generalizations about democratic politics have mostly been disproved. As Holmes points out, religion is not the only social 'cement' and is often a divisive rather than a harmonizing force. A shared interest in peace and prosperity can, as experience demonstrates, act as a powerful cohesive factor in societies with a great deal of cultural diversity.[68] And in his contempt for constitutions contrived by a few scribblers, Maistre overlooked the possibility that such documents could themselves become objects of quasi-religious veneration—sacralized, so to speak. The US constitution, an artificial contrivance which nevertheless helped to shape a nation, is a case in point. As for the idea that public debate will give rise to social instability and disorder, all the evidence suggests the opposite. If anything, such debate could act as a safety-valve for dissenting opinions that might otherwise explode into violent insurrection. Neither does chaos ensue when legislative assemblies reconsider previous decisions. Again, an admission of past mistakes seems to have the opposite effect, calming the nerves of potential rebels and defusing explosive situations. Finally, there is no evidence to support Maistre's assertion that citizens are less likely to obey laws they can revoke than those that are imposed on them by an irremovable authority. To the contrary, logic dictates that people will identify with a legislative process that solicits their opinions and pays heed to their expressed interests.

[67] *Considerations on France*, 31.

[68] Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 35.

Some of Maistre's predictions proved almost comically inaccurate. Commenting on America's plans for a new capital, for example, he offered the following piece of advice to all gamblers: 'one could bet a thousand to one that the city will not be built, that it will not be called *Washington,* and that the Congress will not meet there'.[69] It is doubtful, however, that Maistre would have considered any empirical evidence as in principle capable of upsetting the deep spiritual truths laid down by his religious faith. His thought processes were very much those of the medieval schoolman, deducing an elaborate system of ethical and political verities from a few basic principles. The appeal is to authority not experience. Popular sovereignty *must* be impossible because it contradicts the monocratic power that governs the universe. Political truths *must* be incontestable because religious truths are beyond question, and the former are only derived from the latter. Democratic debate *must* deteriorate into violent chaos because fallen man is naturally vicious and selfish. The pain and suffering of the innocent *must* be just as the world is necessarily governed by a moral purpose. Written constitutions *must* be worthless scraps of paper since only God can create nations. And so on. What we have here is, in Isaiah Berlin's apt phrase, 'pure dogma used as a polemical battering-ram'.[70]

Still, Maistre had a point when he denounced the abstract ideas and prescriptive logic of Enlightenment thought. Following in Burke's footsteps, he did much to discredit the attempt to determine what social goals to choose or structures to adopt by deduction from such general notions as the nature of man, the nature of rights, or the nature of the physical world—a deductive procedure whereby the conclusions have already been imported into the premisses. But his own method, as we have seen, is equally contemptuous of factual experience. In place of the abstractions that fascinated Enlightenment theorists, he substituted scripture and papal fiat. No less than his antagonists, he argued in circles, begging questions with reckless abandon.

Despite all this, we must acknowledge that Maistre, along with Burke, mounted a powerful assault on the sacrosanct platitudes and pious formulas of their liberal contemporaries. In so doing these two exemplars of conservative thought succeeded in highlighting some blind-spots in democratic ideology; in particular, the unwillingness to face the dark, destructive side of human nature, the persistence of irrational instincts, the desire to dominate and the corresponding desire to prostrate oneself before authority. Such elemental human passions can be harnessed but never annihilated, and they will always impose limits on our democratic ambitions. When considering political institutions, it is surely dangerous to take our bearings from man as he should be rather than man as he actually is. What is more, actual human

[69] *Considerations on France*, 61.
[70] 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', 163.

beings are situated within a particular cultural world—a related set of experiences, interpretations, and understandings—that gives them their identity. Political institutions, we now know, will survive and thrive only if they are congruent with prevailing ways of thinking and feeling. Maistre went too far when he asserted that constitutions will not be worth the paper they are written on unless they merely codify existing rights, duties, and privileges: 'No nation can give itself liberty if it is not already free.'[71] Laws, experience tells us, can indeed alter customary modes and values. But neither can constitution-makers or institution-builders ignore the antecedent context. As Burke said, men are not 'loose counters'[72] who can be slotted into any rational design that takes the fancy of progressive thinkers. Liberal democratic theory does rest on the assumption that society comprises a homogeneous mass of self-defining individuals, whose identity is not exhausted by their social roles. Reflect, if you will, on the practice of voting. To take a social decision in this way implies that it is right, appropriate, and intelligible to construct the community decision out of a concatenation of individual decisions. In medieval Europe, by contrast, the relationship between the individual and society was expressed by the organic metaphor: human beings saw themselves as parts of society in something like the way that a hand, for instance, is part of the body. Unity of purpose made it seem 'natural' for decision-making power to be vested in a single 'command centre' (the brain, the pope, the king) whose aim was to maintain the integrity of the whole. Individuals developed neither the skills nor the attitudes required in the democratic arena. Wherever the organic conception of society is dominant, democracy as we know it would seem inappropriate, alien, and perhaps even unintelligible. It is clear, then, that democracy cannot simply be grafted onto a holistic, traditional society—a proposition confirmed by the experience of post-colonial Africa. The romantic conservatives understood how culture shapes and constrains political arrangements; many democrats—even those with the benefit of hindsight—show no such understanding and betray an almost missionary zeal to impose their values, whatever the circumstances.

The problem for Burke and Maistre, however, was that 'the revolution of modern, self-defining subjectivity' (as Charles Taylor labels it)[73] was not just the work of depraved or misguided intellectuals, anxious to implant poisonous ideas into the minds of a previously contented populace. Rather, it reflected real trends: the growth of commercial and industrial society, and the corresponding increase in social and geographic mobility. Traditional

[71] *Considerations on France*, 50; Extract from the *Study of Sovereignty*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 45.

[72] *Reflections*, 300.

[73] C. Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), 410.

conceptions of a fixed and rigid hierarchical order, originating in God's will, no longer mirrored the underlying social reality. It is hardly surprising that these conceptions of cosmic order came to be seen as fictions, and were denounced as fraudulent creations of kings, priests, and aristocrats to keep their subjects submissive. Men and women—at least in the more advanced parts of Europe and North America—had to some degree become detached from their customary roles and functions. In this context, seeing individuals as atomic units and all social relations as voluntary contracts appeared to make sense. With the development of capitalism, human relationships became increasingly instrumental and consistent with the premisses of democratic doctrine. Burke, a supporter of free enterprise and the market economy, should have realized this. At any rate, he, Maistre, and the German romantics were fighting a rearguard action that was doomed to failure. Liberal individualism, spurred on by capitalism, was the wave of the future. Later advocates of the perversity thesis acknowledged as much. Even those, like Hegel, who thought this trend could be resisted nevertheless conceded that it could not be reversed. The new priority for critics of democracy was to isolate or minimize the deleterious effects of social atomism and 'homogenization', not to pretend that this phenomenon was a mere invention of foolish philosophers who had misperceived the nature of reality.

Perversity thesis (2): Atomism, Mass Society, and Despotism

The romantic conservative rejection of the instrumental view of the state laid the foundation for a good deal of nineteenth-century political discourse. Enlightenment justifications of the state, as we have seen, focused largely on the wants and satisfactions of the individual. For Burke and Maistre, on the other hand, the significance of the state was that it embodied the interests people held in common, interests which could not be reduced to a sum of individual desires. The emphasis was on the community which nurtured an individual, defining his self-image as well as his expectations of others. The nineteenth century witnessed a number of political movements whose point of departure was collective identity and involvement. Nationalism and socialism in their various guises highlighted the inadequacy of the abstract conception of the individual which isolates him from the surrounding social context. Still, the reactionary, almost pre-industrial caste of romantic conservative thinking seemed anachronistic in the face of modern technology and commerce. The communitarian ideal had to be reconciled with the demands of reason and science—with the realities, in other words, of industrial society.

Enter Hegel, with his determination to create a dialectical synthesis of Enlightenment rationalism and romantic 'expressivism'. While he shared many of the misgivings of the post-revolutionary generation regarding the cult of reason, he was also anxious to distance himself from the romantic obsession with impenetrable mysteries and imaginative insight. As did all his German contemporaries, Hegel felt compelled to respond to Kant's formulation of the problem of knowledge. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781),[74] Kant had shown how experience of the world was filtered through 'forms of intuition' (space and time) and 'categories' (quality, quantity, relation, modality) which arranged sense-data into intelligible patterns. Without these *a priori* concepts (which were properties of mind rather than properties of things) the impressions received by the senses would be devoid of meaning or coherence. Kant thus made a famous distinction between the noumenal world ('things as they are in themselves'—which we can never in principle know, since our knowledge is always moulded by our mental faculties) and the phenomenal world ('things as they appear to us'—through the mediation of these faculties). If Kant's analysis of the limitations of reason was right, it seemed to some observers that reality might be better understood through other means: intuition, empathy, and faith were variously proposed. Hegel disagreed with this inference and concluded that the 'inner necessity' of things could indeed be apprehended by the exercise of our rational faculties. The key to solving the Kantian conundrum was to see the world as the expression of purposive activity ('everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*').[75] Although he is here exploiting theological premisses, this is theology with a difference. He is content to see the world as God's creation, but only if that creation is regarded as a consequence of God's reason rather than his will. The development of the world should thus be seen as the progressive and logical unfolding of God's rational plan. Moreover, the Hegelian God is not transcendent and exists solely in and through its creation. Conceived in this way, God is neither mysterious nor arbitrary. Because ordinary mortals share a common rationality with this curiously mundane deity, it follows that they can achieve an unmediated understanding of both themselves and their history through a logical analysis of human thought processes. All this is possible, however, only if man is seen in the context of great cosmic forces that envelop him in an all-embracing and infinite whole. History is a succession of states and cultures which chart the progression of the human spirit—or God—in its/his quest for self-knowledge. This quest by no means reflects the intentions or desires of individuals;

[74] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933).

[75] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 10.

individuals participate in God's plan only through membership in a collective unit, which in turn serves some higher purpose in the human odyssey. Their own self-knowledge is therefore constituted by theoretical assumptions central to the life of the community.

It should be evident how much the moral and political dimension of Hegel's philosophy owed to the conservative or romantic critique of the French Revolution. Hegel endorsed the charge that the abstract doctrines of the Enlightenment had alienated men from their communities and had set in motion a chain of events leading to 'the destruction of the whole subsisting social order'.[76] Bringing traditional practices and institutions before the bar of reason, when that reason is disconnected from the evolving historical totality, is a recipe for perpetual discontent.[77] For Hegel, as for Burke and Maistre before him, such practices and institutions should not be seen, *à la* contract theory, as more or less efficient means of advancing individual interests but as essential dimensions of our identities. The union of individuals in a state cannot be reduced 'to something based on their arbitrary wills, their opinions, and their capriciously given express consent'.[78] Unlike his conservative predecessors, however, Hegel interpreted individualism, or 'subjective spirit', as a necessary stage in the progressive revelation of God's plan for mankind. The individual was emancipated as a real 'subject' by Christianity, which taught that every human being must discover and recognize in himself that which is right and good, and that this right and good is in its nature universal. The individual conscience becomes the legitimate subject of all decisions, against established authority and customary morality.[79] The individual, that is to say, descends into his inwardness to discover selfhood and self-will. The Protestant Reformation, in Hegel's view, was the logical culmination of the principle of 'subjectivity'.[80] Later on, with the growth of manufacturing and the division of labour, and the consequent disruption of traditional communal patterns, the new conception of the self became firmly and irreversibly embedded in social relations. Identification with the community was now problematic, for men came to see themselves as individuals with individual goals. The individual ceased to define his identity principally by the public experience of his society. On the contrary, his most meaningful experience was private. To rail against this phenomenon, according to Hegel, was about as useful as cursing the weather. Indeed, 'subjective spirit' should be welcomed

[76] *Philosophy of Right*, para. 5, p. 22.

[77] 'To consider a thing rationally means not to bring reason to bear on the object from the outside and so to tamper with it, but to find that the object is rational on its own account . . .' (ibid., para. 31, p. 35).

[78] Ibid., para. 258, p. 157.

[79] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 18.

[80] Ibid. 416.

as a necessary ingredient of human freedom. The danger, alas, is that rootless individuals in their alienation from customary ways of life, and in their exaggerated estimation of their own rational capacities, might succumb to the temptations of democracy. The result would be the opposite of what was intended. Instead of achieving emancipation, their experiment would (and did) produce 'the maximum of frightfulness and terror'.[81]

In the abstract, democracy is a logical corollary of the idea of free subjectivity. Inward-looking individuals, anxious to pursue autonomously defined goals, will naturally resist hierarchical systems of authority that presuppose a fixed, collective purpose. It is Hegel's contention, however, that free subjectivity would, in practice, render democracy disastrous, if not impossible. Freedom and democracy are incompatible.

Democracy, in its pure form, represents a real identity between the individual and the whole; the government is at one with all the individual citizens, and their will expresses the interests of the whole. This, says Hegel, was the Greek conception of democracy. During the early period of the city-state, when 'the subjectivity of Will' was not yet awake within the substantive unity of the *polis*, laws were looked upon as having 'a necessity of Nature'.[82] Citizens were still unconscious of particular interests. The absence of free subjectivity was the condition of a smoothly functioning democracy. The interest of the community could be 'intrusted to the will and resolve of the citizens' because these citizens did not yet have an autonomous will which could at any moment turn against the community. True democracy, Hegel holds, expresses an early phase in human development, a phase prior to that in which the individual is emancipated, and one contradictory to emancipation. Where individuality exists, the interests of the individual and the interests of the community will sometimes conflict. The Greek city-state could be a democracy, Hegel implies, because it was made up of citizens who were not yet conscious of their essential individuality. There was as yet no tension between the wish for personal liberty and the demands of the whole. Within Greek democracy, then, the recognition of 'subjective freedom' could not manifest itself otherwise than as 'a *destructive* element'. This destructive element was brought into the city-state by Socrates, who 'posited the Individual as capable of a final moral decision'. Although—unlike the early Christians—he accepted the 'naturalness' of slavery, and therefore failed to understand that man *as such* is free, Socrates set the truth apart as a universal and attributed the knowledge of this universal to the autonomous thought of the individual. While condemning him to death for subversion, the Athenians came to realize that 'what they reprobated in Socrates had already struck firm root among themselves'.[83]

[81] *Philosophy of Right*, para. 258, p. 157.
[82] *Philosophy of History*, 252.
[83] Ibid. 252–3, 269–70.

The growth of subjectivity, though restricted to a minority of the population, had destroyed the unreflective unity of the polis.

Hegel does not mourn the demise of ancient Greek democracy, for within it nothing stood as a general rule above the accidentality of common opinion, as expressed in the political market-place. This state of affairs, which he labels 'pure arbitrariness', is synonymous with despotism. For 'despotism means any state of affairs where law has disappeared, and where the particular will as such, whether of a monarch or a mob (ochlocracy), counts as law or rather takes the place of law'.[84] So what at first glance seems an example of perfect liberty—the immediate, unreflective, direct unity of the particular and the universal, the subsumption of the individual under the totality of the body politic—is in fact a form of enslavement to the whims and fancies of the mob.[85]

This was bad enough in ancient times; the effects of democracy in modern circumstances would be worse. Because Greek democracy presupposed an undifferentiated unity, the individual would feel himself in perfect harmony with the collective, however arbitrary or despotic it might be. But once free subjectivity disrupts natural unity, the hand of oppression weighs heavily on defeated minorities within a democratic system. As a prelude to his explanation of this phenomenon, Hegel highlights a strange paradox. Although democracy, strictly speaking, is appropriate only to societies where *no one* is an individual, demands for its implementation have reached fever pitch only in modern society, where *everyone* is an individual. Why? The evolutionary dynamic of modern life has been towards greater homogeneity and interdependence. Cut loose from traditional sources of identity and driven into the open market where considerations of rank or station lose all relevance, many individuals come to see themselves as both socially isolated and essentially similar to everyone else. Such individuals would obviously be receptive to a doctrine which guaranteed them an equal voice in the growing number of political decisions affecting their lives. Democracy, once in place, would accelerate the process of homogenization, or 'atomization', whereby society is

[84] *Philosophy of Right*, para. 278, p. 180.

[85] In Hegel's philosophy, this type of collective enslavement has its counterpart in the unfreedom of the individual who recognizes no restrictions to his will and does as he pleases. He may have the *illusion* of freedom but in fact he is a slave to arbitrary circumstances as well as his own impulses. By contrast, freedom consists in behaviour that expresses our identity—and our identity is essentially determined by existing social roles and conventions, which are no more separable from us than our personal characteristics. When the individual accepts the commitments imposed by his social function, the particular will 'by its reflection into itself has been equalized with the universal'. Our particularity, our individuality, our private interest, is not renounced but harmonized with the needs of the whole. Where such reconciliation is impossible, human action cannot be truly free. For Hegel, then, freedom requires settled constraints on the will—be it the individual will or the collective will (*Philosophy of Right*, para. 7, pp. 23–4, and para. 15, pp. 27–8).

reduced to its ultimate constituents. For the natural imperative of democracy, in Hegel's view, is to abolish 'difference', to destroy all partial communities or associations that stand between the individual and the wishes of the majority. But when the electorate becomes 'an agglomeration of atoms',[86] freedom dies. Manipulation and collective hysteria become the order of the day, and elections degenerate into a 'trivial play of opinion and caprice'.[87] The electorate takes on the characteristics of a mob, 'a formless mass whose commotion and activity could therefore only be elementary, irrational, barbarous, and frightful'. And, to Hegel, mob rule equals despotism.[88]

While Hegel felt sure that universal suffrage would bring catastrophe, he was in favour of representative government. But representatives 'are representatives in an organic, natural sense only if they are representatives not of individuals or a conglomeration of them, but of one of the essential spheres of society and its large-scale interests'.[89] This is an early depiction of the corporate state, which we tend to associate with fascism. Hegel, however, thought that basing the political system on the mediating structure between state and people would be an effective safeguard against despotism. While he stresses that individual representatives are not to be bound by any *mandat impératif*,[90] he sees in their very relation to an identifiable interest ('associations, communities') a guarantee that the state would respect the rights and privileges inherent in civil society.[91] The slogan 'one man, one vote' assumes that men can and should simply identify themselves as men and somehow extract themselves from their inherited or group identities. But having shaken men loose from their traditional communities, democracy—Hegel believes—can offer nothing by way of alternative except for some terrifying notion of state worship, which would depreciate or even crush diversity and individuality.

Hegel is also acutely aware of the dimension of scale as a variable when developing a system of representation. Ancient theories of democracy cannot be applicable to the modern state, with its vast territorial expanse and complex social organization, and, if introduced, would constitute a travesty of representation:

> As for popular suffrage, it may be further remarked that especially in large states it leads inevitably to electoral indifference, since the casting of a single vote is of no significance where there is a multitude of electors. Even if a voting qualification is highly valued and esteemed by those who are entitled to it, they still do not enter the polling booth. Thus the result of an institution of this kind is more likely to be the opposite of what was intended; election actually falls into the power of a few, of a caucus, and

[86] Ibid. para. 311, p. 202. [87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., para. 303, p. 198; addition to para. 302, pp. 292–3.
[89] Ibid., para. 311, p. 202. [90] Ibid., para. 309, p. 201.
[91] Ibid., para. 308, p. 200.

so of the particular and contingent interest which is precisely what was to have been neutralised.[92]

We find here echoes of Burke's observation that rural apathy would lead to the iron rule of urban bourgeois elites. We also encounter a foretaste of rational choice theory in the assertion that ordinary democratic citizens, as solitary and self-interested utility-maximizers, would literally calculate the costs and benefits of visiting the polling station. The benefits being intangible, Hegel assumes that most electors would choose to stay at home. This would enable power-hungry elites with their own agenda to concentrate their Machiavellian skills on those few who do bother to vote. Even these 'participants' are unlikely to take the trouble to inform themselves about specific issues, given that the chances of a single vote influencing policy are infinitesimal. They would be putty in the hands of ruthless mob orators. Thus, the attempt to recreate the supposed 'universality' of ancient Greek democracy in modern circumstances is a labour of Sisyphus. Not only would democracy destroy freedom; it would not even be 'rule by the demos' in any real sense. In an atomized society, full of isolated individuals absorbed by their private concerns, passivity would reign supreme.

The idea that widespread apathy engenders elite domination, even in nominally democratic societies, is a core element of the 'futility' case against democracy and will be considered in our next chapter. Suffice it to say here that the idea is a plausible one. Less plausible is Hegel's further contention that this elitism would amount to a kind of despotism, with a capricious and all-powerful state lording it over a society 'dispersed into atomic units',[93] over an amorphous mass of isolated and insecure individuals, helpless against the depredations of their elected masters. Hegel's worst fears have not been confirmed by history. Experience shows that atomization is not endemic to democratic societies. Whatever its shortcomings, democracy does allow for a richly layered fabric of independent institutions and powers mediating between centre and periphery and between citizens and their elected representatives. Nor does 'one man, one vote' prevent people from defining themselves by their partial and exclusive communities, whether cultural, ethnic, linguistic, occupational, or confessional. Nevertheless, Hegel's worries have found resonance in many critics of democracy ever since. Soon after Hegel died, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French count and pioneering political analyst, tried to grapple with the dilemmas he identified. Tocqueville also believed that the pull of equality tended to take modern society towards uniformity and perhaps even submission under an omnipotent government. But, unlike his German predecessor, he found some room for optimism about democracy, claiming that atomization might be avoidable, and that vigorous constituent communities and

[92] *Philosophy of Right*, para. 311, pp. 202–3. [93] Ibid., para. 308, p. 200.

associations in a decentralized structure of power *could* permit democratic societies to escape despotism and the worst effects of conformism.

Tocqueville's two volumes on *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and 1840 respectively, established their author as the most subtle critic of the emerging democratic order. Though based on Tocqueville's travels in America, and full of useful insights on the American political system, this massive work is essentially a philosophical examination of democracy in general—its underlying assumptions and practical consequences. Tocqueville noted that 'in America I saw more than America', for it 'appears to me beyond a doubt that, sooner or later, we shall arrive, like the Americans, at an almost complete equality of condition'.[94] The USA, 'the most democratic country on the face of the earth', represents the future of mankind.[95] In Tocqueville's usage, democracy denoted not so much a precise constitutional arrangement as an inexorable historical force, eating away at the traditional system of inherited privileges. Tocqueville acknowledged that the prevailing social equality in America had not fully penetrated into the political world, where electoral rights were far from universal. But he thought that the triumph of political equality was simply a matter of time. Once a nation begins to modify its suffrage qualifications, he informs us, it may easily be foreseen that, eventually, those qualifications will be entirely abolished.[96] The United States represented the most advanced stage of democratic development because it had no indigenous aristocracy, no defenders of differential and immutable birth rights, who could mount a sustained resistance to the egalitarian *Zeitgeist*. Nevertheless, it is a striking feature of Tocqueville's analysis that the democratic revolution is ultimately irresistible, and that Europe's aristocrats would do well to accept this fact rather than wallow in nostalgia for more congenial times.

Tocqueville views the democratic revolution as an expression of God's will, and he confesses to 'a kind of religious awe' when contemplating its pitiless advance 'in spite of every obstacle' and 'in the midst of the ruins it has caused'.[97] The gradual development of the principle of equality is therefore 'a providential fact' and exhibits 'all the chief characteristics of such a fact: it is universal, it is lasting, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress'.[98] Tocqueville agreed with the clerical reactionaries, such as Maistre, that the guiding hand of God lay behind visible social processes. Where he differed from them was in his unwillingness to see democracy as a transient horror, a diabolical aberration, but—on a deeper level—God's way of punishing us for our daily

[94] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols.), ed. P. Bradley (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), i. 15, 14.

[95] Ibid., ii. 115. [96] Ibid., i. 59. [97] Ibid., i. 7. [98] Ibid., i. 6.

transgressions. Rather, it represented man's divinely ordained destiny on this earth. Christian theology formed the basis of the democratic levelling process:

> Christianity, which has declared that all men are equal in the sight of God, will not refuse to acknowledge that all citizens are equal in the eye of the law. But, by a strange coincidence of events, religion has been for a time entangled with those institutions which democracy destroys; and it is not infrequently brought to reject the equality which it loves, and to curse as a foe that cause of liberty whose efforts it might hallow by its alliance.[99]

It was certainly true that the Catholic Church had been the largest landowner of the *ancien régime* in France, and that the monarchy had claimed to rule by *divine* right. Because of both its wealth and its expressed values, the Catholic Church was identified with the old order. Jacobinism, the agent of the new order, was seen as derivative from the impiety and heresy of Voltaire and Rousseau. Not just Maistre but Burke saw the revolution as an attack on Christianity as such. Tocqueville's novelty was to detach Christianity from the proprietary claims made by supporters of the old order, and to assert that democracy enjoyed a privileged status in God's grand design.

Tocqueville notes that the Americans, for their part, see no antithesis between Christianity and equality. While the French revolutionaries closed down churches and confiscated church land, their American counterparts were largely a pious lot who forged a wonderful alliance between liberty and religion.[100] For the French revolutionaries, religion was a form of superstition, akin to witchcraft, which had no place in the new epoch of secular felicity. Progress was taken to mean the removal of 'irrational' restraints on the individual or else on the will of the people. American democrats saw things differently. Being Protestants, mainly of the Puritan variety, they associated democracy with self-discipline and a strong sense of responsibility towards others. Their religion thus imposed limits on the passion for gratification that a democratic society encourages. What is more, the early American colonists, especially those in New England, were mainly drawn from the English middle classes and carried with them attitudes and habits fostered by local autonomy in the mother country. They were used to reading, meeting, and debating. The *mœurs* of the colonists combined happily with the circumstances of colonization, which created a strong tradition of local government. Townships existed before states and states before the federation. Tocqueville thus found much to admire in the American experiment with democracy. Certainly the dangers of excessive centralization were being successfully thwarted. Yet he feared that the directional logic of democracy would give rise to despotism in some shape or form, and his anxieties were

[99] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols.), i. 12.
[100] Ibid., i. 46.

particularly evident in volume ii of his masterwork. Even America, he concluded, was not immune to the harmful effects of democracy, despite its special circumstances.

The principal source of danger, for Tocqueville as for Hegel before him, was the 'individualism' that distinguishes a democratic society. In an aristocratic society there is no basis for drawing a distinction between the 'individual' and the roles he may occupy. Identity or rank is assigned at birth: 'the graduated scale of different ranks acts as a tie which keeps everyone in his proper place'.[101] Strictly speaking, there are no individuals in such a social order. It is *pre*-individualist because beliefs and practices do not depend on the assumption of a shared or 'human' nature, on the assumption of 'natural' equality. But in a democratic society, the foundation of personal identity changes. With the growth of geographic and social mobility, many people are uprooted from their native place and station, enjoy an independent economic position, and lose their sense of belonging to the larger human family. They 'acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands'. Civil equality makes it necessary to distinguish between the individual and his social roles, for these no longer exhaust personal identity. All roles become secondary to the universal or primary role—that of the individual, which is, by definition, shared by all. But if all are equal, all are equally isolated. 'Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain and severs every link of it.' While democracy emancipates the citizen from constricting dependency relations, and thus liberates his creative energies, it also 'throws him back upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart'. Individualism is therefore like an infection which, at first, saps only the virtues of public life, but—if unchecked—will destroy all others and degenerate into downright selfishness.[102]

Individualism, then, amounts to the apathetic withdrawal from a larger involvement in, and responsibility for, the welfare of society. It stands opposed to what an older republican tradition has called civic virtue or public spirit. It represents an exaggerated 'privatizing' of life, where families and personal friends become the only concern of the individual citizen. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, 'he is close to them, but does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them'.[103] The Americans Tocqueville encountered tended to think of individualism as the antithesis of tyranny, but, in a striking affirmation of the perversity thesis, he explains why the isolation and self-absorption of modern man, his withdrawal from prescribed social functions, is more likely to produce the enslavement than

[101] Ibid., ii. 94. [102] Ibid., ii. 104–6. [103] Ibid., ii. 336.

the liberation of mankind. Tocqueville gives four reasons for this paradoxical prediction.

The first is the natural democratic desire to turn the state into the sole source of authoritative compulsion in society. In feudal times, the power of the state was weak, and governmental power was exercised predominantly at local level and through a diversity of operational practices. As many functions were left in the hands of the aristocracy, 'the supreme power was always divided' and 'never weighed with its whole weight and in the same manner on each individual'. Since aristocratic power derived not from the will of the monarch but from the accident of birth, it enjoyed a certain degree of independence. Local notables could not be made or unmade in an instant, at pleasure. Nor would they bend in strict uniformity to the king's slightest caprice.[104] What is more, certain cities, corporate bodies, and established families were granted special powers concerning the distribution of charity, the administration of justice, and the raising of troops. These all formed part of what Tocqueville called 'secondary powers' or 'intermediate institutions', which came to function as guarantors of liberty and variety.

Democracy, by its very nature, eliminates or nullifies the powers of aristocracy and of any other bodies whose prerogatives originate in tradition rather than popular mandate. It glorifies abstract or 'human' rights and destroys special privileges. The idea of an independent intermediary structure, acting as a buffer between the state and the citizen, is repugnant to the democratic mentality, whose 'favorite conception is that of a great nation composed of citizens all formed upon one pattern and all governed by a single power'.[105] Democratic ideology insists upon the 'unity, the ubiquity, the omnipotence of the supreme power'.[106] In practice this leaves the central ruling authority (the 'voice of the people') as the major, if not the only, source of social control. Centripetal tendencies are exacerbated by the excessive privatization of life, which so weakens the habit of association that spontaneous organizations, based on contract and mutual interest, are unlikely to fill the gap left by the decline (or absence) of aristocratic institutions. Here America had distinct advantages. A strong tradition of local government obliges citizens to come together, to discuss their common needs, and to develop a civic sense. Moreover, never having had a native aristocracy, Americans lack the attitude of deference to authority. But the 'lot of the Americans is singular', according to Tocqueville. And, in volume ii at least, he seems to doubt that America can indefinitely resist the concentration of power inherent in democratic society.[107] Tocqueville often writes as if the *formal* separation of democratic citizens will inevitably turn into *real* dissociation. When this happens a fatal

[104] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols.), ii. 341. [105] Ibid., ii. 306.
[106] Ibid., ii. 308. [107] Ibid., ii. 316, 317, 307.

synergy between individualism and centralization can develop. 'Despotism', he maintains, 'sees in the separation among men the surest guarantee of its continuance, and it usually makes every effort to keep them separate.' Thus the vices which despotism produces are precisely those which equality fosters. These two things are mutually supportive:

> Equality places men side by side, unconnected by any common tie; despotism raises barriers to keep them asunder; the former predisposes them not to consider their fellow creatures, the latter makes general indifference a sort of public virtue.[108]

The power of the state is thus augmented by the complicity of both sides—an apathetic public who are happy to concentrate on private satisfactions and a government intoxicated with the delights of unlimited control. Political democracy in the formal sense may survive, but it is reduced to the staging of intermittent elections where the passive, atomized electors exercise the dubious right to choose their masters.[109]

A second reason for the link between individualism and despotism, in Tocqueville's opinion, is the profound sense of insecurity that pervades a society of self-seeking individuals. Where people are no longer born with ascribed status and functions, all obligations must be self-imposed: the bonds holding people together are necessarily abstract and conditional. As no man is compelled to lend his assistance to his fellow men, and none has the right to expect much support from them, 'everyone is at once independent and powerless'. So while his independence fills the citizen with self-reliance and pride, his existential loneliness makes him feel, from time to time, the need for some outward assistance, once provided by local notables, charitable bodies, church functionaries, or influential members of his extended family. 'In this predicament he naturally turns his eyes to that imposing power which alone rises above the level of universal depression.'[110] The citizen comes to view the state as the sole and necessary support of his own weakness. When society is shorn of traditional loyalties and hierarchies, when it becomes little more than an aggregation of individualities, only the state can exert a cohesive influence. Tocqueville remarks that the dissipation of spontaneous social effort is facilitated by the hatred of privilege that gnaws at the soul of the democratic citizen. The state, unlike his neighbours, does not excite his envy or cause him anxiety, for it is necessarily and incontestably above *all* citizens. The impersonality of its bureaucratic structures comforts him. Passively obeying the law has an abstract quality which need not disturb his feelings of self-worth, whereas grassroots cooperation might force him to acknowledge the superior ability of his neighbours.[111]

[108] Ibid., ii. 109. [109] Ibid., ii. 337–9 [110] Ibid., ii. 311. [111] Ibid., ii. 312.

Democratic man is not just fearful and envious; he is also restless and perpetually discontented. Whereas identities in an aristocratic society seem 'natural' or fated, in an egalitarian society they are constructed or artificial. Individuals can distinguish between persons and roles, compare roles, and aspire to almost any role. Individuals, that is to say, are no longer held back by fixed or assigned identities. This civil equality fosters a society marked by ambition and innovation—but all ambitions are cast in the same mould. Since fulfilling one's allotted function within traditional structures can no longer bring satisfaction, the newly emancipated individual suffers from what Durkheim called 'anomie', or normlessness. With social values and loyalties in a constant state of flux, democratic man dedicates himself to an endless quest for the one source of fulfilment that remains constant: physical gratification. Citizenship is overwhelmed by a desire for material pleasure. Instead of active citizens, democracy creates passive consumers of 'physical enjoyments'. It sometimes happens, however, that 'the excessive taste they conceive for these same enjoyments makes them surrender to the first master who appears'. For the 'discharge of political duties appears to them to be a troublesome impediment which diverts them from their occupations and business'.[112] This is the third reason why individualism paves the way for 'an absolute and despotic government'.[113] It might be thought that the productive and innovative energy unleashed by social mobility would enable democratic citizens to combine material satisfaction with civic virtue. The United States, after all, is a society of great abundance, where many citizens can and do spare some time for the discharge of public duties. Yet again, however, Tocqueville insists on American 'exceptionalism'. The special circumstances of the country have enabled it to escape the perils of apathy—so far at any rate.[114] But even there, the appetite for physical gratification has highlighted disturbing aspects of the American psyche which are inextricably bound up with the nation's egalitarian social structure. In the midst of plenty, Americans are haunted by a 'strange melancholy'. Unlike the inhabitants of a closed and hierarchical society, they 'are forever brooding over advantages they do not possess', and always in a hurry to pursue these before death obliterates their acquisitive potential. The thought of eternal rest fills them with anxiety and regret, and keeps their minds in ceaseless trepidation. Worldly welfare becomes an all-consuming objective for the individual, but its pursuit brings him nothing but frustration. A person who dedicates his life to material pleasure soon discovers that there is no logical end-point to his endeavours. No matter how many good things he possesses, 'he every instant fancies a thousand others'. Moreover,

[112] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols.), ii. 148–9.
[113] Ibid., ii. 340. [114] Ibid., ii. 150.

equality of opportunity raises hopes and expectations well beyond the possibility of fulfilment. Democratic citizens 'have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition; the barrier has changed its shape rather than its position'.[115] Frustration and disquietude, Tocqueville observed, permeate American society—and these characteristics, easily manipulable by demagogues and aspiring dictators, would seem to be endemic in democratic societies.

The danger of state dictatorship is not, however, the only peril that democracy faces. For in egalitarian times, Tocqueville warns, we encounter a new threat—one that never troubled previous fighters for freedom. This is the omnipotence of society itself, now so uniform in its social topography that any individuality stands out by its isolation. A suffocating conformity becomes the order of the day. And thus we come to the fourth reason why the atomization of society is conducive to despotism. Paradoxically, the threat to individual*ity* traces its origin to the growth of individual*ism*. Where social stratification is fluid and mobility prevails, people cannot derive their belief-system from the class to which they belong. Also, where all citizens are placed on an equal footing, 'no signs of incontestable greatness or superiority are perceived in any of them'. The habit of deference to 'wise men' or one's social 'betters' gradually disappears. In place of instinctive trust in authority comes an instinctive *dis*trust of it. Tocqueville notices that, in America for example, 'everyone shuts himself up tightly within himself and insists upon judging the world from there'.[116] One might think, then, that America is a society of free-thinkers, eager to evade the bondage of popular prejudice. But this is not so. While the denizens of a democratic society have little faith in one another, by reason of their common resemblance, this very resemblance gives them almost unbounded confidence in the judgement of the public, for 'it would seem probable that, as they are all endowed with equal means of judging, the greater truth should go with the greater number'. Individuals may doubt their own ability to reason if it leads to conclusions which differ from those universally held. It is as if formal equality created a duty to share the opinions of the public, resulting not in independence of judgement but conformity. No laws are needed to produce this effect, for public disapproval is sufficient to blot out dissent or eccentricity:

> The public, therefore, among a democratic people, has a singular power, which aristocratic nations cannot conceive; for it does not persuade others to its beliefs, but it imposes them and makes them permeate the thinking of everyone by a sort of enormous pressure of the mind of all upon the individual intelligence.

[115] Ibid, ii. 144–7. [116] Ibid., ii. 4.

Faith in public opinion becomes 'a species of religion, and the majority its ministering prophet'.[117] Tocqueville was aware that in his own day those who defended an aristocratic model of society feared that greater democracy would lead to moral and intellectual anarchy. But that was not the danger he feared. The absolute power of the majority forces us to contemplate 'a new physiognomy of servitude', scarcely less oppressive than the absolute monarchies of the past. 'I am not the more disposed to pass beneath the yoke', writes Tocqueville, 'because it is held out to me by the arms of a million men'.[118]

Tocqueville was here talking about the despotism of public opinion, but he had no doubt that, in a democracy, it would simply be a matter of time before the views of the majority were given the force of law—especially in countries, such as France, with a long-standing tradition of administrative centralization. Inherent in the logic of democracy is the willingness of people to surrender more and more of their liberties to the state, since they regard state power not as an alien imposition but as an institutionalized expression of their own preferences.[119] To Tocqueville, the clerical reactionaries could not have been more wrong when they associated democracy with lawlessness. For the premiss of equality underlying democratic societies has as its natural complement the idea of spontaneous reciprocity. Everyone has a stake in society, and everyone has an interest in making it work. Far from feeling that the law is their objective enemy, citizens of a democratic republic identify with it. In America, 'all classes' are attached to the legislation of their country 'by a kind of parental affection'.[120] Although it is a source of stability, the fact that democratic citizens see themselves as the 'authors' of their own laws can transform the informal 'tyranny of the majority' into a particularly constricting type of state despotism.

In contrasting the despotisms of the past with what he calls 'democratic despotism', Tocqueville foreshadows the modern distinction between 'authoritarianism' and 'totalitarianism'. He points out that, in former ages, no sovereign was so absolute or so powerful 'as to undertake to administer by his own agency, and without the assistance of intermediate powers, all the parts of a great empire; none ever attempted to subject all his subjects indiscriminately to strict uniformity of regulation and personally to tutor and direct every member of the community'. Had such a notion ever occurred to anyone, the lack of information, the defects of the administrative system, and 'the natural obstacles caused by the inequality of conditions' would have prevented the execution of so vast a design. Even the Roman emperors, at the height of their power, were forced to tolerate great diversity of customs and usages within their domain. The various provinces were separately administered, and the

[117] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols.), ii. 11–12.
[118] Ibid., ii. 13. [119] Ibid., i. 9–10. [120] Ibid., i. 255–7.

details of life lay for the most part beyond the emperor's control. While Roman tyranny was violent, its range was limited.[121]

If despotism were to be established among the democratic nations of our day, it would, Tocqueville thinks, take a different form:

> . . . it would be more extensive and more mild; it would degrade men without tormenting them . . . sovereigns might more easily succeed in collecting all political power into their own hands and might interfere more habitually and decidedly with the circle of private interests than any sovereign of antiquity could ever do. But this same principle of equality which facilitates despotism tempers its rigor. We have seen how the customs of society become more humane and gentle in proportion as men become more equal and alike . . . This universal moderation moderates the sovereign himself and checks within certain limits the inordinate stretch of his desires.[122]

If these remarks seem reassuring, Tocqueville does not intend them to be. Benign subjugation, he warns, is no less degrading than the more brutal variant. In modern society, where each individual pursues 'petty and paltry pleasures' and 'is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest', conditions exist for the growth of an 'immense and tutelary power' which would assume responsibility for the destiny of each and every citizen:

> That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood . . . For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances: what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?[123]

With each passing day, the exercise of free agency becomes less frequent. The supreme power, basking in its democratic legitimacy, gradually 'covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd'. The will of the people, whether expressed through plebiscitary dictatorship or through the normal parliamentary channels, must triumph in every area of life. This type of government does not 'tyrannize' in the old-fashioned sense of the word, 'but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd'.[124] What started out as an intention to elevate the individual person to his proper status as a thinking, autonomous

[121] Ibid, ii. 334–5. [122] Ibid., ii. 335. [123] Ibid., ii. 336. [124] Ibid., ii. 337.

being only succeeds in bringing him down to the level of a household pet—dependent, obedient, and mindless. Advocates of democracy, Tocqueville argues, often forget that the passion to be led is at least as strong as the passion to be free. Where they can, men will try to satisfy both of these contrary propensities at once. In a democratic system, the people can console themselves for being in tutelage, for submitting to an all-powerful ruling authority, by the reflection that they have chosen their own guardians.[125]

What separates Tocqueville from Hegel is the former's belief that bureaucratic tyranny need not be the inevitable outcome of democratic change. The Frenchman is 'full of apprehensions', but also 'of hopes'.[126] The way to combat the ever growing tutelary power of the democratic state is to strive for actual or functional equivalents of the intermediate associations that existed in medieval society. In this respect, he was pleased to find the Americans exhibiting a strong tendency towards association—strong enough, perhaps, to resist the centralizing forces set in train by equality of conditions. America is blessed with 'an immense assemblage of associations', not only commercial and manufacturing companies but 'associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive'. In ages of equality, 'every man naturally stands alone', bereft of 'hereditary friends whose cooperation he may demand', or a 'class upon whose sympathy he may rely'. He is 'easily got rid of', he can be 'trampled on with impunity'. But if such men can exert themselves to form associations with like-minded citizens for specific purposes, they can provide islands of resistance to state power. In defending their own partial rights, they detract from the natural omnipotence of a democratically legitimated government.[127] And so the independence of democratic citizens need not lead to fearful isolation and submission to the sovereign authority. Where circumstances are appropriate, it may produce the opposite result: a determination to protect one's interests through voluntary activity with others. Tocqueville stresses the moralising potential of such activity: 'the heart is enlarged and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal influence of men upon one another'.[128] In thus rising above the level of petty and selfish concerns, men acquire skills that fit them for political activity. A sufficiently large pool of energetic and intelligent citizens makes local autonomy possible and helps to account for the resilience of American federalism in the face of contrary pressures.

Tocqueville's analysis of democracy, though much more subtle than that of Hegel, appears as a curious mixture of pessimism and optimism which falls short of forming a coherent whole. Still, his ambivalent attitude may be perfectly appropriate. On the one hand, his dire prophecies have—to a degree—

[125] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols.), ii. 337. [126] Ibid., ii. 352.
[127] Ibid., ii. 114, 342. [128] Ibid., ii. 117.

come true. Modern democracy does suffer from elite manipulation, mass apathy, rampant selfishness, and the 'nanny' state. On the other hand, democratic citizens (or most of them) reveal a level of tolerance and independence of spirit that has no historical parallel. If 'democratic man' has not been as supine as Tocqueville feared, this is probably because democracy has never been as 'democratic' as he predicted. Tocqueville failed to appreciate how the new grandees of business and finance could fill the intermediary role vacated by the landed aristocracy. For example, by the late nineteenth century, American 'company towns' had come to resemble the medieval manors of old, where the well-being of the serfs was dependent on the *noblesse oblige* of the lords. One does not have to be a Marxist to recognize that Tocqueville seriously underestimated the power and prestige that flowed from ownership of capital assets. To borrow his phrasing, financiers and captains of industry are not 'easily got rid of' by an overweening state. The 'equality of condition' he spoke about was never more than a Platonic essence; and where intermediate powers have been curtailed or destroyed (as in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union), this has resulted from the abrogation—not the implementation—of the democratic will. Hitler and Stalin may have been popular, but neither had the confidence to test this popularity in free and fair elections, where opposition groups could organize, canvass, attack government policies, and offer alternatives. Tocqueville's critique seems more applicable to the *theory* of democracy than to its actual functioning. Although his lengthy discussions of American practice may suggest otherwise, his depiction of democratic society, like his description of its aristocratic predecessor, was an ideal-type in the Weberian sense, focusing on the essential traits and internal logic of the phenomenon, and abstracting from the complications of reality. As Larry Siedentop notes, Tocqueville identified a structural flaw in the democratic idea—that it offered no *intrinsic* obstacle to the growth of central power, the power of a state which can alone claim to speak for all equally. Doing so allowed him to remedy a potentially fatal defect in the model of society and government that modern democrats had inherited from seventeenth-century contract theory, which moved from the 'natural' individual to the association of all in the state as if secondary institutions or customary rights and obligations were so much outmoded nonsense.[129]

Tocqueville died in 1859. 'Few major intellectuals in the hundred years after his death', Siedentop writes, 'failed to read and ponder over *Democracy in America*'.[130] The influence of the work was widespread and profound. Its attack on 'mass society' found strong echoes and intriguing variations in the writings of, amongst others, J. S. Mill, Le Bon, Ortega y Gasset, Kornhauser,

[129] L. Siedentop, *Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 140.
[130] Ibid. 141.

Fromm, and Marcuse. Of those who learned from Tocqueville in the generation immediately following his own, the most eminent was Hippolyte Taine, an enormously influential critic of democracy whose *Origins of Contemporary France* (1875–93) supplied the hard basis of fact and scholarship for the *fin dé siecle* assault by French reactionaries on all things progressive. Tocqueville had explained how democracy creates isolated individuals who increasingly resemble the inhabitants of the hypothetical state of nature. Their very rootlessness will, if unchecked, give rise to a collective psychopathology that leads straight to despotism, albeit a despotism that may embrace democratic procedures and reflect the popular will. Without discussing contract theory, Tocqueville implied that it embodied hidden dangers. This theme is taken up by Taine, who also wanted to explore the dark forces unleashed by modern individualism.

What makes contract theory so terrifying, according to Taine, is its doctrinaire commitment to universality. A political system is constructed after a mathematical model, and therefore it must be based on 'man in general', stripped of 'the extrinsic and spurious qualities through which alone all differ', a hypothetical individual 'born at twenty one years of age, without relations, without a past, without traditions, without a country'. This etiolated creature, as idealized as the circles and squares of the geometrician, is also 'a sensitive being capable of forming rational opinions and of acquiring moral ideas'.[131] The mania for universality extends to the nature of the social contract itself. It is not a historical fact like the English Declaration of Rights in 1689, entered into by actual and living individuals, reflecting existing situations and established positions, and drawn up to recognize and define anterior rights. For antecedent to the 'social contract', no justifiable right or privilege exists. These can be agreed upon only by the perfectly equal, and hopelessly abstract, inhabitants of the state of nature: 'Hence, at the moment of its completion, all other pacts are nullified. Property, family, Church, no ancient institution may invoke any right against the new state.'[132]

What Tocqueville discovered through critical reflection on empirical evidence, Taine discovered through a logical analysis of social contract theory, especially as formulated by Rousseau. The methods and starting points were different; the conclusions very similar. Taine argues that the 'loner' who emerges from the state of nature is far from rational, let alone benevolent. Freed from the custom of deference to his intellectual 'betters', absorbed in his efforts to earn a living, which are unlikely to stimulate his mental faculties to any significant degree, he is inclined to think like an 'imbecile'—particularly with respect to public affairs:

[131] H. Taine, Extract from *The Origins of Contemporary France*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 63.

[132] Ibid. 76–7.

General ideas and accurate reasoning are found only in a select few. The comprehension of abstract terms and the habit of making accurate deductions require previous and special preparation, a prolonged mental exercise and steady practice, and besides this, where political matters are concerned, a degree of composure which, affording every facility for reflection, enables a man to detach himself for a moment from himself for the consideration of his interests as a disinterested observer. If one of these conditions is wanting, reason, especially in relation to politics, is absent.[133]

Reason is neither natural to man nor universal in humanity. Moreover, it remains, where it is deployed at all, the obedient servant of 'other forces born within us', our 'inward masters', such as 'physical temperament, bodily needs, animal instinct, hereditary prejudice, imagination . . . and more particularly personal or family interest, also that of caste or party'.[134] Tocqueville had observed how democratic man, through a strange combination of arrogance and insecurity, tended to shun rational debate and discussion, ridicule the abstruse arguments of his intellectual superiors, and generally place his trust in the opinions of the 'crowd'. Taine claims that this kind of 'suggestibility' is endemic in human nature, and thus a mortal threat to any society that forsakes inherited wisdom for the non-existent reasoning powers of ordinary people. Man is 'an imaginative being in which swarming fancies develop themselves into monstrous chimeras to expand his hopes, fears and desires beyond all bounds'. This is why he is prone to 'an excess of sensibility, sudden outbursts of emotion, contagious transports, irresistible currents of passion, epidemics of credulity and suspicion'. One only has to look at the scenes of mob violence during the French Revolution or the Paris Commune to realize that no matter how rational the doctrine of democracy may seem, it becomes, in untutored minds, a series of simplistic slogans which are used as an excuse to indulge in an oppressive collective insanity. Democracy seeks to liberate man; what he really needs is restraint.[135]

Tocqueville had alerted us to the perverse logic that transforms the anarchy of self-seeking individuals into collective despotism. Taine presented us with a similar paradox. If anything, one would expect democracy to produce 'a perfect anarchy', since its ideological thrust is to withdraw every prerogative from the government and to satisfy the immediate desires of the people. But, according to him, there are two sides to democratic theory; one leading to 'the perpetual demolition of government', the other terminating in 'the illimitable dictation of the state'. The very universality of the social contract requires it to nullify all the old structures and practices that stood between the individual and the state. For rights and privileges that have not been sanctioned by 'the people' are an affront to democratic sensibilities. Rousseau's ideal state demonstrates this 'holism' with exemplary clarity. The social body set up by

[133] Ibid. 69–70. [134] Ibid. 71–2. [135] Ibid. 72–4.

the contract must be 'the universal proprietor and absolute master'. Any derogation from its power constitutes an impediment to the popular will, as the state is merely the expression of this will. Unlike traditional states, it is, by nature, hostile to other associations than its own, for 'they are rivals, they annoy it'. Taine concludes that the 'dogma of the sovereignty of the people', despite its anarchic undercurrent, in fact produces 'a perfect despotism', where the voice of reason—still audible in the most absolute of monarchies—falls silent before the awesome might of the people.[136]

Taine, though generally considered a liberal and a friend of science, left rational man rocking on his pedestal. During the middle part of the nineteenth century—and in response to the challenge of romanticism—thinkers as diverse as Comte, J. S. Mill, and Marx had revived the idea of human rationality (though they also borrowed freely from the romantic stock of ideas). Like their Enlightenment forebears, they extolled the virtues of science and displayed boundless optimism about human potential. Reason, man's distinctively human endowment, would guide us to a better future—or so it was thought. Taine's refusal to accept this rosy picture found sympathy among his younger contemporaries. The *fin de Siècle* was a time of general unmasking, of trying to get behind man's rational façade. In philosophy, there was a new emphasis on 'intuition' as the way to truth; in the arts, playwrights such as Strindberg began to ransack the unconscious in an effort to transcend naturalistic drama, while expressionist painters sought to depict inner states—man stripped down to his most basic emotions. The end of the century also saw the growth of popular movements and an outbreak of strikes and working-class unrest throughout Europe. Contemplating these events and developments, students of human psychology became obsessed by the role of emotion in social life and underlined the significance of non-logical motivation. The new discipline of social psychology was founded on the assumption of collective irrationality. Its seminal theorists generally evinced a political bias which was hostile to democratic forms of decision-making. To take a prominent example, Gustave Le Bon, drawing on current theories of pathological susceptibility and hypnotism, undermined mass democracy by linking it to the dynamics of 'crowd' behaviour. A crowd, as he understood it, was more than an aggregate of individuals. Rather, it was a generic creation, a collective mentality that was the amplified projection of an individual mind. But the 'group mind' was an inferior example of the genre, dominated by crass sentiments, open to hypnotic suggestion, and capable of thinking only in images: 'by the mere fact that he forms part of an organised crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting

[136] H. Taine, 76–82.

by instinct.'[137] To Le Bon, the anonymity, contagion, and suggestibility which he deemed endemic to crowds caused a loss of personal identity and a reduction of intellective functions.

Le Bon makes it clear that a crowd does 'not always involve the simultaneous presence of a number of individuals on one spot'. At certain moments, or under the influence of 'certain violent emotions', thousands of isolated individuals may acquire the characteristics of a psychological crowd. Indeed, 'an entire nation', though there may be no visible gathering of individuals, may become a crowd during great national events.[138] Thus, for Le Bon, the democratic electorate is a kind of 'crowd'. Of the characteristics peculiar to crowds, voters 'display in particular but slight aptitude for reasoning, the absence of the critical spirit, irritability, credulity, and simplicity'.[139] Le Bon agrees with Tocqueville that democracy depends upon the detachment of the individual from traditional loyalties; it therefore encourages excessive egoism and *ipso facto* a diminution of the capacity for spontaneous self-organization. Once the social whole becomes 'an agglomeration of individualities lacking cohesion' and wracked by insecurities, men come to desire state direction in their pettiest acts.[140] Le Bon explicitly endorses Tocqueville's explanation for this phenomenon: i.e. while democratic citizens are inherently suspicious of one another, they have great faith in collective authority, the reason being that if all men are equally enlightened, truth and numerical superiority should go hand in hand.[141] In fact, Le Bon argues, this is the opposite of the truth: 'In crowds it is stupidity and not mother-wit that is accumulated.'[142]

The passing of innumerable measures to satisfy the insatiable, and often contradictory, legislative demands of 'electoral crowds' 'conduces necessarily to augment the number, the power, and the influence of the functionaries charged with their application'. These functionaries, Le Bon continues, 'tend in this way to become the veritable masters of civilised countries'. Their power is all the greater owing to the fact that, amidst the incessant transfer of authority from one government to another, 'the administrative caste is alone in possessing irresponsibility, impersonality, and perpetuity'. For Le Bon, there is 'no more oppressive despotism than that which presents itself under this triple form'. Moreover, this 'despotism' is self-perpetuating, as the constant creation of restrictive laws and regulations gradually strangles whatever initiative and independent spirit the people may have possessed:

> Accustomed to put up with every yoke, they soon end by desiring servitude, and lose all spontaneousness and energy. They are then no more than vain shadows, passive, unresisting and powerless automata.

[137] G. Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920), 36. First English translation in 1896.

[138] Ibid. 26–7. [139] Ibid. 201. [140] Ibid. 238–9.

[141] Ibid. 211. [142] Ibid. 32.

Arrived at this point the individual is bound to seek outside himself the forces he no longer finds within his own nature. It then falls to our governors 'to undertake everything, direct everything, and take everything under their protection. The state becomes an all-powerful god.' Democracy, originating in the quest for self-rule, turns us into humble supplicants.[143]

Le Bon's description of the electorate as a 'crowd', while scarcely compatible with our modern reverence for all things democratic, can nevertheless shed light on the peculiarities of democratic politics. It is a common observation, for example, that people who exhibit subtlety and rationality in their occupations often give vent to irrational prejudice when entering the political arena. Think of all those brilliant scientists, artists, and academics in the West who saw Stalin as 'good old Uncle Joe', a misunderstood figure, wanting only to create a better life for the poor and the downtrodden. Even many who acknowledged his barbarous actions claimed that they were 'necessary' in the historical scheme of things. People in 'crowds', says Le Bon, respond to instincts which they would normally, when they are alone or dealing with purely personal relationships, keep under restraint. Outside the realm of political debate, the fellow-traveller would never dream of justifying the murder of his neighbours, for whatever reason. But where he is an anonymous member of an electoral crowd, whose opinions can have no real impact, he experiences a diminished sense of responsibility, not to mention an insecure grasp of reality.[144] Under these conditions, he is—according to Le Bon—subject to another characteristic of crowds: contagion. Ideas and emotions can spread like microbes among people who are in close association. In a media-saturated age, moreover, this 'action of contagion may be felt from a distance'. Human beings, like animals, have a natural tendency to imitation. Contagion, Le Bon tells us, is what accounts for changes in fashion, whether in the matter of opinions, ideas, or merely of dress. The preferences of electoral crowds are propagated by contagion, never by reasoning.[145] Harsh though this verdict may seem, it is obviously the case that democratic politicians rarely rely on rational arguments to persuade the electorate. Here Le Bon shows much foresight. He notes that leaders of crowds always resort to affirmation and repetition. Affirmation pure and simple, bereft of all reasoning and all proof, 'is one of the surest means of making an idea enter the mind of crowds. The conciser an affirmation is, the more destitute of every appearance of proof and demonstration, the more weight it carries'. This is an early statement of the thinking that gave us 'sound-bites' and 'spin doctors'. Affirmation, however, has no lasting influence unless it be constantly repeated. Even enlightened minds find repetition hard to resist; for repeated statements, especially those that 'evoke very vivid images', eventually embed themselves 'in those profound regions of

[143] G. Le Bon, 234–6. [144] Ibid. 33. [145] Ibid. 143–6.

our unconscious selves in which the motives of our actions are forged'. Again displaying precocious insight, Le Bon attributes 'the astonishing power of advertisements' to repetition. He was referring to political as well as commercial advertisements. If we constantly hear it said that A is an 'arrant scamp' and B a most honest man, we finish by being convinced that this is the truth, even in the absence of anything remotely resembling rigorous proof.[146] Le Bon's observations are probably more relevant now than when he made them. That democratic politicians use affirmation and repetition to create benign images of themselves and repellent images of their opponents is plain for all to see. And who could deny the crucial role of 'image' in shaping voter preferences?

Evidence to support Le Bon's conclusions is not just impressionistic. Although the concept of a 'group mind' has largely been rejected as a metaphysical abstraction, there is widespread agreement among social psychologists that groups do demonstrate an internal dynamic, that unique properties emerge out of the network of relations between individual members. Behaving as part of a collectivity has definite psychological consequences. And while the anti-democratic bias of his theory makes Le Bon unfashionable among political theorists, his speculations about the effects of anonymity in the crowd have proved tremendously influential for subsequent empirical research into collective behaviour. Social psychologists like Zimbardo and Diener have found that being in a crowd could lead to a displacement of personal identity—or 'deindividuation'—and hence a loss of self-control. When this occurs, behaviour becomes deregulated—detached from pre-existing values and norms and controlled by immediate cues in the environment. The result may be wanton destruction or mindless regimentation; either way, there is a diffusion of personal responsibility for one's actions.[147]

It was precisely Tocqueville's point that the paradoxical logic of democracy would cause self-absorbed individuals to become 'deindividuated', to merge with the collective mass, or—as he put it—'the crowd'.[148] Le Bon's metaphor of an 'electoral crowd' is a logical extension or development of Tocqueville's ideas and terminology. But even the most illuminating metaphor can be misleading if taken too literally. Members of crowds are supposed to have a diminished sense of reality and therefore a defective understanding of their own interests. There is, however, little evidence of collective hysteria, and much evidence of wily calculation, in the way that people vote on 'bread and butter' issues, such as taxation and welfare. But even if we grant that the 'crowd' metaphor yields powerful insights when applied to democratic electorates, it

[146] Ibid. 141–3, 222.

[147] For a summary of the literature, see R. Brown, *Group Processes: Dynamics within and between Groups* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 9–14.

[148] *Democracy in America*, ii. 337.

does not follow that we must resign ourselves to the irresistible advance of bureaucratic despotism, where people voluntarily abdicate their individual judgement in deference to an all-powerful state. In common with his predecessors in the 'mass society' tradition, Le Bon was transfixed by the *model* of democracy and failed to appreciate how its implementation would be modified by particularistic loyalties and interests. Intermediate structures of power and attachment, serving to protect the individual from the depredations of the state, have not been obliterated by the logic of democracy. Nor are they likely to be in the future. In general, comparative research into popular attitudes and political behaviour does not support the proposition that democracy creates alienated and socially isolated citizens, wandering alone in a spiritual desert.[149] Le Bon, like his predecessors, did foresee that the democratic state would be more intrusive than previous political forms—and it was probably correct to attribute this primarily to the relative rootlessness and psychological insecurity of modern man, wrenched from traditional moorings and forced to interact on a daily basis with a multitude of strangers. But what Le Bon and others did not foresee was the reverse side of the democratic coin—the stubborn spirit of personal independence and initiative unleashed by our 'atomistic' society.

By the twentieth century, the idea of a mass society was firmly established. Its ancestry, as we have seen, can be traced back to the romantic conservatives who bemoaned the erosion and destruction of the ancient bonds of kinship, caste, church, guild, and village or town. But it was Hegel who first theorized a clear connection between despotism and 'the rise of the masses'. In his writings, as in those of Tocqueville and Le Bon, the mass society is portrayed as one in which the population is an undifferentiated collection of individuals, uprooted from tradition, community, and customary morality, subject to waves of emotion, and prey to the manipulation of unscrupulous politicians. The archetypal citizen of this society, the 'mass man', is seen as a passive , isolated creature, whose mental and spiritual life is a carbon copy of other human beings. Accordingly he possesses few resources to fight the intrusion of the

[149] Ronald Inglehart has presented survey evidence to demonstrate that citizens in older, more established democracies—such as Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, the UK, the USA—reveal much higher levels of interpersonal trust than citizens of newer ones (e.g. Germany, Japan, Italy, Spain). His findings, which have yet to be seriously challenged, appear to contradict Tocqueville's argument that suspicion of one's neighbours (the 'lonely crowd' syndrome) is an intrinsic, if controllable, characteristic of democracy. Indeed, Inglehart's statistics suggest the reverse: that democracy, as it matures from one generation to the next, gradually produces mutual trust and a sense of fellowship ('The Renaissance of Political Culture', *American Political Science Review*, 82 (Dec. 1988), 1211–15). These results are consistent with the much earlier findings of Almond and Verba, who maintained that Britain and the USA—in contrast to Italy, Germany, and Mexico—enjoyed a 'civic culture', with high levels of active participation in voluntary associations (G. A. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston: Little Brown, 1965)).

state into the very details of his existence. The argument that mass democracy would lead straight to despotism was given a boost by the rise of fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany. However, those, most notably Hannah Arendt,[150] who tried to explain totalitarianism as an outgrowth of mass society did not, on the whole, blame democracy itself but rather the recency and speed of its implementation, especially in Germany, where the old associations of community and religion supposedly collapsed, leaving anomic and rootless masses as putty in the hands of demagogic politicians. Plausible though this account was, it neglected strong evidence that contradicted its central proposition. Germany and Italy had indeed undergone rapid and dislocating change, but that change was political rather than primarily social. These were not societies in which intermediary social organization was weak. Both countries, for example, had strong trade union movements in the pre-totalitarian years, and religion remained a powerful factor in people's daily lives.

Nevertheless, the mass society thesis refused to die. In 1952, J. L. Talmon—heavily influenced by Tocqueville—forged his famous concept of 'totalitarian democracy' and applied it to developments in France at the time of the French Revolution:

> Totalitarian democracy . . . made man the absolute point of reference. Man was not merely to be freed from restraints. All the existing traditions, established institutions, and social arrangements were to be overthrown and remade, with the sole purpose of securing to man the totality of his rights and freedoms, and liberating him from all dependence . . . All the emphasis came to be placed on the destruction of inequalities, on bringing down the privileged to the level of common humanity, and on sweeping away all intermediate centers of power and allegiance, whether social classes, regional communities, professional groups or corporations. Nothing was left to stand between man and the State. The power of the State, unchecked by any intermediate agencies, became unlimited. This exclusive relationship between man and State implied conformity.[151]

Talmon was (implicitly) a proponent of the perversity thesis. While Enlightenment thinkers wanted to free man, to open up opportunities for maximizing human potential, their ideas led to quite opposite ends. Man became an abject subject of a mass 'democratic' state whose power was—as Talmon observed—'unlimited'. However, he was not a critic of democracy as such. What struck him as dangerous was the 'perfectionist' approach to democracy, as encapsulated in Rousseau's understanding of the 'general will'. By the 1960s Talmon's 'conservative' analysis had gone out of fashion. A new generation of radicals rejected the imputed link between democracy and 'atomism', and attempted to develop 'holistic' theories of popular participation, stressing

[150] H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951).
[151] J. L. Talmon, *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 1952), 249–50.

communal identification over private interest. The idea was to detach democratic theory from the liberal individualism with which it had become entwined. Indeed, an interesting feature of political thought in the years following the Second World War was the appropriation of the mass society thesis as an explanatory tool of the Left. For thinkers like Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, the alienation and standardization of contemporary Western society was caused not by democracy but by capitalism, which infects all aspects of life with its soul-destroying commercialism. While the mass society thesis still reflected an elitist cultural pessimism, it eventually lost its association with critics of democracy.

3

The Futility Thesis

Those who insisted on the futility of democratic change, who denied that democracy in the sense of 'government *by* the people' could ever be attained, shared with certain 'perversity' critics of democracy a tendency to look upon ordinary folk as an undifferentiated mass—banal in its tastes, bereft of conscious purpose, lacking in ties of communication and loyalty. But whereas Tocqueville, Le Bon, and their like contemplated this glob of humanity with trepidation, the 'futility' school spoke about the masses with contempt rather than alarm. The contrast with Marxism could not be more emphatic. Marx had depicted the working class as disciplined, purposeful, the symbolic representative of humanity's future triumph. For the classical elitists, however, history had given us not the self-conscious proletariat, the bearers of our historical destiny, but the vulgar mass, the unattractive deposit of rapid social change. While such a rabble could never realize the Marxist dream of a classless society, neither could they summon up the initiative or energy to threaten mankind with new and frightening forms of oppression. The fatal flaw of so-called democracy, according to the elitists, is not that it replaces the benign rule of traditional elites with the malignant rule of the mob, or of vicious demagogues who flatter the mob, but that it can never succeed in defying the basic laws of social organization. Contrary to surface appearances, nothing really changes. Whether universal suffrage prevails or not, hierarchy remains the natural order of things: men of superior ability will inevitably rise to the positions of highest authority and impose their will on the apathetic and passive masses. The goodness or badness of any particular power elite was a matter of little interest to the futility theorists, for they saw themselves primarily as social scientists, unravelling 'what is', not as moralists, pontificating about 'what ought to be'.

This dedication to a pragmatic method of analysis places the classical elitists squarely in the Machiavellian tradition of political discourse. Machiavelli's own aspiration towards scientific objectivity was memorably expressed in chapter 15 of *The Prince*, where he deems it 'best to stick to the practical truth of things rather than to fancies'. Not for him the (then) common tendency to imagine 'republics and principalities that never really existed at all', to set out

precepts for ideal princes living in ideal circumstances, and thus to ignore 'the practical truth of things'.[1] While Machiavelli's influence on their 'objective' approach is not in doubt,[2] the classical elitists also reflected the nineteenth-century ambition to construct a social science with laws as solid as those that were then thought to rule the physical universe. They were all firm believers in the unity of the sciences. The methods and procedures that had achieved 'miraculous results'[3] in the natural sciences should be applied, in suitably modified form, to the study of human behaviour. As Pareto once wrote, 'my wish is to construct a system of sociology on the model of celestial mechanics, physics, chemistry'.[4] Needless to say, social scientists could hardly conduct controlled experiments under artificial laboratory conditions, but they *could* emulate physical scientists by setting aside their normative preferences and confining themselves to generalizations that were validated by 'experience and observation'.[5] Echoing Machiavelli, Pareto assured us that he had no intention of dealing with 'the intrinsic "truth" of any religion or faith, or of any belief, whether ethical, metaphysical, or otherwise';[6] while Michels maintained that his purpose was not 'to discover, or rediscover, solutions' to political problems, but to aim at the 'dispassionate exposition of tendencies and counter-operating forces'. The law that it is an essential characteristic of all human aggregates to organize themselves into hierarchies is, like any other scientific law, 'beyond good and evil'—a 'practical truth', which no amount of moral posturing can change.[7]

Also remindful of Machiavelli is the elitist determination to dispel the illusions of idealists and 'metaphysicists'[8] of every variety. The great Florentine was struck by man's apparently innate tendency to create fantasy worlds distorted by excessive hopes or fears. Most people, he argued, are reluctant to

[1] N. Machiavelli, *The Prince and Selected Discourses*, trans. and ed. D. Donno (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), 56.

[2] See J. Femia, *The Machiavellian Legacy: Essays in Italian Political Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), ch. 1.

[3] G. Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (henceforth *RC*), trans. H. D. Kahn (New York: McGraw Hill, 1939), 40.

[4] V. Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (henceforth *MS*), trans. A. Bongiorno and A. Livingstone (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), para. 20. The Italian title was *Trattato di sociologia generale*, first published in 1916. Twenty years earlier, in *Cours d'économie politique*, Pareto provided a capsule description of his positivist creed: 'It is only the imperfections of the human mind which multiplies the divisions of the sciences, separating astronomy from physics or chemistry, the natural sciences from the social sciences. In essence, science is one. It is none other than the truth.' V. Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, trans. D. Mirfin and ed. S. E. Finer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 122.

[5] Pareto, *MS*, para. 6. [6] Ibid., para. 69.

[7] R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (henceforth PP), trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Dover, 1959), author's Preface, p. viii. First English translation in 1915.

[8] Pareto, *MS*, para. 20.

accept the unpalatable truth that life is an incessant struggle for power where the strong subdue the weak. Beautiful theories are duly constructed in order to demonstrate the inevitable triumph of natural justice or divine law. For the classical elitists, democracy was one such theory—nothing but a myth, concealing the true nature of events and lulling the masses to a state of contented quiescence. The Machiavellian reduction of legitimating ideas to underlying realities of power informs the elitist analysis of politics. There is always a ruling minority, Mosca claims, but such minorities never justify their power solely by *de facto* possession of it. Invariably they try to find a moral and legal basis for it, 'representing it as the logical and necessary consequence of doctrines and beliefs that are generally recognised and accepted'. These 'political formulas', though they contain little truth value, should not be dismissed as 'mere quackeries aptly invented to trick the masses into obedience'. On the contrary, 'they answer a real need in man's social nature', the need, common to both rulers and ruled, to feel that the established order is based not on force but on moral principle. Democracy, or 'the will of the people', is simply one of the 'great superstitions'—like the Divine Right of kings or common ownership of the means of production—that help to consolidate political organizations and unify peoples or even whole civilizations.[9]

Likewise, Pareto has a couple of splendidly subversive passages where he declares that: 'All governments use force, and all assert that they are founded on reason.' Even when the foundation of authority is religious faith, the obligation to obey is said to rest on Divine *Reason*, as transmitted through sacred texts. Pareto, for his part, refuses to accept that loyalty to universal suffrage is any more 'rational' than any other kind of belief:

> Who is this new God called Universal Suffrage? He is no more exactly definable, no less shrouded in mystery, no less beyond the pale of reality, than the hosts of other divinities; nor are there fewer and less patent contradictions in his theology than in theirs.

The 'devout democrat who bows reverent head and submits judgment and will to the oracles of suffrage' is doing the 'same thing' as 'the Catholic who defers to the Pope pronouncing *ex cathedra*'.[10] Despite his sarcastic tone, Pareto—in common with Mosca—did not intend to eliminate the democratic myth or any other myth that sustains power relations. Such 'derivations', as he called them, may 'have not the slightest experimental validity', but this in no way impugns their utility to society. The 'progressive' assumption that

[9] *RC*, 70–1.

[10] *MS*, paras. 2183 and 585. The alleged similarities between the democratic 'faith' and the Christian faith were repeatedly stressed by Pareto, who represented democracy as a secular 'religion', presupposing a struggle between good and evil, and condemning all doubters as despicable heretics. See ibid., paras. 1608–9, 1630 n. 5, 1799, 1891, 1937 n. 1, and 2022 n. 3.

what is not rational must be harmful meets with a large dose of Paretian derision. Truth value and social utility do not necessarily coincide.[11] Still, the delight Pareto took in debunking religion and other sources of intellectual authority would seem to align him with the enemies of obscurantism in all its forms. He and his fellow elitists did indeed agree with Marxists and other radicals in uncovering the asymmetric power dimension behind conventional belief-systems, but they generalized the attack, seeing control over men's minds as necessary in any society, not least those which purport to be socialist and democratic. Hence Pareto's ridicule of pretentious 'progressives' who define themselves as 'angels of light fighting the angels of darkness'.[12] Since oligarchy is—as Michels phrases it—an 'organic necessity', the quest for perfect transparency in social relations is destined to fail. Our natural human aversion to harsh reality, combined with our 'childlike mythopoeic faculty', will forever ensure our submission to symbolic structures that do not correspond to any actual facts.[13]

We can identify two distinct ways of explaining the necessity of power elites in society. First, it can be argued that there is a fundamental psychological difference which sets elites apart from the masses. The leaders therefore emerge through a process of 'natural' selection. Elites develop in society not because they control great material resources or because they occupy positions of authority (these, of course, follow), but because of personal resources such as intelligence, cunning, courage, or skill. In other words, power elites exist because of their mental or spiritual superiority. This, in essence, was the explanation offered by Pareto.

A second approach has emphasized the development of elites as an unavoidable product of modern social organization. The substance of this thesis is that organizational complexity necessitates a leadership group. That is to say, leaders are needed to give cohesion and direction to a disparate, specialized social structure, whether it be a state, a business corporation, a trade union—in short, *any* social group of sufficient size with a functional division of labour. Elites in modern society, then, are practically necessary and indispensable. Their power lies in the organizational positions they hold and in the material and human resources they thereby control. Mosca and Michels rested their respective cases principally on this explanation of elite rule.

The crux of either approach, however, is that in any society there are those who rule (the small minority) and those who obey (the vast majority). The composition of the elite may change through the infusion of new blood from 'below', and, in the fullness of time, counter-elites will replace currently dominant elites. But rule by the few is perpetual—notwithstanding the presence of

[11] *MS*, para. 2239; *Les Systèmes socialistes* (1902), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 128.
[12] *MS*, para. 1891. [13] Michels, *PP*, 402, 377.

democratic mechanisms or rhetoric. Let us now examine both approaches through careful consideration of the thinkers who best exemplify them.

Futility Thesis (1): The Psychological Approach

There was some rivalry between Mosca and Pareto over who first established the idea of elites as a tool of social science. For our purposes, it is unnecessary to take sides, though it appears that they developed their thoughts more or less independently of each other. Certainly, Mosca's theory of the ruling class (*classe dirigente*) and Pareto's theory of elites stemmed from different intellectual concerns and priorities. The former derives from a criticism of the doctrine of majority rule, while the latter, as we shall see, derives from a study of the distribution of wealth in society and specifically reflects Pareto's background as a mathematical economist.

Pareto's point of departure is the obvious fact that 'human society is not a homogeneous thing' and that 'individuals are physically, morally, and intellectually different'. In every branch of human activity, some people are more capable than the others. Those who are most able in their specific field of endeavour, whether this be playing chess or practising law, writing poetry or robbing banks, are the 'select' persons of their particular grouping—the elite. Of course, the line between the elite and the non-elite will be arbitrary, drawing an absolute distinction between people whose abilities vary imperceptibly, just as in examinations those who are passed are sharply and arbitrarily distinguished from those who are 'failed'. Life itself, not to mention scientific analysis, demands that we make such distinctions. So we get two strata in society: (*a*) a 'lower stratum' (all the low achievers) and (*b*) a 'higher stratum' (all the high achievers). Very few members of the latter, however, will possess the particular talents required by politics or manage to exercise any political influence. The elite must therefore be broken down into two further components: (*a*) a governing elite, and (*b*) a non-governing elite. It is the former which is of chief concern to Pareto, and his contribution to elite theory turns on that group.[14]

In investigating the distribution of wealth and income in Western societies, Pareto had found that it varied little from one period to another and followed a highly unequal pattern that came to be known as Pareto's Law. It can be represented, figuratively, as a pyramid, or 'a sort of upturned top', broad at the base and tapering to a point at the summit. This distribution 'is not due to chance'; instead, it 'probably relates to the distribution of the physiological and psychological characteristics of human beings'. To drive his point home,

[14] *MS*, paras. 2025, 2026, 2027, 2031–4.

Pareto likens the social structure to a living organism, a mass of molecules in motion which nevertheless retains a relatively constant form. Similarly, 'the molecules composing the social aggregate are not stationary'. Some individuals are growing rich, others are growing poor. In the social organism, as in a living organism, 'the processes of assimilation and secretion are incessantly changing the molecules composing the tissues', but the exterior of the organism undergoes only insignificant changes. The existence of an economic elite, like the existence of a medical or a mathematical elite, is inevitable. It should go without saying that the same individuals will not appear in the various elites. Different spheres of activity require different talents. Artistic brilliance or moral excellence are not usually combined with money-making ability, for example. 'People who buy steel cannon need a Krupp, not a St. Francis.' But if human beings are disposed according to the degree of their political and social power, it will be found that individuals in this 'pyramid' will occupy pretty much the same position in the pyramid representing the distribution of wealth. Those with the most political clout are also generally the richest. This was another one of Pareto's 'laws': the governing elite and the economic elite are necessarily intertwined, and the equal distribution of political power, like the equal distribution of wealth and income, is nothing but a pipe dream. It was plain to Pareto that our vaunted democracy was no more than an aesthetically pleasing mask hiding the hard face of plutocracy.[15]

All power elites, he asserts, govern the masses through a combination of 'force and fraud'—that is, by means of coercion and guile or cunning. Generally, however, they exhibit a preference for one or the other. This corresponds to the two basic types of political leader, whom Pareto—borrowing Machiavelli's colourful terminology—calls 'lions' and 'foxes'. Those who fall into each category are endowed with certain psychological proclivities, or 'residues'. Here we see the fundamental psychological orientation of Pareto's theory. Pareto maintained that most behaviour emanated from underlying psychic states or dispositions, though we have a natural tendency to give such behaviour a 'logical veneer' by describing it as a direct consequence of some idea or set of ideas we profess. These dispositions were labelled 'residues' because they were the constant building blocks of human thought and behaviour, a permanent substratum, whereas moral or political theories were the variable or transient 'derivations' from this residual nucleus. Despite their solid foundation in human psychology, these derivations are normally a farrago of vague or meaningless abstractions, fallacious reasoning, and spurious metaphors. Residues—which Pareto sometimes referred to as 'sentiments'—'correspond to' or 'manifest' human instincts, just as the level of mercury in a thermometer indicates the presence or absence of heat. Residues

[15] *Les Systèmes socialistes* (1902), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 130–1; *MS*, para. 2183.

are not themselves instinctual drives, but rather symbolic expressions of such drives. The desire for sex is an instinct; sexual puritanism is a residue—a basic and essentially invariant attitude or sentiment within the human psyche.[16]

Although he believed in free markets and free expression, Pareto posed a challenge to the liberal/positivist faith in individual rationality and peaceful social progress. In this he resembled Marx and Freud. He was at one with them in arguing that the irrational substructure of reality belied the surface rationality of appearances. For Marx, beneath the exchange process was the anarchy of the market; for Freud, lurking just below the controlled ego was the limitless unconscious, the id, driven by bestial instincts; for Pareto, underlying the grand intellectual structures devised by human logic were the residues of irrational sentiment and emotion—the true operative forces in society.

Pareto isolated some fifty-two residues, which he divided into six classes. But his analysis of political elites focused on only two classes, and these corresponded to the distinction between 'foxes' and 'lions'. The former have a preponderance of class I residues, which reflect the 'instinct for combinations', the inclination to take things out of their familiar contexts and combine them in a shrewd or imaginative way. The Italian word *combinazione* incorporates a broader range of meaning than the English equivalent. Pareto's translator suggests that we take the 'instinct for combinations' to be synonymous with 'originality', 'the inventive faculty', 'ingeniousness', and so on. Its behavioural expression would include literary or artistic or intellectual creativity but also the ability to manipulate people, to scheme and cajole. The personality-type defined by Class I residues would be entrepreneurial in business and cunning in politics—like the Machiavellian 'fox', who governs by consent, by appealing to prevailing symbols and sentiments in order to build alliances and strike deals.[17] Class II residues reflect an instinctual drive towards 'group-persistence', or 'persistence of aggregates'. While the inclination to combine things leads to innovation, the impulse behind Class II residues leads to conservation and 'may be compared roughly to mechanical inertia'. Once combinations have been set up, an instinct comes into play to prevent the disintegration of the things thus joined together. The innate human desire for consolidation, for permanence and unity, is, according to Pareto, one of the great and fundamental forces in society.[18] The Class II personality-type is dull but idealistic, fond of continuity and order but receptive to clever theories and contrived images that foster the cohesion of the social aggregate—the family, the nation, the class, the community. Great religions, as well as 'holistic' ideologies/derivations such as socialism and nationalism, are sustained by Class II

[16] *MS*, paras. 870, 875, 1399, 1401.
[17] Ibid., paras. 889–90. See also translator's note *a* in para. 889.
[18] Ibid., paras. 888, 991–2.

residues. The Class II politician corresponds to the Machiavellian 'lion', who fears the disruptive potential of dissident voices or behaviour and is therefore inclined to use force to attain his objectives. The language of persuasion and compromise is alien to him.

Pareto's typology of political systems is therefore twofold. All are oligarchies, regardless of their constitutions, but in some ruling elites Class I residues predominate while in others Class II residues prevail. It should be obvious that this typology does not correspond to the conventional dichotomy between 'left' and 'right'. A Class II regime will be authoritarian, but its guiding ideology may be egalitarian or hierarchical, Marxist or traditionalist. For Pareto, holistic doctrines all have the same residual root. As for regimes led by foxes, they are likely to be participative, liberal, urban, and technologically advanced. In modern times, such a system would conventionally be called a democracy; Pareto prefers the term 'demagogic plutocracy' (*plutocrazia demagogica*). Although he never deviates from his belief that popular representation is a 'fiction'[19] in our so-called democracies, he admits that it is a necessary fiction, since the masses tend to be idealistic and literal-minded (i.e. lion-like). They are effectively guided, affirmed Pareto, not by naked interest but by 'living faiths'. While democracies do not officially align themselves with this or that religious faith, the 'sovereignty of the people' functions as an imitation deity. 'King Demos, good soul, thinks he is following his own devices', but from the days of Aristotle down to our own, he is more or less 'bamboozled'.[20] The people may reign, but they never govern.

If a governing elite could apply force and persuasion in the appropriate proportions, it could, in principle, maintain itself forever. No elite, however, has ever succeeded in doing so. 'History is the graveyard of aristocracies.'[21] Pareto thus offers a dual hypothesis, which he feels is confirmed by historical evidence. To wit, an elite of lions will be deficient in the spirit of innovation and compromise, and this shortcoming will eventually undermine its ability to keep the masses quiet; conversely, an elite of foxes will lack the will-power to use force, and this will eventually erode its authority, perhaps to the point of social anarchy. Elite rule may be necessary, but when the consequences of a particular *type* of elite rule become intolerable, it will be forced to yield to a less rigid or less decadent alternative. In his discussion of demagogic plutocracy, Pareto wishes to demonstrate that the vulpine arts of the governing class are proving disastrous, that we are approaching the end of a historical cycle, which may see a successful uprising by a new leonine (communist or fascist) elite.

For all his protestations about not wanting to judge the worthiness of different political aspirations or goals, Pareto's case for the *futility* of

[19] *MS*, para. 2244. [20] Ibid., paras. 2253, 2183–4. [21] Ibid., para. 2053.

democratic change is intimately bound up with an analysis of the negative effects such change could have. To be more precise, he 'proves' that democracy is impossible by showing how a powerful minority of demagogues and plutocrats manipulate 'democratic' procedures to the detriment of everyone else. Because politics is a Machiavellian struggle between conflicting forces for scarce resources, 'democratic' politicians will always be tempted to pander to special interests in order to build election-winning coalitions or avert immediate threats to social peace. Those citizens who are organized and strategically placed will be rewarded; the rest will be ignored or else appeased 'by fatuous, inconclusive "talk" '.[22] Ultimately, argues Pareto, this conception of politics will have catastrophic results for both the economy and the maintenance of social order. Preoccupied as they are with their own survival in power, the ruling elite will use every trick and practise any deception to keep the majority satisfied with a system that rides roughshod over their real interests. It seems clear that Pareto went beyond 'neutral' or 'objective' description. His rejection of parliamentary 'democracy' was normative as well as empirical. This is why critical commentators, such as Richard Bellamy, can plausibly maintain that he 'merely endowed his own ideological leanings with a spurious scientific status'.[23] Pareto's argument will now be considered in some detail.

For Pareto, the essence of modern 'democracies' is the patron–client relationship, a relationship based for the most part on material interests. His paradigm was the Italian *consorteria* of parties that ruled in his day, but he thought that this analysis applied to all parliamentary systems. What he had in mind was a network of 'patrons', each of which has clienteles consisting of sub-patrons and so on. The system is pluralistic, comprising a vast number of mutually dependent hubs of influence and patronage. These power-centres are forever quarrelling and competing with one another but nevertheless display sufficient cohesion to warrant calling them a class or an elite. Such cohesion, however, is not to be confused with conspiratorial or tight organization. The idea that the ruling class is a 'concrete unity' or a metaphorical person is, in Pareto's view, a Marxist fairy-story.[24] For one thing, this class embraces the leaders of all the constitutional parties—those of the left and those of the right. Nor does it rule by deliberate and concerted stratagem. The road it follows is, instead, 'the resultant of an infinitude of minor acts', each occasioned by particular circumstances, leading collectively to consequences that no one foresees. Society is a reality *sui generis*. The chief determinant of what happens is 'the order, or system, not the conscious will of individuals,

[22] Ibid., para. 1401.

[23] R. Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 27.

[24] But it is a fairy-story whose authorship is often attributed to Pareto! Tom Bottomore, for example, in his influential *Elites and Society*, complains that Pareto (unlike Mosca) was blind to the 'heterogeneity' of the elite. (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1966), 12.

who indeed may in certain cases be carried by the system to points where they would never have gone of deliberate choice'.[25] Such cohesion as exists within the ruling elite is a systemic requirement. Since all its members are actuated by economic self-interest and a desire to retain influence, they naturally tend to act in a common direction without any preconceived design.

Though a governing class does not have a single will, it does contain 'a smaller, choicer class', which 'practically exercises control'. In parliamentary regimes, this inner governing body will include the political 'bosses' of the main parties, whose task is to aggregate the demands of the various clienteles.[26] In pursuit of electoral success, leaders of the different parliamentary parties will compete with one another in this aggregative endeavour. Promises can be made, in the knowledge that government provides a vast panoply of means to fulfil them: tariffs, public works, tax policy, devaluation of the currency, government contracts and subsidies, social welfare benefits, minimum wage guarantees, closed-shop rules, legal immunities for trade unions—all help to keep the various clienteles happy. Corruption, either by 'honours' or illicit payments, usually plays a lesser role than these 'legitimate' forms of bribery, though it attracts disproportionate opprobrium.[27]

Who exactly comprises the governing class? In a dazzling leap of imagination, Pareto sees it as an unholy, though tacit, alliance of bourgeoisie and organized working people against the fixed income groups of the community. Although businessmen and labourers do not always share common interests,[28] these apparently antagonistic 'classes' actually live in symbiosis, agreeing inflationary wage settlements and jointly demanding subsidies and tariffs, which must be paid for by the rest of the population through higher taxes and prices. Plutocrats may rule, but only through demagogic appeals to the interests and sentiments of trade unionists. Pareto expands on this point by distinguishing between two 'classes' of his own invention: 'speculators' and 'rentiers'. The former are chiefly entrepreneurs or financial traders—adventurous risk-takers, rich in combination instincts. They are adept at winning concessions

[25] *MS*, para. 2254. Strangely, for someone who is routinely accused of atomistic individualism, the position adopted by Pareto bears some similarity to the structural determinism of Marxists like Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas—though their 'problematic of the subject', as they would put it, was very different from his own. Poulantzas, who famously criticized Ralph Miliband for reducing the ruling class to 'interpersonal relations' and for understanding its behaviour in terms of individual motivation, described 'social classes and the State as *objective structures*, and their relations as an *objective system of regular connections*, a structure and a system whose agents, men, are in the words of Marx, "bearers" of it—*träger*' ('The Problem of the Capitalist State', in R. Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972), 242). Of course, for Pareto, the deterministic system is the unintended result of 'an infinitude of minor acts' by individual social actors, whereas the structuralist Marxists saw the human subject as the passive plaything of hypostatized social forces. In both cases, however, the system is seen to have its own imperative logic.

[26] *MS*, para. 2254. [27] Ibid., paras. 2265, 2257. [28] Ibid., para. 2231.

from fox-like politicians, who see them as soul-mates. Confusingly, Pareto includes in this 'S' category not only the risk-takers themselves but all persons depending upon them—lawyers, engineers, workers, politicians, union leaders—and deriving advantage from their operations. In other words, he lumps together all individuals whose incomes are variable and reliant upon ingenuity and political connections.[29] Ill-chosen though it may be, the word 'speculators' describes Pareto's governing class.

Arrayed against the 'speculators' are the 'rentiers', another promiscuously inclusive term, comprising all those who live on fixed or near-fixed incomes:

> In this category, roughly, will be found persons who have savings and have deposited them in savings-banks or invested them in life-annuities; then people living on income from government bonds . . . or other securities with fixed interest rates; then owners of real estate and land where there is no speculation; then farmers, working people, clerks, depending upon such persons and in no way depending upon speculators.[30]

A poor old-age pensioner, for example, will have an economic interest resembling that of members of the 'capitalist' class who live on fixed incomes in the shape of returns on debentures and rents. The same pensioner will find, on the other hand, that his or her interests conflict with those of unionized workers in a protected industry. This group of workers can secure high wage increases from their employers because these are in a position to pass on such increases to the consumer (e.g. the pensioner) in the form of higher prices. Indeed, inflation may even be to the advantage of the tariff-protected businessman, as it depresses real interest rates and—certainly in the short term—raises profits.[31] For the pensioner, however, the effect is similar to being set upon by armed bandits.

Without the 'downtrodden' rentiers, the economy would grind to a halt. It is they who supply the savings and the tax revenues to support the money-making schemes of the speculators. And yet, as dull, unimaginative types, replete with instincts of group-persistence, rentiers lack the manipulative and rhetorical skills to win concessions from the political elite. The 'pork barrel' remains more or less closed to them, as the trade unions and employer

[29] Ibid., para. 2233. It may seem absurd of Pareto to include organized workers themselves, and not just their union officials, in the governing class. How much influence, let alone power, can an individual worker exert—even if he is a member of the 'labour aristocracy'? Pareto never deals with this objection. It must be remembered, however, that his governing class includes a 'smaller, choicer class' from which the workers would certainly be excluded—though the composition of this inner core is not definitively spelled out.

[30] Ibid., para. 2234. Borkenau finds it odd that Pareto, having accused Marx of simplifying a complex reality by dividing society into 'capitalists' and 'proletariat', should commit precisely the same error with his division between 'speculators' and 'rentiers' (F. Borkenau, *Pareto* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1936), 141). The criticism is a fair one, though Pareto does acknowledge that the dividing line between the two 'classes' is blurred (*MS*, para. 2235).

[31] *MS*, para. 2231.

organizations jointly manipulate the state to exact tribute from everyone else. While Pareto, unlike the Marxists of his day, did not underestimate the power of politicians, he believed that the public authorities were increasingly acting as mere ratifying bodies for the exploitative policies of the 'producer' groups. He also remarked upon the frequent willingness of the victims to cooperate in their own 'spoliation' (his word for 'exploitation'). Short of vulpine shrewdness, they allowed their vision to be 'clouded by sentiments' favourable to the speculating class.[32]

Psychological explanations for the passivity of the rentiers did not, it seems, fully satisfy Pareto. He thus offered what might appear to be a contradictory argument, one that foreshadowed the 'rational choice' explanations of modern political scientists.[33] The intensity of human activity, he reminded us, is not proportional in the same degree to losses as to gains: 'if, in a nation of thirty million, it is proposed to levy one franc per annum on each citizen and to distribute the total to thirty individuals, these latter will work night and day for the success of this proposal, while it will be difficult to get the others to bestir themselves sufficiently to oppose the proposal, because, after all, it is only one franc!' Furthermore, the thirty individuals who benefit from this largesse will do so because they form an identifiable group. And for a group to form, let alone apply effective pressure, it 'must not be too widely dispersed' and 'must have an easily recognizable common characteristic, such as the same race, the same religion, the same occupation, and so forth'. This is why consumers, for example, 'can scarcely ever organize themselves successfully to resist the producer combines'.[34] To organize scattered and diverse individuals with low-intensity preferences is virtually impossible. But in a demagogic plutocracy, those who have no organizational power have no bargaining power. By virtue of their social and geographic dispersal, they neither occupy a strategic position within the system nor possess the potential to cause serious conflict or disruption. They can be, and are, effectively ignored by the leading politicians. Policy emerges out of a complex network of visible and invisible exchanges between the various bargaining agents who represent vested interests in the particular policy area. This segmented decisional process has dire consequences. Not only does it alienate 'the silent majority', it also produces short-sighted and incoherent policy. The repeated surrender to sectional interests leads to a paralysing disproportion between current expenditure and long-term investment.

On Pareto's reading of history, spoliation rarely meets with truly effective resistance from the despoiled. What brings an end to a particular form of

[32] *MS*, para. 2250.

[33] See, in particular, M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

[34] *Les Systèmes socialistes* (1902), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 141–2.

exploitation is the destruction of wealth consequent upon it. 'History shows us', he writes, 'that more than once spoliation has finished by killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.'[35] Demagogic plutocracy administers daily doses of poison to the capitalist goose. Too much attention is paid to allocating wealth rather than creating it. Instead of concentrating all their efforts on improving efficiency, capitalists devote precious energy and resources to lobbying for protective duties and other gifts from the public. The competition which favours initiative and economic expansion gives way to bureaucratic dependency.[36] Unions, for their part, use legal immunities to preserve outmoded jobs or to prevent non-union workers from working at non-inflationary wage levels.[37] Other citizens are bought off with public employment, communal facilities, and income maintenance programmes.[38] In general, political needs take priority over economic needs. The cumulative effect of controlled markets and uncontrolled public expenditure is macroeconomic distortion. Massive public debts accumulate and these are inevitably accompanied by higher prices and interest rates. Worse, rising taxes exhaust the incomes of ordinary, non-speculating investors.[39] Creative accounting, along with the printing of new money, can disguise the appalling state of public finances for a while, but eventually the consequences of profligacy must be faced. The funds available for investment begin to dry up.[40]

In Paretian analysis, hyperactive, interventionist government also has a corrosive effect on public morale. When so much of the population depends on state handouts, an ethic of greedy discontent takes root, since most people can always point to someone or some group who enjoys more influence or more patronage or simply bigger handouts than they. The idea that one should *earn* one's benefits or privileges is gradually consigned to the dustbin. Moreover, the constant bestowal of government favours, by undermining the work ethic, stimulates a debilitating and hedonistic egoism. People increasingly indulge their tastes for immediate gratification: they squander savings and incur debts. Eventually, they will be forced to use their earnings to retire debt, and consumption will decline. This will exacerbate the problems caused by the shortage of funds for investment.[41]

Pareto is disturbingly contemptuous of the 'universal truths' that serve to justify the redistribution of income by a meddlesome state. For him, concepts like 'justice' and 'morality' are mere platitudes, devoid of any

[35] Ibid. 142.

[36] *Cours d'économie politique* (1896), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 119.

[37] V. Pareto, *The Transformation of Democracy*, trans. R. Girola and ed. C. H. Powers (London: Transaction Books, 1984), 43–6, 66. Originally published in 1921 under the title *Trasformazione della democrazia*.

[38] *MS*, paras. 2228, 2255, 2309.

[39] *The Transformation of Democracy*, 60.

[40] *MS*, paras. 2306–7.

[41] *The Transformation of Democracy*, 65–7.

logico-experimental grounding; they 'have no precise objective reality, being only the product of our mind'.[42] Their meanings are therefore inherently 'indeterminate and transitory'. Such concepts are normally defined in accord with 'the sentiments of some collectivity at a given point in time'. When times, and sentiments, change, so do the definitions.[43] Pareto is especially amused by the transformation in the meaning of 'liberty'. Once it stood for the reduction of state restrictions which deprived the individual of the power to dispose of his person and property as he wished. Now, Pareto claims, it signifies precisely the opposite. Coercion for purposes of 'efficiency' or 'social justice' is christened with the name of 'liberty'.[44]

Pareto's view of demagogic plutocracy is not entirely negative. A nation without speculators would, after all, be a poor nation. They alone have the initiative and energy to carve out economic opportunities. And at certain stages in economic development, government subventions and protective tariffs are positively conducive to industrial growth, since they afford time to effect the necessary accumulation of capital in order to enable national industry to compete in world markets. Nevertheless, the chicanery of fox-led governments will eventually plunge the economy into depression or deep recession. At this point, the counter-productive nature of the demagogic strategy will become obvious. It is all very well to 'conquer by gold, not by steel', but what happens when the gold runs out? Previously contented clients become disenchanted, as their expectations are dashed. The authority of the state, based as it is on bribery, begins to evaporate. By squalidly buying off potential adversaries, the top politicians sacrifice the mysterious aura, the 'dignity and respect' that evoke the sentiment of deference in the masses.[45] The emergent 'legitimation crisis' poses a knotty problem for the ruling elite, because foxes are unwilling or unable to use force in the required measure. Such pacifism, Pareto believes, is misguided. All laws and institutions must be sustained by a judicious blend of force and consent; where one or the other is foregone, the result will be either incipient anarchy or naked despotism. Pareto saw the former as a real danger in modern society: 'The bourgeois state is tottering and the power of central authority is being eroded.'[46] Centrifugal forces were beginning to prevail.

He illustrated this point by reference to trade unions, for which he developed an obsessive hatred. They were, in his opinion, a law unto themselves. Dissatisfied with their *official* legal immunities, the unions proceed to demand (and receive) *unofficial* ones. In Italy, trade union members destroy the property of their employers and beat-up blacklegs under the benevolent paternal

[42] *Manuel d'économie politique* (1909), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 148–9.
[43] *The Transformation of Democracy*, 25, 31; *MS*, para. 401.
[44] *MS*, para. 1554. [45] Ibid., paras. 2228, 2307, 2309, 2059.
[46] *The Transformation of Democracy*, 71.

gaze of the public authorities, who do nothing to stop such outrages. Pareto compares the situation to the rise of feudalism: the *de facto* authority of kings disappeared, to be replaced by an elaborate system of immunities and special privileges. The trade union bosses are the new barons, paying ritual obeisance to the *idea*l central authority, while ignoring it in practice. In the face of union power, the duly constituted political authorities have shown themselves to be 'cowardly', according to Pareto.[47] Their plight filled him with a mixture of pity and contempt. He was fond of quoting an old Italian saying: 'Play the sheep and you will meet the butcher.' The butcher, in this case, might be the 'silent majority'. Weak demagogic governments parcel out operating autonomy to power blocs, vested interests, and supposedly subordinate organizational units. Once central authority disintegrates in this way, the silent majority find that they are no longer protected by the 'sovereign' power. Increasingly, they fear less for their pocket-books than for their safety and peace, as crime and trade union 'justice' become harder to avoid. Writing in 1920, Pareto alerted his readers to the authoritarian movements (Bolshevik and nationalist) waiting in the wings. The rentiers, the non-union workers—all those who have had to pay the price for the pluto-democratic system 'will eventually rebel', though their rebellion would be fruitless unless orchestrated by an alternative elite.[48] Ever the sceptic, he was reluctant to predict the timing or the exact magnitude or even the effectiveness of this rebellion. After the march on Rome, however, he saw Mussolini's rise to power as conclusive proof of his theory's correctness.

Whether or not we share his self-assessment, there is no denying the perspicacity of his depiction of the liberal state. Pareto pioneered propositions and ideas which have since become widely influential or commonly accepted. One can mention his pluralistic model of the policy process, his masterly analysis of why 'diffused interests' are ignored, his emphasis on vertical as well as horizontal divisions in society. He offers an original combination of insights from Marxist and anti-Marxist sources. On the one hand, he accepts that power in modern society is relatively dispersed; on the other, he recognizes the systematic disadvantages inflicted on those outside the unofficial constellation of power, which bypasses the formal circuits of representation.

What is problematic, however, is the connection between his description of 'demagogic plutocracy' and his contention that 'it is always an oligarchy that governs'.[49] In modern liberal systems, Pareto tells us, the elite is remarkably inclusive, comprising trade union 'barons' as well as employers, social democratic party leaders as well as their conservative counterparts. Members of this supposed power elite 'hold no meetings where they congregate to plot common designs, nor have they any other devices for reaching a common

[47] Ibid. 43–6, 66. [48] Ibid. 47. [49] *MS*, para. 2183.

accord'.[50] The governing class, moreover, appropriates other people's property 'not only for its own use, but also to share with such members of the subject class as defend it and safeguard its rule'—a patron–client relationship.[51] Pareto concurs with Marx that the state is always 'an instrument for spoliation', but, in the case of demagogic plutocracy, the spoils of 'class war' are rather widely distributed.[52] Finally, although in an objective sense the governing elite 'defrauds' or 'gulls' the rentiers and their allies, this is not necessarily how it appears to the elite itself or to the 'despoiled' either. In most cases, states Pareto, the governing elite sincerely identify their own gains and advantages 'with the best interests of their country', with 'honesty, morality, and the public welfare'; and the majority of their compatriots, who support the system with their votes, evidently agree.[53]

It is patently clear that Pareto's ruling elite does not necessarily embody what Meisel regards as the defining characteristics of such an elite: namely, the 'three C's'—consciousness, coherence, and conspiracy.[54] So in what sense is Pareto talking about a ruling elite? Is he not simply saying that in all societies a minority makes the major decisions and the majority obeys? But this is a truism, which is not normally thought to be incompatible with democracy. That Pareto may not be going beyond this truism is suggested by the way he conceptualizes the governing elite. It consists of people who enjoy a high degree of 'influence and political and social power', though a later formulation restricts it to those 'who directly or indirectly play some considerable part in government'.[55] On either formulation, it is impossible *not* to find a governing elite. Only an anarchist could imagine a functioning society where some people do not have more influence or power than most other people. Of interest to democrats is whether (*a*) this 'elite' is open to the lower orders (Pareto concedes that it is), and (*b*) the elite is accountable to the governed (he assumes that it is not). His challenge to democracy therefore turns on point (*b*).

Since Pareto nowhere denies that elections held in liberal systems are technically 'free', he must believe that the ruling elite (or, more accurately, its inner core) has achieved its ascendancy by 'bribing' or 'bamboozling' the great majority of the 'ruled'. Peter is robbed to pay Paul, but Peter is comforted by reassurances that his generosity, enforced by the tax authorities, serves the interests of 'justice' or 'morality' or even 'freedom'—elastic terms which correspond to 'nothing real'.[56] As for Paul, he either does not understand or does

[50] *MS*, para. 2254. [51] Ibid., para. 2267.

[52] *Cours d'économie politique* (1896), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 117.

[53] *MS*, para. 2267.

[54] J. Meisel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 16.

[55] *Les Systèmes socialistes* (1902), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 131; *MS*, para. 2032.

[56] *MS*, para. 1501.

not care that his handouts are destroying the fabric of society. To repeat, Pareto is not accusing all politicians of cynicism, or deliberate exploitation. For the most part, they are genuinely self-deluded and consider it a happy coincidence that their own advantage is perfectly congruent with 'the public interest'. Although they deliberately manipulate the voters' sentiments and ignorance, they do not, as a rule, feel that they are harming the voters' interests. The system rests on self-aggrandisement and self-deception in equal measure.

Essential to Pareto's analysis, then, is the conviction that the endless cycle of bribery and manipulation is *not* in the public interest, which he thought could best be achieved in a libertarian, free-market society. Pareto's critique of the interventionist state appears to save his elite theory from vacuousness. The elite is not accountable to the masses because the latter are systematically deluded as to the true nature of their interests. The argument would seem to rest on the idea of 'false consciousness'. But what if Pareto is wrong about this? Public expenditure and provision in his day was as nothing compared with the present, and yet the general quality of life in Western democracies has risen exponentially. With hindsight, it would be absurd to deny that the majority have benefited from the 'demagogic' system. Without the support of his gloomy economic analysis, Pareto's attempt to demystify existing 'democracy' would look much weaker. It would depend on the apparently obvious fact that there is no autonomous will of the people, that the masses are largely apathetic and (politically) ignorant, and therefore vulnerable to manipulation by those seeking their vote. But—as Schumpeter later observed—if the voters are given a choice, if debate is unfettered by legal restrictions, and if the popular interest is, by and large, served, then we could still call the system a democracy. While the people would not 'rule' in any meaningful sense, they would at least control or limit their rulers. This accepted, our quarrel would be with the traditional conception of democracy, which expects too much from the masses by assuming that political initiative will flow from them rather than their leaders. That is to say, the 'classical' doctrine of democracy would be unrealistic, or futile, not democracy itself.[57]

Alas, this way of approaching the matter is not entirely satisfactory. If, as Schumpeter admits, the democratic will is 'largely not a genuine but a manufactured will', if most voters are 'infantile' and 'yield to irrational prejudice and impulse', can we really say that those who prey upon their weaknesses are being held to account?[58] I think not. Pareto's concept of a power elite, while lacking empirical specificity, can plausibly be defended against the charge of vacuousness, whether or not we accept his free-market analysis. Of course, Pareto may still be wrong about the existence of such an elite. The voters may be shrewder

[57] J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd edn. (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), ch. 21.

[58] Ibid. 262–3.

than either he or Schumpeter allows. If one starts out with some notion of an *ideal* democratic citizen, it is easy to exaggerate the shortcomings of *actual* citizens. Although they may be deficient in detailed political knowledge, not to mention sophisticated reasoning powers, voters will generally have a good idea of the values and interests embodied in the various candidates and parties. To this extent they can exercise a kind of control over their governors. Pareto, one presumes, would respond to this point by arguing that we have set the standard of democratic control, or accountability, too low. The problem is that he—like Mosca and Michels—never bothered to analyse the meaning or conditions of democratic accountability. How would we recognize it in practice? Pareto pitched his theory at a very high level of generality. For all his scientific pretensions, his identification of a power elite is empirically unfalsifiable—and this criticism, as we shall see presently, applies to his fellow classical elitists as well. It is difficult to determine whether Pareto was right or wrong if we cannot first determine the precise nature of his claims. But even if Pareto *is* right about the fictional quality of modern 'democracy', this would not necessarily mean that he was right about the futility of democratic reform. To show that a power elite exists is not equivalent to showing that it must always and everywhere exist. Additional arguments are required.

For Pareto, it is the permanent substratum of human psychology that renders democracy impossible. There will always be a minority of people who are power-hungry and adept at deploying one or other method of social control: force or fraud. Conversely, the mass of people will always be dull, gullible, and politically inert—'an army without commanders'.[59] Everything, it seems, hinges on the validity of Pareto's assumption that human thought is, at root, a product of instinctive mechanisms—an assumption we must now explore.

Pareto insisted that verbal affirmations must be separated from real motivations. In this he, once again, resembled Marx. However, by underlining the importance of human psychology, he had, in some people's eyes, stood Marxist 'holism' on its head. Whereas Marx disregarded individual psychology, Pareto, it is often supposed, gave no credence to social determinism and the power of collective beliefs. He is placed in the same category as Freud and accused of reducing the mechanics of the social process to a number of preponderant and archetypal psychological responses—to primitive drives, such as aggression and fear—and thus assuming that 'everything is the same everywhere'.[60] The reduction of thought and behaviour to eternal human impulses

[59] *Les Systèmes socialistes* (1902), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 134.

[60] W. Stark, 'In Search of the True Pareto', *British Journal of Sociology*, 14 (June 1963), 111–12; M. Ginsberg, 'The Sociology of Pareto', in J. H. Meisel (ed.), *Pareto and Mosca* (Englewood cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 96; Borkenau, *Pareto*, ch. 3; and N. S. Timasheff, *Sociological Theory* (New York: Random House, 1957), 159–66.

was already adumbrated in the British social philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—in, for example, Hobbes's psychological explanation of the need for an absolute state, and in Hume's view of human nature, which is not too far distant from Pareto's own:

> It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions. The same events always follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises which have ever been observed among mankind.[61]

As Mannheim observes, this conviction that 'the same motives always produce the same actions' implies the destruction of all 'reality-transcending elements, ideologies, utopias, etc.' Any ideal (e.g. genuine democracy) which is incongruent with the reality of our present or past situation can therefore be dismissed as a deceptive mirage.[62] And this is exactly what Pareto did. But was he a consistent psychological reductionist?

It is true that Pareto's discussion of residues and derivations stresses similarities, not differences. He believed, for instance, that differing religious rituals revealed the existence of certain universal residues: the baptism of Christians, the sacrifices of the pagans, the ablutions of the Muslims all express the same underlying sentiments and needs. His was a protest against historicism and its belief in the uniqueness and individuality of each society or epoch. However, to say that Pareto ignored the impact of social norms on human conduct is wide of the mark. It is understandable but misleading to describe him as a psychological reductionist. While he saw human psychology as the *principal* factor in social life, it was only *primus inter pares*.[63] Nor could it be divorced from the social context. Sentiments, he believed, were *both* innate *and* socially acquired. In various passages, he made it clear that social practices themselves encourage the diffusion of sentiments appropriate to their continued functioning.[64] Moreover, as we saw in his discussion of how a power elite operates in a demagogic plutocracy, Pareto acknowledged that individuals are often swept along by the logic of the social roles they occupy. He saw society as a system of mutually interdependent phenomena, moving

[61] D. Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 83.

[62] K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. L. Wirth and E. Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936), 255.

[63] *MS*, para. 870.

[64] *Les Systèmes socialistes* (1902), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 124; *Manuel d'économie politique* (1909), in Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 148–9; and *MS*, paras. 1091 and 1690.

from one state of equilibrium to another. According to this mechanical model, the 'form of society is determined by all the elements acting upon it and it, in turn, reacts upon them. We may therefore say that a reciprocal determination arises.'[65]

Unfortunately for Pareto, though, his insistence on 'reciprocal determination' generates difficulties for his case against democracy. If the distribution of residues, along with the opportunities for their manifestation, are socially conditioned, then this surely leaves open the possibility that changing circumstances can create new patterns of behaviour. Let us pursue the logic of Pareto's assertion that the 'acts in which sentiments express themselves reinforce such sentiments *and may even arouse them in individuals who were without them*'.[66] A natural inference from this statement is that the extension of democratic practices and institutions could foster Class I residues in the hitherto sluggish masses, making them capable of self-government. It appears that Pareto, in attempting to evade the charge of psychological reductionism, lapsed into incoherence.

Still, his reluctance to reduce all social explanation to psychic states is well founded. Those who wish to attribute psychological causes to political happenings must first establish that the causal dispositions or attitudes actually exist, and, as Pareto himself recognizes, this can only be done through examination and classification of overt actions, not from any independent source. In other words, he deduces the existence of 'residues' from these overt acts and then inverts the whole process by presenting the residues as the primary cause of the reality from which they have been abstracted. Finer protests that 'this is the argument of animism': 'The native asserts that the movements of a tree are the movements of the god that possesses it. He then proves the existence of the god by pointing to the movement of the branches.'[67] Perhaps this is an unfair analogy, but, from a scientific standpoint, it is extremely hazardous to account for events by reference to mysterious, unobservable causes when structural or contextual alternatives are readily available. Much depends, moreover, on how the events are interpreted. For example, where a national leader introduces emergency legislation to deal with terrorism, we could describe this (*a*) as a repressive move by a power-crazed politician who exaggerates threats and overreacts, or (*b*) as a necessary measure to maintain the territorial or institutional integrity of his country. Description (*a*) could support the proposition that the cause of the leader's actions is his possession of Class II residues; description (*b*) implies objective or environmental causes, since the leader 'had no choice'. There is no way of resolving this matter objectively, for how we characterize political events will be determined by our angle

[65] *MS*, para. 2060. [66] Ibid., para. 1091 (my emphasis).
[67] S. Finer, 'Introduction' to Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, 73.

of vision—and this, in turn, cannot be divorced from our particular scale of values. It is certain that those—in our example—who view the terrorists as 'freedom fighters' and sympathize with their aims (if not their methods) will be inclined towards description (*a*). People who disagree with the terrorists' goals, admire the existing political order, and place great value on social stability will naturally prefer description (*b*). Pareto, as a positivist who upheld a rigid distinction between 'fact' and 'value', 'description' and 'evaluation', wrongly ignored this complication, which renders his typology of 'lions' and 'foxes' somewhat suspect. It is rarely possible to apply these labels in a value-free way.

It is not that psychological explanations for elite rule are demonstrably false; it is that Pareto offers no compelling reason for regarding such explanations as true or definitive. By way of alternative, an elitist could argue that minority rule is inherent in the very structure of human society. This was the view taken by Mosca and Michels.

Futility Thesis (2): The Organizational Approach

Despite being joint author with Pareto of classical elitism, Mosca habitually suffers by comparison with his cosmopolitan (Italian-French-Swiss) colleague, whose intellectual system has been portrayed as 'a monument of gigantic architectural proportions', in relation to which 'the problems of political organization that Mosca sets out to solve are mere details'.[68] Pareto's theoretical ambitions were grander and more varied than those of Mosca, who was—as Bellamy puts it—'something of a monomaniac', devoting his life to writing 'three versions of the same book'—a book about the classification of governments and the impact of universal suffrage.[69] A Sicilian, whose experience of democracy was distorted by the corrupt electoral practices of his native region, Mosca claimed that major political philosophers from Aristotle to Montesquieu had mistaken appearances for reality when they made their distinctions between diverse forms of government. Monarchies and republics, aristocracies and democracies—all of these types were shown to be subject to

[68] A. Livingstone, 'Introduction' to Mosca, *RC*, pp. xxxvii–xxxviii.

[69] *Modern Italian Social Theory*, 34. The first version was called *Teorica dei governi e governo parlamentare*, published in 1884. The second and third versions are the two volumes of his *Elementi di scienza politica*, published in 1896 and 1923 respectively. The English text entitled *The Ruling Class* is a conflation of these two volumes and consequently obscures any differences between them. The second, written in the early years of Mussolini's fascist regime, offers a rather more favourable assessment of liberal representative government. This shift (Mosca thought of it as a 'refinement') may have something to do with the fact that Mosca became a deputy in the lower house of the Italian parliament in 1908, where he remained until 1918, when he became senator for life.

the far more fundamental dichotomy of rulers and ruled. Regardless of constitutional or historical forms, societies are always ruled by minorities, by oligarchies. A true science of politics would therefore ignore institutional structure and adopt a behavioural approach, which would focus on how the 'ruling class' (*classe dirigente* or *classe politica*) recruits 'new blood', maintains itself in power, and legitimates its dominant position.[70] The term 'elite' is not found in Mosca's writings, but this is merely a semantic distinction between himself and Pareto. Both thinkers present the same theme—the inevitability of oligarchy—though with a different variation. As we have seen, Pareto relied almost exclusively upon psychological variables in accounting for elites. Mosca's explanation, however, stresses structural and organizational factors.

In a famous passage, Mosca gave a clear and concise statement of the general elitist position:

> Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye. In all societies . . . two classes of people appear—a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolises power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent.[71]

Popular sovereignty is therefore a myth, a 'political formula' whose objective function is to bind the ruled to their rulers. Whatever democratic mechanisms are employed, a small minority will wield exclusive power and the greater majority will be 'directed and controlled'. We must, in other words, distinguish between *de jure* authority and *de facto* authority—between formal political structure and informal political power. The key to elite control lay, according to Mosca, in a minority's capacity for organization:

> A hundred men acting uniformly in concert, with a common understanding, will triumph over a thousand men who are not in accord and can therefore be dealt with one by one. Meanwhile, it will be easier for the former to act in concert and have a mutual understanding simply because they are a hundred and not a thousand.

[70] Mosca used the terms *classe dirigente* (ruling class) and *classe politica* (political class) interchangeably. As if to drive home the point that he recognized no distinction between them, he occasionally referred to 'classe dirigente o classe politica' (*Elementi di scienza politica*, vol. i (Bari: Laterza, 1896), 79, 84). In the English edition of the *Elementi*, the two Italian terms are both translated as 'ruling class'. One might dismiss this as a translator's eccentricity were it not for the fact that the edition was read and approved by Mosca himself. (Editor's introduction to *RC*, p. xli.)

[71] *RC*, 50.

The minority will weld itself into a cohesive and active force, while a majority will remain a large aggregation of individuals—apathetic, inward-looking, devoid of common purpose.[72] The *composition* of the ruling class will be determined by the possession of qualities—material, intellectual, or even moral—which are widely esteemed in society. It is often sufficient, however, to be the heir of an individual who displayed such qualities. In primitive societies, military valour is the attribute that most readily opens access to the ruling class. At a later stage of social development, status in a religious hierarchy may carry more prestige. In mature societies, wealth seems to be valued above all else: 'when fighting with the mailed fist is prohibited whereas fighting with pounds and pence is sanctioned, the better posts are inevitably won by those who are better supplied with pounds and pence'.[73] Wealth produces political power just as political power produces wealth. Note here that Mosca is making a kind of concession to Pareto's way of looking at things. The members of the ruling class are likely to be more clever, more enterprising, more holy, more public-spirited, or more courageous than the mass of the governed. But what enables the 'superior' few to control the many is the fact that they are *organized*, presenting a common front to the rest of society. The explanation is primarily structural.

Mosca was adamant that free elections could not alter the universal reality of domination and submission, and he took special pains to explain why:

> When we say that the voters 'choose' their representatives, we are using a language that is very inexact. The truth is that the representative *has himself elected* by the voters, and, if that phrase should seem too inflexible and too harsh to fit some cases, we might qualify it by saying that *his friends have him elected*.

His 'friends' are the party bosses who, assisted by their minions, choose candidates, direct campaigns, manipulate public opinion, and therefore control the parliamentary process. Mosca points out that the sheer size of the electorate gives disproportionate power to this tiny clique:

> The political mandate has been likened to the power of attorney that is familiar in private law. But in private relationships, delegations of powers and capacities always presuppose that the principal has the broadest freedom in choosing his representative. Now in practice, in popular elections, that freedom of choice, though complete theoretically, necessarily becomes null, not to say ludicrous. If each voter gave his vote to the candidate of his heart, we may be sure that in almost all cases the only result would be a wide scattering of votes. When very many wills are involved, choice is determined by the most various criteria, almost all of them subjective, and if such wills were not co-ordinated and organized it would be virtually impossible for them to coincide in the spontaneous choice of one individual. If his vote is to have any efficacy at all, therefore, each voter is forced to limit his choice to a very narrow field, in other

[72] Ibid. 53. [73] Ibid. 57.

words to a choice among the two or three persons who have some chance of succeeding; and the only ones who have any chance of succeeding are those whose candidacies are championed by . . . *organized minorities*.[74]

Mosca here identifies a flaw in democratic theory and rhetoric, one that is now widely recognized. For all the talk about the voice of the people being sacrosanct and so on, the people in question are invariably forced to choose from the very small number of candidates or parties that have a realistic chance of success. From the viewpoint of the individual elector, none of these options may be entirely satisfactory. *A* may get his vote in spite of his disagreement with much of what *A* proposes—for the simple reason that he regards *A* as the least bad alternative. If, as is likely, such ambivalence is widespread within the electorate, it becomes difficult to ascertain, at the level of specifics, precisely what they have 'mandated'. Elections are not effective mechanisms for translating voter preferences into particular policies. Moreover, Mosca's reference to organized minorit*ies* highlights an important point. Mosca acknowledges that the ruling class in a parliamentary system will normally be divided into two or more parties competing with one another for popular support at the polls. It follows that Meisel's 'three C's'—cohesion, consciousness, conspiracy—cannot be attributed to the ruling class *as such*, but only to the various groupings that comprise it.

Neither does Mosca seek to deny that elections have an effect (albeit an indirect one) on the policy-making process:

The great majority of voters are passive . . . in the sense that they have not so much freedom to choose their representatives as a limited right to exercise an option among a number of candidates. Nevertheless, limited as it may be, that capacity has the effect of obliging candidates to try to win a weight of votes that will serve to tip the scales in their direction, so that they make every effort to flatter, wheedle and obtain the good will of the voters. In this way certain sentiments and passions of the 'common herd' come to have their influence on the mental attitudes of the representatives themselves, and echoes of a widely disseminated opinion, or of any serious discontent, easily come to be heard in the highest spheres of government.[75]

He even maintains that, if the electorate could be limited to intelligent and educated people, then one of the chief assumptions of the liberal system—'namely, that those who represent shall be responsible to the represented'—could be rendered 'not wholly illusory'.[76] Even in its least prepossessing forms, the parliamentary process 'provides a way for many different social forces [interest groups] to participate in the political system' and influence public policy to some degree.[77]

Still, Mosca never deviated from his view that the 'sovereign people' are a

[74] *RC*, 154. [75] Ibid. 155. [76] Ibid. 413. [77] Ibid. 258.

fiction, that we can never attain more than '*apparent* democracy', and that a minority, however divided internally, will always retain 'actual and effective control of the state'.[78] But this control will be limited by the very nature of the representative system, which 'would function very badly if all free activity on the part of individuals were suppressed, and if individuals were not fairly well protected against arbitrary acts on the part of the executive and judiciary powers'. Overtly repressive measures, by curtailing public debate and thereby exposing the sham of democratic rule, would threaten political stability. Such measures, however, are unlikely to occur in a parliamentary regime. Because representatives, who alone make laws, are obliged to flatter and cajole the 'common herd', the system itself provides the 'maximum guarantee' of civil liberties.[79]

Mosca puts defenders of Western democracy in a quandary: on the one hand, they can agree with almost everything he says about the functioning of the parliamentary system; on the other, they refuse to accept his conclusion that the system is undemocratic. If our rulers must 'make every effort to flatter, wheedle and obtain the good will of the voters', if they must broker compromises with 'many different social forces', and if the system provides the 'maximum guarantee' of civil liberties, then surely a democracy is what we have. Unlike Pareto, he made no claims about voters being hoodwinked into endorsing policies that are inimical to their interests—though he did say that the political bosses 'force their will' upon us.[80] So what did Mosca mean by democracy? It seems likely that he implicitly accepted the 'classical' definition of democracy which stipulated that all political initiative should flow from the bottom upwards, that the outputs of the democratic machine should simply reflect the will of the people. Understood in this way, popular rule could never, of course, exist on a large scale. What Mosca wanted to discredit was the myth of democracy rather than the practice inspired by it. The impossibility of democracy did not, in his writings, mean the impossibility of responsive and tolerant government. This explains why some commentators, like Tom Bottomore, wonder whether Mosca's version of elite theory amounts to anything more than the 'trivial observation that in most known societies of the past there has been a clear distinction between the rulers and the ruled'.[81] To Cassinelli, Mosca's elitism never gets beyond the proposition 'that in political affairs some people, who are usually in a minority, give orders and the rest of the people obey them'. This, he adds, is 'little more than a truism'.[82] Perhaps—but remember that, according to Mosca, those who 'give orders' are not responsible to those who 'obey', even in so-called democracies.[83] There is

[78] Ibid. 335, 331. [79] Ibid. 470. [80] Ibid. 154.
[81] Bottomore, *Elites and Society*, 115.
[82] C. W. Cassinelli, 'The Law of Oligarchy', *American Political Science Review*, 47 (1953), 781–2.
[83] *RC*, 413.

nothing truistic or trivial about this observation. It does, however, raise the question of what he meant by democratic responsibility—a question that he, in common with his fellow elitists, never explored. Does not the obligation to 'obtain the good will of the voters' impose severe limitations on what the rulers can do? Is this not a form of democratic responsibility? And if not, why not? As it stands, his theory is empirically unfalsifiable. Either it is true by definition or it is too vague to be tested. In Mosca we see the Paretian combination of scientific rhetoric and unscientific practice.

The main work of Mosca's disciple, Robert Michels, is more closely patterned in the style of modern social science. *Political Parties*, written in 1911, proposed a hypothetical law governing all social organizations—the celebrated 'iron law of oligarchy'—and then proceeded to test the hypothesis against considerable empirical data, not simply selected historical examples, *à la* Pareto and Mosca. What is more, Michels demonstrates his themes by examining the behaviour of organizations which *prima facie* 'represent the negation' of his iron law; that is, the socialist parties (and trade unions) of Germany and elsewhere, which were dedicated to preserving equality and democracy in their internal organization.[84] An argument showing conservative parties to be internally undemocratic would not have proved his point, since most conservatives at the time neither believed in democracy nor pretended that it informed their party deliberations. Socialists, however, fought for universal suffrage and popular participation in the operation of social and political institutions at every level. Their rhetoric overflowed with sentimentality about the 'common people' and the absolute moral necessity of popular self-determination.[85] The organizations they set up officially regarded elected leaders as mere agents of the mass membership. If such organizations were themselves undemocratic in their internal structure, Michels asserted, then the efforts to democratize society as a whole must amount to an exercise in futility. In developing his argument, he isolated two sets of factors which cause oligarchy: psychological factors, innate human tendencies; and technical factors, the imperatives of social organization. Of these, the psychological causes were deemed to be of secondary importance, simply reinforcing inexorable social processes.

Michels argues that as soon as human cooperative activities attain the size and complexity which warrant the term 'organization', technical expertise becomes necessary. It is not possible for 'a gigantic number of persons' to make effective decisions through a system of direct discussion.[86] The only realistic alternative is to invest officers with power to make decisions on behalf of the collectivity. A division of labour emerges, but this means the creation of positions that are held by persons with special expertise, persons

[84] *PP*, 11. [85] Ibid. 15. [86] Ibid. 26.

whose indispensability to the functioning of the organization gives them authority:

> Just as the patient obeys the doctor, because the doctor knows better than the patient, having made a special study of the human body in health and disease, so must the political patient submit to the guidance of his party leaders, who possess a political competence impossible of attainment by the rank and file.[87]

Some of this 'competence' will be technical and pertain to things like macro-economics, financial management, law, fund-raising, and so on, but much of the required expertise will be political in the strict sense: speech-making, policy development, adapting the party message to suit public opinion, negotiating with friend and foe alike. In all these areas, mass control conflicts with efficiency. Without specialization and (therefore) hierarchy, working-class success 'is *a priori* impossible'. Because it is based 'upon the principle of least effort, that is to say, upon the greatest possible economy of energy', organization 'is the weapon of the weak in their struggle with the strong'. What the workers lack in financial clout or weapons of war or educational sophistication can be compensated only by organizational effectiveness. Yet we 'escape Scylla only to dash ourselves on Charybdis'. Organization at first undermines and eventually destroys democracy.[88] In Michels's famous formulation: 'Who says organisation, says oligarchy'.[89] While democratic procedures may remain in place, they become little more than an empty formality.

The internal structural needs of the organization impose their own hierarchical logic, but these oligarchical tendencies are exacerbated by the 'metamorphosis' of supposedly democratic leaders into a 'closed caste'.[90] To some degree, this transformation reflects the sociological law that change in circumstances will produce a corresponding change in consciousness. An individual who achieves high office within a proletarian organization—especially if his origins are humble—will develop an inflated sense of his own importance. Former altruists, once full of feeling for the downtrodden, become rampant egoists, extremely pleased with themselves and determined to pursue their own interests with 'cold calculation'.[91] Notwithstanding their intermittent professions of socialist purity, they are gradually assimilated into the elite structure of established society. If they were once manual labourers, they now enter the class of salaried employees—the bourgeoisie—and even begin to share that class's contempt for the 'toiling masses'. Youthful idealism is replaced by cynicism about human potential, as conservative arguments about the incompetence of the majority are deployed to justify their effective exclusion from the conduct of affairs.[92]

[87] Ibid. 89. [88] Ibid. 21–2. [89] Ibid. 401.
[90] Ibid. 278, 156. [91] Ibid. 206, 209. [92] Ibid. 299, 270, 151.

The socialist leader's belief in his own 'personal greatness'[93] is fed by the uncritical adulation of the rank and file. At this point, Michels introduces speculation about the universal features of human psychology. 'The masses', he informs us, 'experience a profound need to prostrate themselves, not simply before great ideals, but also before the individuals who in their eyes incorporate such ideals'. Hero worship is not peculiar to backward countries or remote periods; 'it is an atavistic survival of primitive psychology'.[94] This 'cult of veneration'[95] is combined with mass apathy—a pervasive lack of interest in public life: 'Though it grumbles occasionally, the majority is really delighted to find persons who will take the trouble to look after its affairs'. Ordinary people, even those mobilized by socialist organizations, exhibit 'an immense need for direction and guidance'.[96] This is what makes them so susceptible to demagogic power-seekers. Michels draws attention to a disjunction between the collective psychology of elites and masses respectively. Borrowing from Le Bon's 'crowd' psychology, he claims that the masses are 'always subject to suggestion', being unduly influenced by the eloquence of popular orators. Ignorant and lacking any appetite (or aptitude) for rational deliberation, they are easily stirred to waves of emotion which spread like a contagious disease. The individual disappears in the multitude and 'therewith disappears also personality and sense of responsibility'.[97] These are ideal conditions for those who possess 'a natural greed for power'. Again, organizational imperatives are 'complemented by psychological determinism'. 'The desire to dominate', for good or evil, is a universal human trait, according to Michels. In most people, it is either latent or satisfied in personal relationships. But there exists a minority who wish to dominate large human collectivities. When these natural leaders succeed, they predictably seek to enlarge their prerogatives: 'He who has acquired power will almost always endeavour to consolidate it, and to extend it, to multiply the ramparts which defend his position, and to withdraw himself from the control of the masses'.[98] If he occupies a leading role in a political party, for example, his endeavours will be assisted by the assets that accrue to this role. Power, in other words, generates more power. The leadership controls the party funds and the party press, it dispenses patronage and makes every effort to recruit parliamentary candidates in its own image. The fact that the party's leaders—and all its deputies—derive their power from the wider electorate, and not just from the rank and file, gives them the independence to formulate policies that may or may not coincide with the wishes or interests of the membership. Any criticisms of the leaders or (worse) attempts to dismiss or 'de-select' them would bring the party into disrepute and give aid and comfort to its enemies.[99] The rank and file have no choice but to watch

93 *PP*, 206. 94 Ibid. 66–7. 95 Ibid. 63. 96 Ibid. 53.
97 Ibid. 24–5. 98 Ibid. 205–7. 99 Ibid. 85, 104, 130, 135, 136, 138.

helplessly as their political 'representatives', supposedly servants of the people, are transformed into their masters. Michels thinks that this transformation exemplifies an 'ancient truth' which was 'recognised by Goethe when he made Mephistopheles say that man always allows himself to be ruled by his own creatures'.[100]

It could be argued that the concentration of power in the hands of a few leaders is conducive to the achievement of a socialist party's goals. After all, an army without commanders would be rather 'shapeless' (Michels's word) and ineffective.[101] But Michels is adamant that the demands of power make consistent radicalism impossible. The chief aim of a parliamentary party is electoral success. Consequently, determined efforts must be made to appeal for support beyond the limits of the party's natural constituency. To avoid alarming such supporters, who are still outside the ideal worlds of socialism and democracy, 'the pursuit of a policy based on strict principle is shunned'.[102] All talk of proletarian dictatorship or absolute equality serves only to repel potential middle-class voters, whose sympathy for the workers usually flows from natural compassion, not socialist dogma.

Another force for conservatism is the bureaucratic structure that any successful socialist party necessarily develops. Originally designed as an instrument to overthrow the centralized power of the state, the socialist party comes, through a process of 'organic necessity',[103] to mimic the state in its internal organization. In defiance of its anti-bourgeois principles, it becomes a hierarchical haven for careerists, 'a state within the state'.[104] Like the macro-state, its principal interest is self-preservation. Bold and aggressive tactics or policies might invite repression by the government, thus jeopardizing existing gains, not to mention the livelihoods of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of party officials. A familiar bureaucratic sclerosis sets in. The party becomes 'sluggish', or 'inert', with respect to both thought and action. 'Thus, from a means, organization becomes an end.' Maintaining the machine assumes greater importance than the productivity of the machine itself. The old aim of demolishing the state is replaced by a new aim: namely, to insert socialists into the existing state structure. The struggle is 'no longer one of principle, but simply one of competition'. Socialists might conquer, but not socialism.[105] Michels sees the whole process 'as a tragicomedy in which the masses are content to devote all their energies to effecting a change of masters'. A natural extrapolation from this socialist 'tragicomedy' is that democracy itself is a delusive fiction. His empirical analysis, he confidently proclaims, proves that 'oligarchy is, as it were, a preordained form of the common life of great social aggregates'.[106]

[100] Ibid. 154. [101] Ibid. 42. [102] Ibid. 367. [103] Ibid. 402.
[104] Ibid. 368. [105] Ibid. 371–4. [106] Ibid. 391, 390.

Political Parties is one of the twentieth century's most influential books. Studies of political parties and even trade unions have routinely taken it as their starting point.[107] Beyond this, Michels's pioneering work has also contributed to the larger study of organization and to social thought in general. As Philip Selznick has commented, 'Michels' theory . . . may be seen as a special case of the general recalcitrance of the human tools of action. The tendency for goals to be subverted through the creation of new centers of interest and motivation inheres in all organization.' Michels has encouraged students of organization 'to pay attention to deviations from professed goals'—deviations rendered necessary by the contradictory demands facing all human collectivities.[108] The 'tendency for goals to be subverted through the creation of new centers of interest and motivation' was strikingly illustrated by the 'patriotic' reaction of most socialist parties to the First World War. Organizational survival took precedence over doctrinal rectitude. The Russian Revolution offered an even more dramatic confirmation of his other prediction that a successful socialist revolution would mean not the triumph of democracy but the substitution of one oligarchy for another. Michels wrote the script; the Bolshevik Party acted it out. Before 1917, Lenin extolled the virtues of a completely free and democratic society; after the seizure of power, he set up a vicious system of one party rule where the 'democratic' part of 'democratic centralism' quickly disappeared.

Nevertheless, many criticisms have been made of Michels's diagnosis and prognosis. Some are less than cogent. Marxist efforts to answer Michels, for example, have been comprehensively disproved by history. Nicolai Bukharin put the case succinctly in 1925:

> [Under socialism] what constitutes an eternal category in Michels' presentation, namely the 'incompetence of the masses', will disappear, for this incompetence is by no means a necessary attribute of every system; it likewise is a product of the economic and technical conditions, expressing themselves in the general cultural being and in the educational conditions. We may say that in the society of the future there will be a colossal overproduction of organizers, which will nullify the *stability* of the ruling groups.[109]

We now know that the 'incompetence of the masses', whether or not it 'constitutes an eternal category', can be blamed on neither poor education nor 'economic and technical' backwardness. It is a visible affliction in the most

[107] See e.g. Sigmund Neumann's observation that the 'study of the sociology of political parties has been completely dominated by Robert Michels' iron law of the oligarchical tendencies of social movements'. S. Neumann (ed.), *Modern Political Parties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 405.

[108] P. Selznick, 'The Iron Law of Bureaucracy', *Modern Review*, 3 (1950), 162–3.

[109] N. Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (New York: International Publishers, 1925), 309–11.

developed countries. Still less can it be attributed to the capitalist system of property. As for the 'colossal overproduction of organizers', there was never much sign of this under 'actually existing socialism', which scarcely encouraged grassroots participation in the formulation of policy. The Marxist explanatory framework is too schematic to account for the trends uncovered by Michels. It was his friend, Max Weber, who made the point—later validated by events—that the technical necessity of hierarchical structures would be more, not less, evident under socialism, given the abandonment of market signals as a means of coordinating the economy. An army of expert planners, being technically indispensable to the command economy, would keep the masses in a condition of perpetual tutelage.

When attacking Michels, the *defenders* of liberal democracy are not necessarily more convincing than the Marxists. A familiar criticism accuses him of neglecting 'the possibility that democracy at the state level might be achieved by competition between parties which were not themselves democratic'.[110] Parties are *voluntary* associations, which one can join or leave at will. Indeed, oligarchically structured parties can perform a service to democracy by aggregating public demands and expressing them in the form of coherent policy options. So democracy, according to this argument, could be the result of competition between internally oligarchic organizations, as long as the power of deciding between the competitors resided in the *demos*.[111] This line of criticism ignores what Michels took to be a basic axiom of his study: that so-called democratic parties (and trade unions) are microcosms of the so-called democratic state. Almost all of the arguments he deploys to demonstrate oligarchic tendencies in voluntary organizations are applicable to the organization of the state itself, and he is sometimes explicit about the connection.[112] Parties are not *sui generis*; they are examples of 'great social aggregates', whose internal patterns of behaviour are essentially identical to those of all other 'great social aggregates'.[113] And *pace* his critics, Michels does concede that multi-party competition can produce responsive, if not *responsible*, government. Socialist parties, 'even when subjected to oligarchical control', can 'act upon the state in a democratic sense', by forcing the legislature and the executive 'to yield, not only to claims proceeding from above, but also to those proceeding from below'. Under conditions of universal suffrage, even non-socialist governments may feel obliged to make concessions to the workers. While Michels believes that this responsiveness will be greatly

[110] G. Hands, 'Roberto Michels and the Study of Political Parties', *British Journal of Political Science*, 1 (Apr. 1971), 156.

[111] G. Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987), 149, 151; J. Plamenatz, *Democracy and Illusion* (London: Longman, 1973), 55, 63; R. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 276.

[112] *PP*, 185–6, 389. [113] Ibid. 389–90.

reduced once the governing classes manage to convert proletarian leaders into 'collaborators', it appears that, in his view, oligarchy is not incompatible with a degree of influence 'from below'.[114] This does make us wonder about the coherence of his theory, and also about what he meant by 'oligarchy' and 'democracy'.

Cassinelli points out that Michels uses the former term in two different senses.[115] In some passages, oligarchy refers to a state of affairs where the actions of people who hold positions of authority within a human collectivity are not controlled or checked by the subordinate members, whose stance is one of passive acceptance.[116] Let us call this situation (*a*). Oligarchy in this sense does not exclude the possibility of a confluence of interests between rulers and ruled. Elsewhere, though, Michels associates oligarchy with exploitation (situation (*b*)). Those in positions of authority pursue their own 'special interests', disregarding or even harming the interests of the mass. The presumption here is that there is an inherent conflict of interests between leaders and led.[117]

In the case of situation (*a*), Michels needs to ask whether power is being exercised *over* the membership, or legitimately on their behalf. If electoral mechanisms are in place, and if the leaders seem to be defending the interests of the led, why not assume that the former are tailoring their policies to suit the actual or potential desires of the latter? This is what Friedrich calls 'the law of anticipated reactions'.[118] Perhaps the operation of this law explains why the rank and file rarely complain and therefore give the impression of impotence. Leaders facing elections will normally try to devise policies that please—or at least do not upset—their constituents, who would thereby exert a 'negative' or 'restrictive' influence. Recent theorists have argued that such anticipative behaviour is analogous to the behaviour of firms in a marketplace, who try to adapt their products to the preferences of consumers. As we have seen, Michels himself admits that multi-party competition can force governments to respond to popular pressure, though he never develops this insight or pursues its implications for his theory. Gouldner rightly accuses him of underestimating the constraints imposed by the need to build 'consent'. Do not these constraints amount to 'what we mean by democracy'?[119] The fact—amply demonstrated by Michels—that socialist leaders were rarely defeated on policy or in elections hardly proved their immunity from democratic control. The separation of leaders from led can be more apparent than real.

114 *PP*, 365. 115 'The Law of Oligarchy', 778–9.
116 *PP*, 136, 144, 145, 154. 117 Ibid. 389–90.
118 C. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy* (Boston: Ginn, 1946), 589.
119 A. Gouldner, 'Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy', *American Political Science Review*, 49 (1955), 506.

Even situation (*b*), which seems unarguably oligarchical, raises awkward questions for Michels. How do we determine that there is a conflict of interests between leaders and led? Michels, when using oligarchy in this sense, *assumed* that the 'conservative' interests of the socialist party bosses were at odds with the real interests of the workers. But evidently the workers themselves did not see it that way—not in Germany at any rate. As most historians agree, the German workers cared even less than their leaders did for the Marxist principles that officially inspired their movement. Despite his assault on socialist pretensions, Michels was almost Marxian in his assumption that a transformation of capitalist property relations was objectively good for the masses. Deprived of this extremely contentious premiss, many of his 'examples' of purely self-interested oligarchs exploiting the masses to maintain or extend their own power and privileges would simply dissolve. Again, we may question whether his empirical data supports the story he wishes to tell.

But even if party chiefs did set aside the interests or demands of the rank and file, this would not necessarily prove the existence of oligarchy. Parties have *supporters* as well as actual members; both groups can be deemed to comprise the constituency of the party leadership. It is perfectly intelligible, for example, to say 'I am a Conservative' or 'I am a Democrat' without holding a membership card for the party in question. This is where Michels's analogy between the state and the political party breaks down. For a party that is *internally* undemocratic may not be undemocratic at all if we redefine the 'led' to include all those who identify with the party. Michels, yet again, seems to be labouring under a false premiss.

It is unlikely, however, that all these examples of ambiguity and fallacious reasoning would disturb his present angle of repose. For underlying his analysis is a conception of democracy that renders his 'iron law of oligarchy' true by definition. Early on in *Political Parties* Michels expresses his agreement with 'Rousseau's account of the logical impossibility of the "representative" system'. With approbation, he repeats the Swiss philosopher's dictum that 'the will of the people is not transferable'. The people's 'right' to choose their representatives is no more than the 'privilege of choosing from time to time a new set of masters'.[120] Democracy must therefore be 'direct'—a form of governance in which policy initiatives come from, and policy decisions are made by, the people themselves, though some form of *strict* delegation may be possible to deal with problems of scale. In his concluding chapter, Michels claims to have demonstrated 'that every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy'.[121] In reality, this conclusion was already inherent in his premisses.

[120] *PP*, 36–8. [121] Ibid. 400.

To be fair to Michels, he is not saying that leadership *per se* is anti-democratic; his claim is that *institutionalized* or *professional* leadership, as embodied in formal positions of authority, runs counter to the democratic principle. This is partly because of the psychological transformation undergone by elected leaders, who will always become vain and try to emancipate themselves from popular control. But formal representation is also impossible, he believes, because of the complexity of modern life. It would be 'absurd to attempt to "represent" a heterogeneous mass in all the innumerable problems which arise out of the increasing differentiation of our political and economic life'. Each constituency is a bewildering tangle of conflicting interests and demands. A 'representative' could propose almost anything and assert, without fear of contradiction, that this is what his constituents want (or need). In 'great social aggregates', there is no such thing as a precise mandate.[122]

While this may be true at the state level, the range of preferences within voluntary associations is much more restricted. Even at state level, we must remember that those we elect are members of political parties, and that the function of political parties is to impose order on complexity, to mould disparate interests and opinions into coherent programmes. Our elected representatives must more or less adhere to the programme they offered at the election. They have some leeway, of course, but they are not free to do or say whatever they please. Although he never puts it in so many words, popular control, for Michels, is a matter of 'all or nothing'. Either we have complete and detailed control over everything our representatives do in our name, or else we have meekly submitted to their dominion. This is an untenable dichotomy, allowing Michels to overlook or 'reinterpret' all evidence that seems to refute his iron law of oligarchy. For example some of his critics[123] remind us that American political parties, being decentralized and amorphous, hardly confirm the 'universal validity' of his law.[124] There is no unified command structure at national level, while factionalism and fragmentation is often rife within the individual states. Candidates for high office are normally chosen through primary elections, where the rank-and-file delight is springing surprises on the party bosses, such as they are. Michels's only question would be: do the Republican and Democratic parties have permanent officials and recognized leaders? If so, they cannot count as internally democratic organizations.

Political Parties has been attacked for containing 'surprisingly little hard empirical evidence' and for resorting to the method of 'proof by anecdote'.[125] In fact, the work presents, by the standards of the time, a remarkable amount

[122] *PP*, 40.
[123] See e.g. D. Fisichella, *Dilemmi della modernità nel pensiero sociale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 51–2.
[124] *PP*, 347.
[125] Hands, 'Roberto Michels and the Study of Political Parties', 157.

of empirical data, hard or otherwise. It is doubtless true that Michels fails to sift this data with the kind of rigour that is now taken for granted by political scientists. He sometimes gives the impression of mistaking illustrative examples for conclusive proof—a bad habit he inherited from his elitist mentors and never quite managed to shake off. But the real problem, I think, lies less in his treatment of evidence than in his definition of democracy, which predetermined his conclusions. The 'iron law of oligarchy' is not only 'beyond good and evil', it is also beyond empirical disproof. Nevertheless, his 'empirical observation'[126] is far from irrelevant. More rigorously than Mosca or Pareto, he exposed the Rousseauian or 'classical' ideal of democracy as an 'illusion', a 'mirage'.[127] What led him (and them) astray was the implicit assumption that a political system could not be considered democratic unless it perfectly embodied the ideal. It was therefore pointless to talk about degrees of democracy—or degrees of oligarchy for that matter.[128] This assumption betrays an odd notion of the relationship between ideals and reality. Because, say, the system of justice in the UK is less than perfect, does this mean that there is *no* justice in the UK? An ideal must, by definition, transcend the existent. The classical elitists probably said enough to convince us that democratic perfectionism is futile. What they did not do was to prove that universal suffrage would have no effect on the unequal distribution of power in society. Democracy is impossible only if we set the standards for its attainment impossibly high.

Still, the classical elitists identified structural tendencies and repetitive patterns of human behaviour that continue to thwart our democratic aspirations. Mass apathy and hero (or heroine, in the case of Princess Diana) worship are by no means passing phases and do seem to have deep psychological or structural causes. Moreover, in an era of 'spin-doctors' and 'sound-bites', who could gainsay that politicians manipulate our emotions and shape our opinions? It is also undeniable that the ever increasing differentiation of functions gives disproportionate power to experts or specialists. Rather than condemning such deviations from democratic purity, the elitists regarded them as inevitable. Life is too complex, they thought, to submit to the simplicities of classical democratic doctrine, which remains innocent of both psychological needs and organizational dynamics. Since they wrote, life has become much more complex and even less suited to the democratic ideal. Their common insight—that, contrary to all 'progressive' thinking, economic and social development is *not* conducive to popular self-government—seems more relevant than ever. This claim can be substantiated if we explore the parameters

[126] *PP*, 400. [127] Ibid. 401.

[128] Right at the end of *Political Parties*, Michels does appear to draw a distinction between 'ideal democracy' and 'possible' or 'realizable' democracy, but this distinction—which would undermine much of what he said in the preceding 400 pages—is neither clarified nor developed.

of complexity in the modern world, together with their impact on the implicit prerequisites of democracy: collective solidarity, citizen rationality, and the transparency of the policy process. In so doing, we shall reaffirm that the elite theorists, for all their methodological shortcomings, were right to inject a dose of Machiavellian realism into democratic discourse, which has always been prone to wishful thinking. Economic modernization, by destroying traditional elites and liberating the individual, brought forth (what we call) democracy. In less developed countries, or in countries emerging from the shadow of communism, it may still serve this function. Beyond a certain point, however, the symbiotic relationship between 'progress' and democracy is transmuted into one of mutual antagonism. The futility thesis needs updating rather than abandonment.

The Futility Thesis Updated: Democracy vs. Complexity

Social complexity exists to the extent of the number and variety of elements and interactions in the environment. It is beyond dispute that this phenomenon is on the advance and that its main driving force is technology. For our purposes, it is necessary to focus on three interrelated manifestations of complexity in modern society.

(i) Global interdependence

Bound up with the information revolution, this is an inexorable historical development by which the 'nations of the world have become *mutually sensitive and vulnerable* through an interrelationship of socio-economic and technological issues'.[129] An obvious cause (or perhaps symptom) of this sensitivity and vulnerability is the growth of the multinational corporation, by definition no respecter of political boundaries. Accompanying this change in the global productive structure is the erosion of national systems of financial regulation. Protective barriers have been brought down by (*a*) the reduction of direct controls on capital movements, (*b*) liberalization of regulatory mechanisms within financial markets, and (*c*) the introduction of new technology in the process of financial intermediation.[130]

'Globalization' has two major political consequences. The first is a massive shift in power from states to markets. The omnipresence of multinationals and the expansion in the extent of their penetration of national economies

[129] R. O. Keohane, *Power and Interdependence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 9.

[130] S. Strange, 'The Limits of Politics', *Government and Opposition*, 30 (1995), 294.

have weakened traditional political constraints on business. Furthermore, foreign exchange markets now seem to determine exchange rates, leaving central banks to ratify what is, in effect, a *fait accompli*. All in all, the former power of the state, through fiscal policy and indicative planning, to control the business cycle is no longer credible. The range of economic policy options is narrowing to the vanishing point.[131]

The planetary scale of economic and financial issues has also brought about the gradual transfer of state powers to international organizations such as the UN, the European Commission, the OECD, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the International Energy Agency, NATO, and so on. Beavering away within these institutions are a vast array of 'faceless' Directorates and Committees, with their own organizations, communication networks, and bureaucratic structures—which not only determine the parameters of policy but may actually take significant decisions on their own. Ionescu describes the situation well:

> Incessantly going round and often overlapping, modern processes of policy-making are like a *perpetuum mobile* of actions and counter-actions, influences and counter-influences in which neither the *initial* nor especially the *ultimate* decision-makers can be easily identified.[132]

While the national representative systems of the nation-state remain the formal channels and authorities of policy-making, they are becoming increasingly 'dignified', to use Bagehot's expression, and increasingly integrated into larger units with little visibility and no democratic mandate. Supranational integration reduces the vote to a debased form of currency, forcing the political 'consumer' to 'buy' politicians with ever-diminishing power and therefore (from the viewpoint of the electorate) ever diminishing value. To the bewildered citizen, authoritative political judgements seem almost anonymous, emerging as they do from far distant conjunctions of causes, and from the multiple (not to mention mysterious) interactions of national and transnational bodies.

In recent years, the *de facto* dilution of national sovereignty has been evolving towards a *de jure* recognition that states are accountable to 'the international community', and that the right to exclusive domestic jurisdiction cannot be absolute. What Paul Taylor labels 'proactive cosmopolitanism' claims legal justification for attempts to subject diverse cultures to universal liberal values, as defined and interpreted by the USA and its allies. If a state fails to maintain the required standards in its internal arrangements, armed intervention

[131] Ibid. 296–300.

[132] G. Ionescu, 'Political Undercomprehension or the Overload of Political Cognition', *Government and Opposition*, special issue on *Modern Knowledge and Modern Politics*, 24 (1989), 415.

is seen as justified, even when there is no threat to international peace and security. The recent NATO operation in Kosovo (a province of Serbia) was an extreme case, since it had no UN authorization and involved massive military force. But the tendency to make national sovereignty conditional was already implicit in a number of Security Council resolutions.[133] It now appears that democratically elected governments must answer not just to their own electorates but to the 'cosmopolitan' powers-that-be as well.

(ii) The rise of a professionally selected technical apparatus

Despite its declining power to shape events, the state has expanded tremendously in its range of functions, and—as Weber taught us—every extension in the functions of the state results in the growth of the bureaucratic apparatus—i.e. an apparatus structured hierarchically in which power is 'descending' rather than 'ascending'.[134] But while the triumphal march of bureaucracy may affront our democratic sensibilities, it is—paradoxically—a direct consequence of democratization. Widening of the suffrage allowed more and more members of the general public to put their demands to those in power; and since these demands never cease and almost always involve the state in new initiatives, the state is obliged constantly to extend its sphere of action, and hence its administrative control. Borrowing from Marx, we might say that democracy suffers from an 'internal contradiction', for the seeds of its destruction (or at least enfeeblement) are inherent in its *modus operandi*.

But the relentless expansion of state administration is part of a broader social trend. Technological development means that the problems which demand technical solutions, and which can only be entrusted to experts, are growing exponentially. The dilemma this poses is admirably summed up by Bobbio in a passage that could have been written by Michels:

> democracy is based on the principle that everyone is in the position to decide on everything: according to the democratic ideal, the only person competent to judge political issues is the citizen (and in this sense the citizen can claim to be sovereign). But as decisions become steadily more technical and less political, surely the citizens' sphere of competence is becoming steadily more restricted, and hence their sovereignty is being steadily eroded. Is it not therefore a contradiction in terms to ask for more and more democracy in an increasingly technocratic society?[135]

In complex, information-based social systems, the 'knowledgeable'—lawyers, scientists, technicians, technocrats, central bankers, corporate leaders—play at

[133] P. Taylor, 'The United Nations in the 1990s: Proactive Cosmopolitanism and the Issue of Sovereignty', *Political Studies*, special issue on *Sovereignty at the Millennium*, 47 (1999), 557–65.

[134] N. Bobbio, *Which Socialism?*, trans. R. Griffin and ed. R. Bellamy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 69, 82.

[135] Ibid. 71.

least as great a part in the making of policies as do the formal institutions of representative government. Those who are 'selected' have gradually usurped the prerogatives and functions of those who are 'elected' and therefore directly accountable to the people.[136]

(iii) 'Depersonalization' and 'abstractness' of social relations

According to Luhmann, the master trend of historical evolution is the attempt to reduce social complexity through the formation of ever more numerous, functionally differentiated systems; this process of system formation necessarily generates additional complexity and thus feeds upon itself.[137] The various systems, moreover, have 'distinct and autonomous functional codes', allowing for a variety of experiences and values that 'are not at root commensurable'.[138] Religious feelings, for example, cannot be translated into the language of science. The differentiation of experience, by dissolving established hierarchies and solidarities, favours independent thought as well as social and geographic mobility. Removal of the constraints of tradition, stratification, and localization in turn leads to a kind of moral 'polytheism' and widespread agnosticism over the 'final questions'. 'In place of a society weighted with the ballast of universal and unchanging principles', writes Zolo, 'there is a pluralism of social spaces regulated by contingent and flexible criteria'.[139] Given the variety and mutual incompatibility of social expectations, relationships are moulded more by instrumental than emotional needs.

Now that modernization has violated the innocence of man's unproblematical identification with his surroundings, and increased the artificiality of his social condition, classical democrats have much cause to regret the resultant abstractness and aridity of the 'feel' of existence, the loss of certainty, commonality, and orderliness. Whereas the political realm was once the symbol of social cohesion, the embodiment of collective beliefs, it is now viewed as just one functional system on the same level as others. The endless differentiation of individual experiences has engendered a growing demand for autonomy from the organic aspect of politics. Citizens are increasingly guided by the desire for individual expression and action, and decreasingly inclined to participate in rituals of collective integration or to endorse grand political schemes. The electronic communication media—lauded by optimists for their educational and interactive possibilities—actually make matters worse. Functionalist theories of mass communication shed light on how the reception of

[136] Ionescu, 'Political Undercomprehension or the Overload of Political Cognition', 422.
[137] N. Luhmann, *Trust and Power* (New York: John Wiley, 1979), 7, 32, 55.
[138] D. Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 5.
[139] Ibid. 6.

media messages becomes a substitute for direct political activity. The modern world is full of political 'couch potatoes', self-absorbed and isolated 'viewers', indifferent to dialogue with their compatriots.[140] Insofar as the need for community remains, it results in the formation of particularistic solidarities of a purely 'ascriptive' sort, based on ethnic, regional, or family characteristics, forms of employment, etc. As Zolo observes: 'The very desire for solidarity and for communion tends to express itself in esoteric, intimate and neo-religious ways, which remove legitimacy from, rather than provide it for, the collective dimension of political life.'[141] Instead of Rousseau's 'general will', we have a confused multiplicity of special and localized interests. Most people still respond to terms like the 'common good' and the 'public interest', but such rhetoric, in the absence of a genuine community, has a distinctly hollow ring.

All the conventional assumptions of democratic theory are called into question by the various consequences of social complexity. The prospects for democratic accountability seem doubtful in a world where many public policies are effectively forged by foreign politicians and industrialists, anonymous—and often supranational—bureaucrats, and international money markets, beyond the ken and almost certainly the control of the supposedly sovereign electorate. The real power-holders seem to work behind the scenes, while the people we elect speak the language of activism but achieve little. To talk of 'global' or 'cosmopolitan' democracy as a way out of this impasse is to inhabit that realm where the wish is father to the thought. Democracy presupposes a significant degree of cultural similarity within the democratic unit, as no one will voluntarily submit to majorities whose values or preferences are systematically alien to his own, and no democracy can survive where such malcontents exist in large numbers. A deep sense of community may not be necessary, but citizens must be sufficiently united so that they can share, and act upon, a general good that is not in marked contradiction to their personal aims and interests. Cultural diversity and ethnic conflict render democracy problematic in Northern Ireland, let alone the entire world. It should go without saying that there is no commonality of interests and values at the global level. As for 'the international community' (note the definite article), it is a transparent fiction, invented to disguise naked power politics, and almost surreal in its distortion of reality. Pareto, that great scourge of vacuous concepts, would have greatly appreciated this latest addition to the politicians' bag of rhetorical tricks.[142]

[140] D. Zolo, 157–8. [141] Ibid. 63.

[142] David Held may be responsible for the term 'cosmopolitan democracy'; he is certainly one of its most distinguished advocates. But even he concedes that 'the processes of globalization do not necessarily lead to growing global integration'; that is, to the progressive development of cultural and political homogeneity and mutual understanding across national boundaries.

If democracy, as traditionally understood, depends on the transparency of power, it also relies on the existence of well-informed citizens, willing and able to assess policy options with detachment and reason. But the very factors that have transferred power to 'invisible' forces have also exploded the myth of the rational citizen. The heightened complexity of modern life severely taxes the attention spans and cognitive capacities of even the most intellectually gifted people. We cannot reasonably expect ordinary citizens to grasp the intricacies of European Monetary Union or of civil wars in distant countries. Neither can we expect them to comprehend how our approach to these matters might affect other areas of public policy. Complexity itself breeds apathy, as most people realize that informed political participation would require a massive investment of time and energy—and probably make no difference, given the hidden and often unaccountable centres of power. Insofar as grassroots participation exists, it cannot usually be depicted as rational. The latest trend is for people to fasten upon a single issue that excites their passions, then take part in public demonstrations of the kind that encourage the obsessive repetition of simple-minded slogans, the parading of banners with crude catchphrases, and the overwhelming compulsion to harangue one's opponents. Such activities, though, are a minority taste. Far more typical is the inclination to take refuge in the inner sphere of private experience and personal relationships. Politics is of marginal interest to most people, and studies consistently indicate that political activity is not widely valued as a source of self-esteem.[143] If, as Aristotle asserted, man is a political animal, one would never know it by observing his behaviour. The Aristotelian view of citizenship, so cherished by radical democrats, presupposes a type of holistic community where participation is an expression of social solidarity and shared aspirations. The irresistible forces of modernity, however, create a multiplicity of differentiated and autonomous social domains, each with its own values and norms. Our mobile and contingent social arrangements make a mockery of the classical democratic search for expressive 'wholeness'.

Surveying these developments, Danilo Zolo concludes that there is a 'central functional antinomy' between 'complexity and democracy'.[144] While

Indeed, 'globalization can engender an awareness of political difference' and 'highlight conflicts of interest and ideology'. In that case, it is hard to see how his idea of an 'authoritative' global 'parliament', based on democratic representation rather than power politics, could ever make the transition from paper to reality. In the absence of 'global integration' or homogeneity, why would any existing state wish to surrender such autonomy as it has to a world government? Despite the best efforts of romantic conservatives and various cultural relativists, the tendency to assume that schemes which appear 'rational' in principle would necessarily make sense in practice persists. See D. Held, 'Democracy: From City-States to a Cosmopolitan Order?', *Political Studies*, special issue on *Prospects for Democracy*, 40 (1992), 31–9.

[143] R. Lane, 'Government and Self-Esteem', *Political Theory*, 10 (1982), 7–8.

[144] *Democracy and Complexity*, 62.

complexity may not actually negate democracy as we understand it, his pessimism is not without justification.[145] It is interesting that all the optimistic talk of 'democratization' refers to countries that were previously dictatorships in one form or another. The established democracies seem, if anything, less democratic—less susceptible to popular control—than they once were. And this situation is unlikely to improve. For example, even if we refuse to follow the classical elitists in seeing political apathy as a psychological given, even if we blame it on the alienating tendencies of capitalism or modernity, it is difficult to discern any trends or forces which might cure this alienation and transform ill-informed and passive citizens into rational and active participants. Globalization means that the decision-making process will become increasingly opaque and remote; physical and social mobility will continue to undermine our sense of collective identity; and functional differentiation, allied to technological sophistication, should ensure an even greater role for the possessors of specialized knowledge.

In the final analysis, the elitists were right about the futility of worshipping at the altar of popular rule. It does not follow, however, that we should abandon all attempts to invigorate such democracy as we now have. In a

[145] Zolo, however, thinks that democracy *is* negated by complexity and its various manifestations. A true child of the classical elitists, he argues, in *Democracy and Complexity*, that the regimes which are known as democratic 'are more properly *differentiated and limited autocratic systems*', or, in traditional terminology, 'liberal oligarchies' (p. 181). This conclusion is largely grounded in his claim that, in our information-based societies, voters are neither rational nor autonomous. The press and electronic media mould our perceptual attitudes and establish the collective criteria which enable us to understand the world. The stereotyped expressions and reactions transmitted by the media define the limits of mass political thinking and have a 'narcotizing' effect. The political information we receive, distorted as it is by the needs for 'newsworthiness' and 'spectacularization', is more likely to induce ignorance than rational thought (pp. 157–76). Given the power of the media, politicians adopt the 'functional logic' of commercial advertising, with inordinate attention being paid to the 'telegenic' aspects of a party's message. The differences between the parties are reduced to differences in image and rhetoric (pp. 121–2). The 'sovereignty of the political consumer' thus amounts to 'empty verbiage' (p. 170). Since Zolo believes that we can renew democratic values and reconstruct democratic theory, he does not, strictly speaking, count as a 'futility' critic of democracy. Nevertheless, his pessimism and hyper-realism fit snugly into the Machiavellian tradition. My own view is that he overstates his case. While it may be true that the modern voter is forced to choose between 'Tweedledee and Tweedledum', this probably indicates that all major candidates are obeying the 'law of anticipated reactions' by appealing to the national consensus. There are certainly extra-democratic constraints on our leaders—as we have seen—but these are not easy to disentangle from the constraints imposed by the electorate. Most voters, for example, doubtless feel that the success of global capitalism is in their interests. It is one thing to say that democratic accountability is *limited* by global trends; it is quite another to say that it is *precluded* by such trends. Moreover, are the 'political consumers' really just passive receptacles of media messages? Does the media *create* our image of reality, or does it—in its desire to please the viewer/readers—reflect the biases prevalent in society? And why does Zolo assume that reliance on electronic sources of information produces ignorance? The political knowledge of ordinary citizens has always been selective and coloured by prejudice. The difference now is that, at the flick of a switch, they have immediate access to rival views and new information.

strangely neglected coda to *Political Parties*, Michels admits that the democratic principle, if pursued with determination, could contribute to 'the enfeeblement of oligarchic tendencies'. By way of explanation he relates the fable of the peasant who, on his deathbed, tells his sons that a treasure is buried in the field. After the old man's death, his sons dig everywhere in order to unearth the treasure. They do not find it. But their tireless labour has the unintended effect of improving the soil and therefore making them richer. 'The treasure in the fable may well symbolise democracy', writes Michels. For democracy is a treasure which no one will discover by deliberate search; but 'in labouring indefatigably to discover the indiscoverable', we may nevertheless achieve fertile results. At the very least, the procedures of democracy, however hollow, will stimulate and strengthen in the individual the 'intellectual aptitude for criticism and control'. Democratic debate, even when debased, makes citizens aware of issues, alternatives, and possibilities. While this educative process cannot *prevent* oligarchy, it should act as a kind of 'palliative'. It should also enhance the capacity of individuals to resist state incursions and regulate their own lives.[146] It is a pity that Michels omitted to develop these observations and instead conveyed the false impression—as did his fellow elitists—that the impossibility of the democratic *ideal* entailed the pointlessness of democratic *reform*. Pursuit of the unattainable is not always a waste of time; the futility thesis, correctly understood, need not be a counsel of despair.

[146] *PP*, 405–6.

4

The Jeopardy Thesis

THE Enlightenment faith in reason or in science to achieve progress survived its encounter with romanticism, albeit in modified form. What Franklin Baumer labels the 'New Enlightenment',[1] which reached full bloom in the middle part of the nineteenth century, included a variety of protagonists: the English utilitarians and radicals, the French positivists, the Young (or 'left') Hegelians of Germany, Marx's scientific socialists. While these groups constituted no sort of family, they were united in their optimism about the future and in their desire to apotheosize 'man' and his exploits in history. Despite their differences, they were all engaged in a common struggle against the forces of reaction and obscurantism. But the New Enlightenment was, to repeat, no mere copy of the original. The French *philosophes* were deemed too metaphysical and too analytic. A certain amount of romantic historicism had rubbed off on most New Enlightenment intellectuals, as also did 'the cultivation of the feelings'. What they had not absorbed from romanticism was its tragic sense of the world as a mysterious and refractory reality, impervious to our rational schemes. Like the most optimistic of the *philosophes*, they generally envisaged a world where democracy, liberty, efficient governance, cultural excellence, and economic prosperity all fit together in a happy state of mutual support. Proponents of the jeopardy thesis disparaged this enchanting vision. For them, democracy posed a threat to our most cherished values and basic human needs.

Jeopardy Thesis (1): Democracy vs. Culture

The term 'culture' has been used in two different senses. Anthropologists understand it as the way of life of a people, the conventional patterns of thought and behaviour, including values, beliefs, rules of conduct, political organization, economic activity, and the like. In this sense, 'culture' is a *descriptive* term, though Victorian anthropologists claimed that the world's cultures

[1] F. L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600–1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), Pt. IV, ch. 3.

could be arranged according to a single hierarchy, from the least cultured to the most, and that Western civilization stood at the higher end of the scale. By the turn of the last century, however, anthropologists began to adopt a relativistic position which acknowledged that the evaluation of superior or inferior itself rested upon a cultural point of view.[2] 'Culture' has also been used in an explicitly *normative* sense, as something to be achieved by deliberate effort. Matthew Arnold famously described it as 'the disinterested endeavour after man's perfection', or 'as an inward condition of the mind and spirit', not as 'an outward set of circumstances'.[3] Culture, so construed, is a form of self-cultivation; it involves the refinement of one's artistic sensibilities or personal manners, the enlargement of one's learning and intellectual faculties, and the achievement of a kind of spiritual nobility. We thus have 'the man of culture'. Those who interpret culture in this way usually recognize a cultural separation between one level of society and another. A distinction is sometimes drawn between 'high' culture—the pursuits of the enlightened elite—and 'low' culture—the pursuits of the mediocre mass. But the term 'culture' may simply be reserved for the expressions of 'high' culture, so that you can speak of the less cultured or more cultured strata of society.

The thinkers covered in this section often oscillate between the two main senses of culture. But when they adopt the anthropological definition, they are anything but relativistic. For them, culture—whether applied to the individual or to society at large, to the rarefied world of arts and letters or to the mundane activities of daily life—is something that can thrive or degenerate. There are healthy, vibrant cultures, and there are decadent, lowly cultures. The latter are considered the natural product of democracy and egalitarianism.

(i) The fascist and proto-fascist variant

Fascism has been characterized in a number of ways, but most commentators would probably agree that it contained two fundamental ingredients. The first was the 'integral nationalism' developed by the anti-Dreyfusards in France, who coalesced in the organization called Action Française, and by Enrico Corradini and others in Italy who founded the chauvinistic review called *Il regno* in 1903 and later (1910) came together to form the Associazione Nazionalista Italiana. The second ingredient was Nietzsche's 'transvaluation' of the Judaeo-Christian ethic, and his strident preference for 'master-morality' over 'slave-morality'.

Both ingredients must be understood in the context of the *Fin de Siècle*, the revolt, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, against the entire heritage

[2] E. Hatch, *Theories of Man and Culture* (New York, 1973).

[3] M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. S. Lipman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 19, 33. First published in 1869.

of the Enlightenment, with its optimistic worship of reason as the key to human liberation. While 'enlightened' assumptions continued to dominate the mainstream of European thought, the phrase *fin de siècle* defined a new kind of modernity that was very different from scientific-rationalistic modernity. Obviously recalling the aspirations of the original romantics, it represented a rebellion against the whole pattern of bourgeois values and conventions, and bourgeois rationalism and conventionality in general. For the thinkers associated with the new outlook, human nature was less rational, knowledge more subjective and elusive, and history less understandable and predictable than the champions of 'Enlightenment'—'old' and 'new'—would have us believe. Central to this iconoclastic mode of thought was a reaction against the cult of science and the world projected by science—a world of systematic connections and rigorous plans, where everything could be quantified and measured. The villain of the piece was not so much science *per se* as its putative claim to take all knowledge for its province, along with the corresponding assumption of universal determinism. Contempt for 'scientism' or 'positivism' was closely linked to a new emphasis on human irrationality, a desire—as we saw in Chapter 2—to expose the dark side of the human psyche. Even Darwinism, a quintessentially enlightened doctrine, stimulated study of the primitive and instinctual in man by calling attention to our animal origins. The devaluation of intellect was strikingly expressed in the writings of Henri Bergson, an influential French philosopher who insisted that intuition alone could give us true knowledge of nature and life. His metaphysical conception of ultimate reality as a continuous, unpredictable process of creation, beyond the grasp of human rationality, led to a widespread feeling that the spontaneous, irrational creative act was the highest value and motive force of history. Reality was 'nothing but change', ceaseless flux: there was no fixed star to light the way to truth; man was cast adrift on an endless sea of becoming.[4] Again, Darwinian evolution had a paradoxical role to play. On the one hand, it counted as a victory for science over religious mysticism. On the other, it boosted irrationalism by undercutting the moral and rational 'truths' which were formerly the backbone of the Western tradition. For if everything evolves, nothing, including the canons of scientific inquiry, is true in the sense of absolute for all time and for everybody.

The *fin de siècle* thus ushered in a way of thinking that contemplated everything—nature, man, society, history, even God—*sub specie temporis*, as forever evolving into something new and different. The category of *becoming*—relativity, movement—replaced the category of *being*—absolute truth, immobility. Of course, the Hegelians and the Marxists also refused to recognize any

[4] H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1907), trans. A. Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1944), 4.

timeless order and celebrated the dynamism of history. Nevertheless, they remained convinced that the historical process would eventually reveal final truths about human existence. In their commitment to the triumph of reason, they were true heirs of the Enlightenment, exponents of the 'old' modernity. What was distinctive about the new modernity was its unqualified abandonment of absolutes, leaving man with a sense of loss and insecurity. For those in the grip of this mental outlook, life became provisional—not merely changing but without standards or roots. To an increasing number of thinkers, a world that had seemed more or less static, at least in terms of ultimate goals and eternal frames of reference, now began to look endlessly dynamic.

No one expressed this spiritual disorientation, this decline of certainty and optimism, more powerfully than Friedrich Nietzsche; and no philosopher was more admired by the fascists (and Nazis) than this eccentric German, who—despite suffering from insanity during the last eleven years of his life—must rival Marx in the scholarly attention devoted to his work. Like the romantic conservatives, Nietzsche sought to demolish every sacred cow of Enlightenment thought; unlike them, he offered no reassuring alternative—no God, no tradition, no higher moral law. His writings are the intellectual equivalent of a scorched earth policy, razing cherished beliefs to the ground while betraying perverse delight in the resulting moral void.

The spread of positivism, according to Nietzsche, was based on fundamental misconceptions about the nature of man and reality. Human beings do not behave the way the Benthamites said they did, always in pursuit of pleasure or their own advantage; far from acting 'rationally' at all times, they often choose chaos and destruction. Attempts to devise universal explanations of human behaviour are as fruitless as attempts to impose meaning on an inherently meaningless universe. Man's irrationality accurately mirrors the disordered nature of reality. The inflated claims being made for the scientific method, Nietzsche argued, served to disguise our existential condition. The experimentally verified statements of natural science are not, as they pretend to be, objective—that is, discoveries about the world—but a human arrangement and interpretation of an essentially structureless and irrational universe, so that it can be understood and 'lived in'. Science, no less than religion, rests on fictions (such as causation and the existence of atoms). In any case, and contrary to the general tenor of positivist thinking, scientific statements are statements only of (alleged) fact, value and meaning being outside their sphere. The idea that scientific 'truth' can substitute for the moral 'truths' subverted by evolutionism is, for Nietzsche, one of the great absurdities of the age. Empirical investigation can discover why morality exists (its causes) but this just demonstrates that moral 'truths' are true only from a particular perspective, that there are moralities but no 'Morality'. He deprives morality of its transcendental origins and sanction, which means that it can have no

everlasting and universal worth. Darwinism, he thought, had mobilized massive evidence in support of the conclusion that humans came into being entirely by fortuitous variations. This made it difficult to posit some directing agency in the universe; certainly, the existence of a conscious creative force was now unnecessary, since what had formerly appeared as purposeful order could now be explained as random change. 'God is dead', Nietzsche's most famous epigram, expresses the view that there is no such thing as a supersensible reality beyond observed phenomena. For if God is dead, then everything subsumed in the concept of God—ultimate realities, 'things-in-themselves'—must also be deemed extinct.

But while morality as a set of metaphysical postulates does not exist, morality as an observable system of rights and duties, varying over time and space, clearly does exist. What is the origin of this morality (or these moralities)? One answer that can be gleaned from Nietzsche's writings is that morality derives from power: those who are in physical control of society will eventually translate this into spiritual dominance as well. Since moral judgements are not objective or absolute, they depend on the balance of advantages and disadvantages as seen from a certain vantage-point—and the vantage-point that prevails is likely to be that of the powerful. This would explain the variability of morality from one social or historical context to another. Significant changes in power relationships—'the effect of *successful crimes*'—produce innovations in moral thinking.[5] Nietzsche's apparent reduction of morality to power relations, which owes a great deal to Hobbes, obviously prefigured the fascist/Nazi assumption that 'might is right'.

Yet Nietzsche's views are more subtle than this formulation might suggest. The concept of justice, for example, originates not in an unequal power relationship, but between 'parties of approximately *equal power* . . . where there is no clearly recognizable superiority of force and a contest would result in mutual injury'. Hence arises the idea of 'coming to an understanding and negotiating over one another's demands'. Enlightened self-preservation, involving requital and exchange, is the original purpose of so-called just (and fair) actions.[6] Moreover, although morality is a coercive mechanism, a 'tyranny against "nature" ', in the sense that it constrains our instinctual drives and reinforces prevailing modes of behaviour, it nevertheless expresses universal needs. Not only is moral restraint causally responsible for all the great human achievements ('virtue, art, music, reason, spirituality'), it also corresponds to 'the herd instinct in the individual', the innate desire to be a function of the herd and live in a stable community.[7] Specific moralities may reflect asym-

[5] Extract from *Daybreak*, sect. 98, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1977), 92.

[6] Extract from *Human, All Too Human*, sect. 92, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, 74–5.

[7] Extracts from *Beyond Good and Evil*, sect. 188, and *The Gay Science*, sect. 116, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, 105–6, 102.

metric power relations, but the *need* for morality emerges from our human condition.

In explaining morality, Nietzsche intended to show that moral systems develop over time and out of given social circumstances, and are not presented from on high; that they are of human rather than divine provenance; and that they are to be justified, if at all, by their consequences rather than by appeal to external authority. But consequences, of course, can only be judged in terms of a particular value-system. Notwithstanding the sophistication of his analysis, Nietzsche paved the way for the crude instrumental approach to morality that enabled the fascists and Nazis to employ any means in pursuit of their ends. And, as a matter of fact, their ends resembled his own. He believed that he was living in a time of decadence, that Judaeo-Christian morality had produced a deadly form of cultural enervation. The failure of this morality, in his view, could be illuminated through an examination of how it arose.

Nietzsche tells us that there are 'two basic types' of moral perspective, 'master-morality' and 'slave-morality'. He concedes that these are intellectual constructs which are rarely found in pure form, even within a single individual, let alone a complex culture. Nevertheless, they represent two distinct ways of seeing, and acting in, the world. In the first type of morality, the antithesis 'good' and 'bad' means the same thing as 'noble' and 'despicable'. The cowardly, the timid, the humble, the petty, the deceitful, the mistrustful and those who think only of narrow utility are despised. They are 'bad'. As for goodness, it designates just those qualities which the 'masters', the natural leaders, possess. 'Everything he knows to be part of himself, he honours: such a morality is self-glorification.'[8] The master, the noble human being, may help the unfortunate, but not usually from pity. What drives his charitable behaviour is 'an urge begotten by superfluity of power'—*noblesse oblige*. The aristocratic human being is severe and harsh, both with himself and others. He exhibits deep reverence for age and tradition, takes pride in his ancestors, and feels a sense of responsibility only to his equals. Towards beings of a lower rank, he may act 'as the heart desires'. Honour is more important to him than comfort or convenience, and he attaches no great value to human life as such. The capacity for and the duty of 'protracted gratitude and protracted revenge'—both only among one's equals—is another mark of noble morality. Slave-morality, by contrast, is deeply suspicious of the virtues of the powerful and even calls them 'evil', a term which is extensionally equivalent to the word 'good' in the master's language. The moral evaluations of the 'slave' are generated by fear and inadequacy, or *ressentiment*. Those whose power and rapacity inspire dread among the weak must be condemned as 'evil'. For the slave, 'good' means almost exactly what 'bad' means in the moral vocabulary of the masters. Qualities which serve to lessen the burdens of existence—pity,

[8] Extract from *Beyond Good and Evil*, sect. 260, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, 107.

kindness, an aversion to violence, the warm heart, patience, humility—are 'flooded with light'. Within the slave's way of thinking, the good man is the harmless man, the man who will relieve, rather than ignore or exacerbate, the suffering of the weak. Appropriately enough, the longing for freedom is also distinctive of slave-morality, while the aristocratic mode of thinking favours reverence and devotion, the willingness to surrender oneself to a higher cause.[9]

Nietzsche is convinced that master-morality pre-dates slave-morality. He is scathing about English utilitarians who claim that the concept 'good' originated in non-egoistic actions that were useful. This implies that the judgement 'good' originated with those to whom 'goodness' was shown. Rather, writes Nietzsche, 'it was "the good" themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who . . . established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian'.[10] Any calculus of utility was the furthest thing from their minds. Nor did they equate goodness with the suppression of one's ego. Nietzsche thinks that he can prove this point by studying the etymological significance of the designations for 'good' coined in various languages. He found that everywhere, 'noble', 'aristocratic' in the social sense, is the basic concept from which 'good' developed: a process running parallel with that other in which 'common' and 'plebeian' are transformed into the concept 'bad'.[11]

It follows from the noble origins of the word 'good' that, at its inception, it had nothing to do with 'unegoistic' actions. When, then, did 'good' and 'unegoistic' become linked? When—to put it another way—did modern Western 'slave-morality' arise? It was, asserts Nietzsche, ancient Israel's resentment of her Egyptian oppressors that first gave rise to a form of spiritual revenge, an inversion of the noble values and a triumph over them. The slave morality of Moses and the prophets repudiated the values of the high and the mighty. This is the ultimate source of the decadent and degenerate character of Western culture.

The Jews inverted 'the aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God)', asserting instead that only the wretched are good. The 'suffering, deprived, sick, ugly, alone are pious, alone are blessed by God', whereas 'the powerful and noble' are 'the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity'.[12] Nietzsche does not deny that this 'vengefulness of the impotent', this poisonous urge to denigrate the 'masters', had powerful justification. From the viewpoint of the weak, the noble world was hostile and oppressive. Although the noble warriors held each

[9] Extract from *Beyond Good and Evil*, 107–9.

[10] F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), first essay, sect. 2, pp. 25–6.

[11] Ibid., sect. 4, pp. 27–8. [12] Ibid., sect. 7, p. 34.

other in mutual respect, their attitude to outsiders was one of total contempt. The sight of strangers or 'inferiors' could turn them into 'monsters', beasts of prey who find their feats of murder, arson, rape, and torture exhiliarating.[13] Nietzsche also goes out of his way to compliment the Jews (a 'gifted' nation) on the creative audacity of their historical achievement.[14] Nevertheless, the Jews are ultimately responsible for 'the diminution and levelling of European man', something which constitutes '*our* greatest danger'.[15] Two opposing value-systems—'good and bad' vs. 'good and evil'—have engaged in a fearful struggle for thousands of years. And the symbol of the struggle, 'inscribed in letters legible across all human history', is 'Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome'; for Rome epitomized all that was 'strong and noble'; it was the perfect embodiment of aristocratic values. In consequence, Rome felt the Jew to be an enemy of the human race, and rightly so, says Nietzsche, as 'the salvation and future of the human race' is dependent upon 'the unconditional dominance of aristocratic values, Roman values'. Yet Rome, for all its magnificence, was 'defeated beyond all doubt'. Consider to whom one bows down 'over almost half the earth': Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who spread the vales and ideals of his people.[16] The only difference is that Christianity, by preaching a gospel of love, presented itself as the denial of the Jewish 'thirst for revenge'. But the reverse is true, according to Nietzsche. Christian love and Jewish hatred are driven by the same impulse—the desire to destroy master-morality.[17]

Christianity continued and accentuated the inversion process by rejecting the Roman (i.e. pagan) ideals of war, power, might, and glory. With reference to Christ, Nietzsche asks: 'Did Israel not attain the ultimate goal of its sublime vengefulness precisely through the bypath of this "Redeemer", this ostensible opponent and disintegrator of Israel?' Nietzsche suggests, bizarrely, that the crucifixion of Christ was part of an elaborate Jewish plot to fool the world.[18] Through the instrument of Christianity, the master-type was eventually persuaded to accept, for *himself*, the same system of values that originated in slavish powerlessness. The strong have thence come to disapprove of, and regard as reprehensible, the very set of traits deemed 'good' in the master's normal code. The result is an internalized form of self-oppression, for all 'instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn* inward'. Cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in destroying—all this turned against the possessors of such instincts. That self-punishment brought about the phenomenon of 'bad conscience', the 'gravest and uncanniest illness, from which humanity has not yet recovered'—an illness that sterilizes the power of the natural masters.[19] The *ressentiment* felt by the disenfranchised has thus

[13] Ibid., sect. 10, p. 37; and sect. 11, pp. 40–1.
[14] Ibid., sect. 16, p. 53.
[15] Ibid., sect. 12, p. 44.
[16] Ibid., sect. 16, pp. 52–3.
[17] Ibid., sect. 8, p. 35.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., second essay, sect. 16, pp. 84–5.

spawned a terrible revenge. Western morality, and particularly the moral code of Christianity, despite its emphasis on charity and love, has arisen 'out of the cauldron of unsatisfied hatred'.[20] Our morbid moralization, in Nietzsche's opinion, is nothing but malice spiritualized, an anti-life phenomenon, reflecting the grim self-contempt of the slave.

And so the slaves or the 'mob' or the 'herd'—whatever you want to call them—have disposed of their masters. Nietzsche describes this as 'a blood-poisoning', progressing through 'the entire body of mankind'. Everything is 'visibly becoming Judaized, Christianized, mob-ized'. Democracy is the appropriate expression of a culture whose vitality has been depleted by a perverse preference for mediocrity and weakness over greatness and strength. It represents the apotheosis of the 'maggot man', the 'tame man', the 'hopelessly mediocre and insipid man', who now views himself 'as the goal and zenith, as the meaning of history, as "higher man" '. This lamentable specimen rules over the 'sickly, weary, and exhausted' civilization of modern Europe.[21]

Nietzsche hopes for a non-metaphysical transcendence of the modern world, a new transvaluation of values, which would remove the constraints of the herd and allow only such constraints as are imposed by the born masters. He always speaks of conquerors or masters with undisguised admiration. When discussing the origin of the state, for example, he informs us that

> it is obvious what is meant—some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race which, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace perhaps tremendously superior in numbers but still formless and nomad. That is after all how the 'state' began on earth. I think that sentimentalism which would have it begin with a 'contract' has been disposed of. He who can command, he who is by nature 'master', he who is violent in act and bearing—what has he to do with contracts! One does not reckon with such natures; they come like fate, without reason, consideration, or pretext; they appear as lightning appears . . . Their work is an instinctive creation and imposition of forms; they are the most involuntary, unconscious artists there are—wherever they appear something new soon arises, a ruling structure that *lives* . . . They do not know what guilt, responsibility, or consideration are, these born organizers; they exemplify that terrible artists' egoism that has the look of bronze and knows itself justified to all eternity in its 'work' like a mother in her child.[22]

For Nietzsche, cruelty, dominance, and submission are essential to life. The principle that we must refrain from mutual injury, mutual exploitation, or equate our own will with that of others, is the *denial* of life—the 'principle of dissolution and decay'. For 'life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's

[20] F. Nietzsche, first essay, sect. 11, p. 40.
[21] Ibid., sect. 9, pp. 35–6; and sect. 11, p. 43.
[22] Ibid., second essay, sect. 17, pp. 86–7.

own forms . . . and, at the least and mildest, exploitation'. Life, that is to say, is 'will to power', a desire to master and transform the environment on the part of every living thing. And so 'exploitation' does not pertain 'to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society; it pertains to the *essence* of the living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will of life'.[23] Pace Darwin, life is not a struggle to survive but to *prevail*, in accordance with the will to power. The 'basic drive of life . . . aims at *extension of power*'.[24] Conflict and the aggressive instincts are therefore the affirmation of existence, the source of all creativity.

If we are to get in tune with nature, according to Nietzsche, then we must liberate the passions and instincts from the crippling influence of the old (slave) virtues, and this is the role of the very few who are very strong. Here is where the 'superman' (*übermensch*) steps forward. It is his task to free us from what is petty, what is 'womanish, what stems from slavishness and especially from the mob hotchpotch'.[25] The superman would have a different kind of spirit from that typical of the present age. It would be a spirit 'for whom conquest, adventure, danger, and even pain have become needs'. This '*redeeming* man', this 'creative spirit', bringing hope to man; this 'Antichrist', this 'victor over God and nothingness—*he must come one day*'.[26]

Nietzsche's preference for 'master-morality', his assertion that the higher and rarer specimens of humanity should command while the lower ranks obey, carries with it a profound contempt for the 'rabble' and for democracy.[27] Whatever is 'common', as in 'common good' or 'common man', has little value by definition. Democratic regimes are therefore well suited to the spiritual exhaustion of late modernity. Nietzsche has no time for democratic politicians and theorists who prattle on about 'equality of rights' and dangle before the people the promise of abolishing all misery and suffering. Democracy, like socialism, is simply a translation of Christian eschatology into secular terms, with the consequent weakening of the human will to life. For the Christian faith was, from the start, a denial of the pride and self-confidence of the human spirit, a religious neurosis making debilitating anti-life demands, such as fasting and sexual abstinence. Christianity broke the spirit of the strong and healthy by casting suspicion on their love of beauty, and by devaluing their haughty, manly, and domineering qualities. Democracy, too, pours scorn on these qualities; it undermines aesthetic greatness, heroic individuality, and

[23] Ibid., sect. 12, p. 79; and extract from *Beyond Good and Evil*, sect. 259, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, 229–30.

[24] Extract from *The Gay Science*, sect. 349, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, 230.

[25] Extract from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Pt. IV, sect. 3, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, 243.

[26] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, sect. 24, p. 96.

[27] Ibid., first essay, sect. 12, p. 44; third essay, sect. 25, p. 154; and extract from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Pt. II, in *A Nietzsche Reader*, 225.

aristocratic self-sacrifice; it reduces political obligation to the rational self-interest of the 'maggot man', our new lord and master.

Hostile criticism of Nietzsche often focuses on his unconventional and aphoristic style, a curious mixture of invective, riddles, poetry, and assertion. Sustained argument is rare. His rejection of democracy, for example, turns on his denigration of 'slave-morality', which democracy allegedly expresses. But by what criteria does Nietzsche choose between different moral values? Since 'God is dead', we can forget about transcendent or metaphysical criteria. Nor does he believe that we can discover a rational foundation for our moral preferences. Philosophers who think otherwise are merely giving a logical veneer to prevalent moral convictions, in his view. Reason cannot supply answers to 'ought' questions. How, then, can Nietzsche declare 'master-morality' to be superior to 'slave-morality'? Zeitlin concludes that it is just a matter of taste, a sort of aesthetic choice.[28] An alternative would be for Nietzsche to weigh up the differential *consequences* of the two moral perspectives. One, he says, leads to cultural decay; the other to health, beauty, and spiritual excellence. It is obvious, however, that such a judgement of consequences itself depends upon the very moral outlook that is meant to be tested. He sees female emancipation, the spread of benevolence, and a mass desire for comfort and security as signs of decadence; proponents of 'slave-morality' would interpret these trends as signs of social stability and moral progress. Perhaps he would have changed his tune if someone had managed to convince him that oppression, racial persecution, and endless conflict would be the predictable results of his desire to re-establish 'master-morality' in the modern context. Surely no one would consider such consequences beneficial. But Nietzsche was indeed willing to accept cruelty and suffering as undesirable concomitants of something intrinsically desirable. He points out in one of his more chilling passages that there is no disciplining of men without cruelty. Blood, torture, and sacrifice have performed a valuable function in history, helping men to 'master their basic mob-instinct', and creating the climate of self-control necessary for cultural achievement: 'how much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all "good things"!'[29] It appears that consequentialist arguments for (and against) 'master-morality' are irreducibly circular. Zeitlin's assessment must therefore be correct: only taste, only instinctive revulsion, could explain Nietzsche's hostility to Judaeo-Christian moral teachings.

Is there any way of refuting Nietzsche's moral tastes without resorting to the foundationalist arguments he rejected out of hand? Without laying ourselves open to the charge that we are dressing up our own moral tastes in rational or religious garb? While taste may be subjective, it does seem reasonable

[28] I. M. Zeitlin, *Nietzsche: A Re-examination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 53.
[29] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, sect. 3, pp. 61–2.

to argue that the Nietzschean taste for master-morality was perverse. Does it make sense to despise tolerance, compassion, patience, humility, mutual co-operation, and material prosperity when these things make our short stay on earth so much more bearable? Civilization is, above all, the will to live in common, and respect for others is what makes common life possible. A man is uncivilized, barbarous if he does not take others' needs into account. To say that the 'moral' code of ancient conquerors is 'higher' than New Testament morality is equivalent to saying that Damian Hirst is a better sculptor than Michelangelo. Although the judgement may not admit of rational disproof, all the accumulated wisdom and experience of our culture tells us that it borders on the absurd.

Adopting a different critical tack, Ansell-Pearson argues that Nietzsche failed to address the 'right of subjectivity', as Hegel described the right of the modern individual to self-determination. Since the majority will no longer meekly submit to a dictatorial minority, 'it is difficult to see how aristocratic rule as conceived by Nietzsche could be maintained except through ruthless forms of political control'.[30] It is doubtful, though, that he would have been troubled by 'ruthless forms of political control'—*in principle* at any rate. The point Ansell-Pearson should be making is that Nietzsche's political vision of a renewed aristocratic ascendancy will *never materialize* in advanced technological societies which have enshrined Hegel's 'right of subjectivity'. The fascist/Nazi interlude, let us remember, occurred in countries that were politically backward. Moreover, information and computer technology is rendering the old manly values increasingly redundant. Physical strength, fortitude in the face of danger, and the like are yielding pride of place to the gentler virtues associated with females: emotional 'literacy', facility in verbal communication, etc. The transformation of values is bound up with the transformation of productive techniques. Nietzsche's criticism of egalitarianism and democracy is grounded in nostalgia for a primitive past that can never be recreated in the conditions of modern life. Needless to say, his condemnation of modern life may still have some validity. What is inevitable is not necessarily desirable, and what has been superseded by history is not necessarily undesirable. But I invite the reader to reflect on how Nietzsche has caricatured democracy and modernity. Even he accepted, as we have seen, that master-morality and slave-morality were intellectual constructs, not accurate descriptions of reality, where the two types of morality have generally co-mingled. The trends feared by Nietzsche have intensified since his death a century ago; but even now, the idea that the supposed manly virtues—courage, steadfastness, heroism, self-sacrifice, risk-taking, physical vitality and aggression—have

[30] K. Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 155.

been obliterated by our egalitarian, 'feminized' culture is far too simplistic. The twentieth century witnessed numerous wars and revolutions where men were ready to submit to the ultimate test in support of some higher cause. And while it is true that the average 'millennium male' in advanced democratic countries is noticeably 'softer' than his ancestors, or his counterparts in less developed societies, the manly virtues still live on in sport, in the military, and even (far less admirably) in the codes of deviant groups: football hooligans, terrorist and criminal gangs. Nor has modern democracy led to the levelling process that Nietzsche so deplored. Like many other critics of democracy, he confused an abstract threat for a real threat. He laboured under the misconception that democracy and equality would be taken literally, that modernity would produce a race of mediocre clones, devoid of creative geniuses, or (as he would put it) 'higher specimens' of humanity. Liberalism may underpin democracy, but it also restrains democracy, by defending individuality and the cultivation of special talents. In his preoccupation with a noble past, real or imagined, Nietzsche failed to notice this subtle dialectic.

Although he died when Hitler was still a boy, Nietzsche was enlisted to the Nazi cause as an ideological inspiration and mentor. Being an internationally celebrated philosopher, whose likes and dislikes resembled their own, he could lend intellectual credence to the prejudices of Hitler and his henchmen. They made his writings part of their educational programme and published inexpensive collections and anthologies. But it has now become almost a cliché in the secondary literature that this appropriation was 'crude and highly selective'.[31] During the years of Nietzsche's insanity and incapacity, and after his death, his sister Elizabeth—an early admirer of Hitler—became the executor of her brother's literary estate. It seems that she and her husband, a notorious Jew-hater called Förster, 'edited' and tampered with certain manuscripts in ways that made Nietzsche into a precursor of Nazism. That the Nazis distorted and misrepresented his thoughts and ideas is beyond question. Possibly because of his admiration for individual self-assertion and personal authenticity, Nietzsche hated nationalism in general and German nationalism in particular—a rather obvious disqualification for retrospective recruitment to the Nazi movement. When he referred to a master race, he meant 'masterful types of people', who could be Arab or oriental as well as Nordic or European.[32] His anti-Semitism was abstract and historical, and no more violent than his antipathy to Christianity. Vulgar and personalized anti-Semitism was anathema to Nietzsche. Nevertheless, it is misleading to deny an affinity between his views and fascism—every bit as misleading as the opposite posi-

[31] K. Ansell-Pearson, 32.

[32] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, first essay, sect. 11, pp. 40–1.

tion. His casual acceptance of cruelty and violence, his contempt for the 'old ladies' morality of the Jews and Christians, with its stress on pity and compassion, his fervent desire for a saviour, a redeeming *übermensch*, who could rescue us from the egalitarian nightmare of modernity—all of this was music to the receptive ears of Hitler and Mussolini.

Nietzsche's impact, it seems to me, is particularly evident in what Roger Griffin refers to as fascism's 'mythic core': the image of a decaying national community in urgent need of regeneration. According to Griffin, 'the recurrent obsession with national rebirth' can be summed up by an obscure and obsolescent English word: 'palingenesis' (meaning rebirth).[33] The 'palingenetic' nature of fascism is attested to in passage after passage by the various authors who contributed to fascist doctrine. A few prominent examples should suffice to make the point.

Early fascism drew much of its rhetoric from the vocabulary of Futurism, an artistic movement with political pretensions. Galvanized by a mythology of innovation and audacity, and led by Filippo Marinetti, an experimental novelist and poet, the Futurists spoke of 'rejuvenating' the Italian creative genius, now rendered 'sluggish' by the 'gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tourist guides and antiquaries' who rule Italy. The nation that rises, phoenix-like, from the ashes of this putrid system will 'demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice'.[34] Nietzsche would have approved. Edgar Jung, a rabid German nationalist (who was nevertheless murdered by the Nazis during the 'Night of the Long Knives'), wrote in 1927 that people like him were 'transvaluing values' (note the Nietzschean formulation) and 'transcending a world grown rotten'; only a 'bold act of spiritual renewal' could overcome 'German impotence'. The source of degradation was liberal individualism and the democratic state.[35] Similarly, Nakano Seigõ, an authentic Japanese fascist, denounced democracy as 'the precise cause of contemporary decadence' because it 'insists only on numerical superiority without considering the essence of human beings'. Rejuvenation will come when individuals are 'organically united for solidarity and for combat'.[36] Curzio Malaparte, a novelist on the extremist wing of Italian Fascism, expressed the imagery of decay and renewal with exceptional

[33] R. Griffin (ed.), *Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 3–4 of General Introduction. For a detailed exposition of Griffin's thesis, see his *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991).

[34] 'Manifesto of the Political Futurist Party' (Sept. 1918), in Griffin (ed.), *Fascism*, 30; 'The Futurist Manifesto' (1913), in A. Lyttelton (ed.) *Italian Fascisms: From Pareto to Gentile* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 212.

[35] E. Jung, Extract from *The Rule of the Inferior: Its Decay and Replacement by a New Reich*, in Griffin (ed.), *Fascism*, 107.

[36] N. Seigõ, Extract from 'The Need for a Totalitarian Regime' (speech delivered in 1939), in Griffin (ed.), *Fascism*, 239.

menace. He lamented 'the humiliating mediocrity of our nation', a nation 'corrupted and fragmented by the heretical spirit of the Reformation'. Mussolini's mission, he tells us in Nietzschean language, is to restore to Italy 'the physical sense of heroism'. As our saviour, as 'an enemy of modern civilisation', Mussolini must show 'no respect or pity . . . no mercy'. Indeed, 'suffering is a national and social duty and necessity'. Anyone who teaches that 'suffering is hateful or preaches the law of paradise and not the law of hell is denying man's greatness'. Since we 'must pass through pain and hell to reach heaven', there will be no 'rebirth' if we allow our spirits to be crushed by materialistic liberalism. In a Nietzschean flourish, guaranteed to curdle the blood of all enlightened progressives, Malaparte proclaims that 'we are anti-democratic because we are anti-humanitarian'. Essentially inspired by Nietzsche, his vision is of a world where 'blood' and 'honour' (aristocratic virtues) destroy the 'slave' virtues of pity and comfort.[37]

Last but certainly not least, Il Duce himself, when asked to formulate the basic principles of fascism in 1932, did so in palingenetic and Nietzschean terms. Fascism, he said, seeks to 'remake' human life in a heroic mould. The fascist 'disdains the "comfortable" life', rejects 'universal concord', and denies that ' "happiness" is possible upon earth'.[38] The flabby, materialistic goals of liberalism and democracy 'would transform men into animals with one sole preoccupation: that of being well-fed and fat, degraded in consequence to a merely physical existence'. Without fascist intervention, the Italian democrats—their minds distorted by the 'absurd conventional lie of political equalitarianism'—would have created 'a social state in which a degenerate mass' could experience no greater ambition than 'to enjoy the ignoble pleasures of vulgar men'.[39] The new fascist man, by contrast, is willing to sacrifice his private interest in order to restore the glory of the fatherland and realize 'that completely spiritual existence in which his value as a man lies'. Fascism, in other words, 'desires an active man, one engaged in activity with all his energies'. This virile *übermensch* sees life as a struggle 'to conquer for himself that life truly worthy of him'.[40] Rebirth, for Mussolini as for Nietzsche, is conceived as a revolt against modernity, inasmuch as modernity is identified with the rationalism, optimism, and humanism of the eighteenth century. Also like the German philosopher, Italy's fascist dictator failed to grasp that any attempt to revive the ancient heroic code in the modern age was doomed to failure.

While the Nietzschean theme of 'decay' (brought about by the Christian/liberal ethos of equality and compassion) and 'rebirth' (inspired by a 'victor

[37] C. Malaparte, 'Mussolini and National Syndicalism', in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 225–31.

[38] B. Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism' (1932—written in collaboration with G. Gentile), in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 40–1, 44, 48.

[39] Ibid. 49–50. [40] Ibid. 40.

over God', for whom 'conquest, adventure, danger, and even pain have become needs')[41] forms the 'mythic core' of fascism and gives the doctrine a dynamic quality, we must of course remember that fascists, unlike Nietzsche, understood rebirth in nationalistic terms. Theirs was a 'palingenetic ultra-nationalism', in Griffin's coinage.[42] Integral nationalism, as it was known, was perhaps the most salient component of fascism.

By common consent, the most interesting proponent of integral nationalism was Charles Maurras, a leading figure in Action Française (a right-wing political group, with a journal of the same name, formed at the time of the Dreyfus Affair). Born in 1868, he lived long enough to support the Vichy regime and was duly sentenced to life imprisonment and national degradation after the liberation of 1945. He died seven years later, a pariah in the land he worshipped.

Nationalism was 'integral' when it formed a systematic mental framework, fitting all aspects of national life into a coherent whole. Nationalism in this sense goes beyond love of country or pride in one's ethnic roots; it becomes a kind of comprehensive ideology, an integrated mode of seeing the world, which judges everything in terms of its effect on the nation. Nationalism thus understood, in contradistinction to the liberal nationalism of Mazzini and Garibaldi, tended to be reactionary and authoritarian. Ernst Nolte, in his classic study of fascism, suggests a number of characteristics which can help us to understand Maurras's nationalism.[43] First and foremost, it was *aesthetic*. France corresponded to what was beautiful. With its unique creative heritage, inspired by Catholicism and the classical spirit, it was the wonder of wonders. Having identified beauty with symmetry and order, Maurras wanted to apply the aesthetics of classicism to political life. What could be more destructive of natural harmony than a cacophonous and unwieldy parliament, riven by ugly populist passions and incompatible demands?[44] And what could be more in keeping with nature than a hierarchical chain of authority allowing everyone to know his place in the scheme of things? In the France of the *ancien régime*, authority extended naturally to every aspect of social life, and each centre of authority, from fathers of families right up to the king, cooperated with the rest. In this delicately balanced and unified system of hereditary monarchy and aristocracy, a system conforming to 'the natural and rational order of

[41] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, sect. 24, p. 96.

[42] Griffin (ed.), *Fascism*, p. 4 of General Introduction.

[43] E. Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism* (New York: Mentor, 1965), 143–8.

[44] '. . . it is contradictory, that the state, founded for the purpose of building unity amongst men, unity in time which we call continuity, unity in space which we call concord, should be legally constituted by competition and discord between parties which by their very nature are divisive'. C. Maurras, Preface to *Romanticism and Revolution*, in J. S. McClelland (ed.), *The French Right: From de Maistre to Maurras* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 253.

things', the institutional and artistic genius of France was preserved in all its glory.[45] France was then a beautiful and supple Goddess, radiating health from every pore. Democracy, alas, has infected the Goddess with a wasting disease: her face is no longer beautiful and her gait is unsteady.

It should be clear that the 'France' cherished by Maurras is not the actual France, the France he could see before his eyes, the France indelibly stamped by the Revolution of 1789. *His* France was an abstraction—the Goddess in all her ideal perfection. Maurras's nationalism is therefore *metaphysical*. This is its second characteristic, according to Nolte. As a Goddess, the *patrie* becomes the final absolute, the *summum bonum*, demanding complete devotion. She has an eternal 'soul', though her body may perish at the hands of democrats and socialists.[46] Whatever failed to correspond to the immaculate image of the Goddess had to be exposed as 'un-French' and, if possible, traced to a foreign source. This applied to the so-called 'French' Revolution and the 'enlightened' ideas that instigated it. Whether or not such ideas were supported by the majority of Frenchmen was immaterial, for 'France', the abstraction, as personified by the Goddess, was not identical with the French population. The 'soul' of the 'real' France is pure; the empirical France, on the other hand, is full of 'fools and scoundrels', resident aliens, and fifth columnists.[47] Hostility to democracy is inherent in this metaphysical concept of nationalism, for only an elite—those steeped in the unique national heritage—can distinguish what is French from what is 'foreign' in the life of the nation.

This preoccupation with enemies, both internal and external, along with the 'alien' ideas they promote, brings us to the third characteristic singled out by Nolte: Maurras's nationalism is 'emphatically reactive'.[48] It is rooted in fear and hatred. To Maurras, the Jew and the German were the prime causes of evil. Vicious anti-Semitism was so common on the European right that it requires little comment. The Jews, through their 'control' of international finance and their predilection for international socialism, were said to be attacking the sovereignty of the nation from all sides. Not being the biological progeny of the Goddess France, they were, for Maurras, naturally antagonistic to the traditions and customs that reflected or expressed the unique soul of the French nation. More intriguing was his intense loathing of everything German. The Germans, by inventing Protestantism, were responsible for the corrosive individualism that is destroying European civilization. This heretical doctrine makes the individual the one respectable object on earth and views society as an 'artifice' which has as its sole *raison d'être* the progress and the perfection of the individual. Our ancient institutions, the dogmas and

[45] C. Maurras, 'Dictator and King', in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 216.
[46] C. Maurras, *Enquête sur la monarchie* (Paris, 1914), 474. First published in 1900.
[47] Ibid. 226. [48] Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, 147.

authority of the Church—all these must be subjected to examination by free and rational individuals, who reserve the right to make their own choices.[49] In Maurras's estimation, this was the politics of primitive man, the politics of Robinson Crusoe, conceived largely in terms of isolated men who view one another with suspicion. Such 'barbaric' ideas, which were totally extraneous to the classical traditions of Athens and Rome, originated in the 'dark Teutonic forest'.[50] Protestantism and individualism were somehow 'natural' to 'the German':

> The German mind, reading the Holy Word, could not but hear in it the cry of those violent effusions of the senses that civilization attempts to moderate: the cry of love and hate, of hope and despair, of servitude and liberty, that hysterical yearning for independence of one who, in Guizot's phrase, 'flails in all directions with no other goal than his own satisfaction'. The inner turmoil let loose! This unbridled fundamentalism first of all swept away, or perhaps merely overturned, the discipline—mental, moral, aesthetic discipline—reason, law, order, taste in which was embodied all the civilizing influence of the classical spirit.[51]

Maurras detects a similarity between Jews and Germans. Both possess an anarchic, unruly spirit, governed by 'inner turmoil'. The Jews rebelled against the Roman Empire; the Germans against the Roman Church. The 'Hebrew desert' and the 'Teutonic forest' alike spawned races who wish to destroy civilization, who rage against authority. Luther, it might even be said, embodied 'the Jewish spirit'. The remote ancestors of Protestantism are therefore to be found in Jerusalem.[52] In this way, Maurras managed to unite the people he hated into one common enemy. The Nazis claimed that everything despicable was Jewish; Maurras claimed that everything despicable was both Jewish and German.

Perfectly natural to the turbulent, individualistic spirit of the Germans (and, by implication, the Jews) was the erroneous philosophy of romanticism. It is slightly puzzling that Maurras should associate romantic thinking with democracy and political rebellion. In Germany and (to a lesser extent) England, the romantic era is taken to exemplify the conservative and reactionary spirit. Nostalgia for the Middle Ages and a powerful sense of history were of course inventions of this era. In France, however, there is a tendency

[49] In spite of his contempt for freethinkers and heretics, Maurras showed no interest in dogma and even less in the Gospels—written, after all, by Jews. Almost certainly an unbeliever, he admired Catholicism for its structure and rituals—for its desire to preserve the Latin language and classical aesthetic standards, for its institutionalized system of authority, and for its centrality in French life. The Church repaid his support by placing a number of his works on the Index.

[50] Maurras, Preface to *Romanticism and Revolution*, in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 241.

[51] Ibid. 242. [52] Ibid. 241.

to trace romanticism back to 'the wretched Rousseau'—a Swiss Calvinist whose name came to epitomize radicalism.[53] Romanticism is therefore linked with everything that stands opposed to the classical tradition of order and hierarchy. Maurras always stressed the lawlessness of romantic subjectivity, the romantic fondness for innovation, the contempt for that vested order of reason and taste we have inherited from Greece and Rome. The word that sums up this restless, disordered outlook is individualism. According to the romanticist, the individual must extract from his inner being his own law. He is and must be a law unto himself. One can submit to an outer law but not *accept* it. The self is thus an exalted inner god in the face of whom traditional customs and institutions have little authority or value. Destruction is his first duty. Nothing is sacred to the romantic self other than itself and such principles as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of inquiry—principles which serve the ego and facilitate social chaos. In religion the doctrine of the ego assumes the form of Protestantism; in politics, revolution and democracy. Nationalism, needless to say, is the opposite of unrestrained egoism. A true nationalist supports the national interest, not his own penchants or repugnances. As for democracy, the political expression of the rampant ego, it makes a bonfire of the accumulated products of a nation's past, discarding them as 'outmoded' or restrictive. For Maurras, it was impossible to be a nationalist and a democrat at the same time.[54]

Maurras's integral nationalism depends upon a series of dubious equations: individualism = Germanism = Protestantism = Judaism = romanticism = democracy. This string of equivalences is made possible by a process of abstraction from reality. Each variable is defined in terms of 'essential' features that may or may not be validated by empirical observation. The word 'Jew', for example, does not just refer to a specific person or group of persons; rather, it serves as a convenient shorthand for attitudes or doctrines of which Maurras disapproves. Thus, for him, the ideas of liberty and democracy are 'Jewish' by definition. Because Protestantism undermines the integrity of Christianity, it too must be 'Jewish'. All that tends to break down national difference is 'Jewish', since the Jewish diaspora is by its very nature international. The 'German' is similarly abstract: he is defined in terms of his national 'soul', not in terms of what the German people actually think or do. Many observers comment on the German proneness to discipline and order, but Maurras decides that the German mentality is dominated by a 'hysterical yearning for independence'.[55] An essence is also ascribed to romanticism: since it celebrates inner turmoil and personal authenticity, it must be conducive to democracy and hostile to order and tradition—never mind that prominent romantic philosophers such as Coleridge and Müller were staunch conservatives in the Burkean mould.

[53] Maurras, 243. [54] Ibid. 239–51. [55] Ibid. 242.

Given his determination to ascribe metaphysical essences to concrete objects (some would describe this as a 'Germanic' trait), it is odd that Maurras heaped ridicule on the 'abstract and general nature' of Enlightenment ideas. He even repeated the point—often made by French reactionaries in the nineteenth century—that he knew 'Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans and Russians' but nowhere had he encountered 'abstract man'. The French revolutionaries had lost their heads in the 'metaphysical clouds'. How can the purpose of society be to preserve 'rights' when rights are 'inconceivable without the existence of society'? So-called natural rights are no more real than the 'ideal and absolute type of man' who supposedly possesses them. Instead of concentrating upon these 'insubstantial wraiths', the Constituent Assembly should have dealt with the 'tangible entity called France'.[56]

What Maurras refused to accept was that the 'tangible entity called France' no longer resembled the Goddess of his dreams. The tradition of the Revolution, and the idea of a pure republican democracy, which Maurras denounced as foreign, were dearer to the French people than he was willing to admit.[57] Nor did he explain how his reactionary proposals could possibly be implemented in a society undergoing rapid industrialization. In fact, it was Maurras who had lost his head in the 'metaphysical clouds'. And his relative indifference to empirical reality had implications for his critique of democracy. If one stipulates an 'essentialist' definition of French culture in terms of hierarchy, symmetry, order, and reverence for the past, then it is a truism to say that democracy will undermine it. However, if Maurras had defined French culture as a modern anthropologist might, in terms of the observable values and norms of French life, then democracy would have been an inherent part of it. The truth was not that democracy threatened French culture but that Maurras's definition of French culture excluded democracy. As we shall see, he shared this circular mode of reasoning with the Italian nationalists and fascists, whose admiration for the Frenchman was enthusiastically reciprocated.

The *direct* link between integral nationalism and fascism was established by the young Italian writers who spouted chauvinistic diatribes in a variety of avant-garde journals, including *Il regno* and *Leonardo* (both founded in 1903). Essentially, the principles of Italian nationalism were not all that different from those developed in France. However, there is no doubt that the Italians injected an extra element of dynamism into the tribalistic ideology they shared with Action Française. In large measure, this reflects the influence of Nietzsche, who achieved cult status in Italy during the early part the twentieth

[56] Ibid. 252–3.

[57] W. C. Buthman, *The Rise of Integral Nationalism: With Special Reference to the Ideas and Activities of Charles Maurras* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 331–4. First published in 1939.

century. Italy's most charismatic Nietzschean was the poet and adventurer, Gabriele D'Annunzio, who tried to exemplify the idea of the superman in his various guises as lover, aesthete, and man-of-action. In his comic-opera efforts to 'liberate' Dalmatia and Fiume, he symbolized a yearning for heroic leadership, for a politics of national glory, for escape from the vulgarity of the new plutocratic and democratic age. He was a great inspiration to the fascist *squadristi*, the hooligan element of the movement, whose mission was to terrorize their political opponents.

Nietzschean conceptions are also evident in the nationalistic rantings of Giovanni Papini, who exalts the 'heroic intensity' of existence and denounces the 'irrational respect for human life'.[58] Only 'heroic deeds and superhuman passions' can restore Italy to its former splendour, when it was 'the leading light of the world'.[59] But for a people to be 'great and powerful', it needs to understand 'the value of the supreme sacrifice'. The 'enlargement of life' requires the 'enlargement of death'. Wasting one's time in sentimentality, 'humanitarian moaning', mouthing platitudes about the sacredness of life, 'would be to deny the force of the life that is throbbing and growing and glowing all around us'. While the 'democratic mob' may see war as a 'barbarous relic of outgrown savagery', nationalists 'look on it as the greatest possible tonic to restore flagging energy, as a swift and heroic means to attain power and richness'.[60] Italian nationalists may not have been obsessed by Jews and their alleged subversion, but, in common with Maurras, they insisted that love of country logically entailed loathing of the country's 'enemies', many of whom were internal and captivated by 'alien' ideologies. Thus Papini preaches 'hatred of everything that is anti-national'.[61] Most anti-national of all, most in need of repression and destruction, is the 'democratic mentality', that 'confused medley of debased feelings, empty thoughts, defeatist phrases and brutish ideals'.[62] He reserves special contempt for the 'brutish ideals' of liberty and equality. The former encourages the blind feeling of indiscipline and revolt that is spreading throughout society. People seem to think that everybody can decide how best to conduct his life by the use of his own intelligence. This 'superstitious belief in independence' can only lead to 'the disintegration of our society'.[63] Equally subversive of national unity is 'the myth of universal equality'. For any enterprise to be successful, it needs a minority who give orders and a majority who obey: 'A people is a flock which always needs competent shepherds . . .'. Like Maurras, Papini holds the Catholic Church in great esteem because it is 'the finest example of organized hierarchy in modern times'. Also like Maurras, he wants to revive 'the noble spirit of the

[58] G. Papini, 'A Nationalist Programme' (speech delivered in 1904), in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 105–6.

[59] Ibid. 119, 116. [60] Ibid. 106–7. [61] Ibid. 103, 114.

[62] Ibid. 104. [63] Ibid. 107–8.

Middle Ages' and 'to bring our glorious aristocracy back into the life of the nation'.[64]

Given Italy's ancient republican traditions, it is hard to see why civic participation and personal liberty should be regarded as 'anti-national'. Papini adopts Maurras's method of circular reasoning. He contemplates an ideal Italy that embodies Nietzsche's heroic and hierarchical code, and then condemns democracy for besmirching this splendid image. But democracy is 'anti-national' only because Papini has defined the nation selectively, in a way that excludes democracy.

Probably the most original of Italian nationalists was Enrico Corradini, who invented the idea of Italy as a 'proletarian nation'. He was determined to transpose the class struggle to the international sphere. Just as Marx declared conflict between the property owners and the property-less to be natural in any stratified society, so Corradini saw the state of war as the natural state of relations between nations, which could also be divided into 'haves' and 'have-nots'.[65] Hence his denunciation of 'pious humanitarianism', 'idealistic pacifism', and—predictably—'the principle that human life is sacred'. Even worse, in his opinion, was 'plutocratic pacifism', founded on the principle that 'business is sacred and the be-all and end-all of everything'. In the international struggle for existence, Italy's survival could only be assured by discipline, authority, social solidarity, the sense of duty and sacrifice, and the 'warrior morality' in general.[66] Anything that made for unity and cohesion was positive: authoritarian government, the subordination of the individual to society and the collaboration of diverse social classes for the sake of national greatness. Corradini's hatred for bourgeois individualism often expressed itself as hatred for the bourgeoisie *per se*. True, socialism was a 'foul' movement led by 'despicable' and 'contemptible' people. But the 'loathsome decrepitude' of the Italian bourgeoisie—a class whose base materialism promoted a war of all against all—was equally destructive of 'the higher human and national values'.[67] The purpose of nationalism is to suppress 'factions', and this means suppressing liberal democracy, a form of plutocracy that nevertheless suffers from 'the parasitical infection of socialism'. Reformist, 'humanitarian' socialists have joined forces with bourgeois democrats to propagate a 'great lie': that a regime constituted for the 'advantage of the few' (politicians, businessmen, some trade unionists) is actually of benefit to the many. The democratic republic combines two grand forms of parasitism—'proletarian

[64] Ibid. 107, 113.

[65] E. Corradini, 'The Principles of Nationalism' (report to the first Nationalist Congress in Florence on 3 Dec. 1910), in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 146–7.

[66] E. Corradini, 'The Cult of the Warrior Morality' (speech delivered in 1913), in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 155–8.

[67] E. Corradini, Article from *Il regno* (1903), in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 137–40.

parasitism' and 'plutocratic parasitism'.[68] Corradini's alternative was 'ethnarchy' (*etnarchia*), where the 'nation', as opposed to any particular class, is sovereign. This, Corradini maintains, would be 'the truest and greatest form of democracy . . . since the beginning of time'. It would be a 'properly Italian democracy', devoid of all things 'foreign' and French, such as individual freedom and mindless egalitarianism. It would be a regime of order and authority based on natural hierarchies; a regime of producers, a regime of class collaboration, dedicated to the well-being of *all*.[69]

Corradini was sympathetic to revolutionary syndicalism, whose principal ideologist, Georges Sorel, gradually drew closer to Maurrasian nationalism. Corradini believed that the syndicalist call for 'direct action' indicated an admirable willingness to fight against the crass mercantile values of the decadent bourgeoisie. Syndicalism, like his own brand of radical nationalism, adopted Nietzsche's heroic and elitist values, and despised liberal democracy for its corruption and mediocrity. He also praised syndicalism for understanding that the nation is 'primarily an economic society', whose aim is to 'produce'. But syndicalism, in essence, was a doctrine of *class* economic solidarity, while nationalism enjoined *national* economic solidarity. Corradini sought to demonstrate the necessary identity of the interests of capital and labour. The nationalist state would 'rise above all class interests by co-ordinating and concentrating them so as to transform them into units of power'. Power would lie with the directly elected representatives of all the 'syndicates', whether of industry or labour.[70] He also insisted that Italy's status as a 'proletarian nation' put it at a distinct disadvantage in the struggle for global influence. Lacking colonies, the country was short of raw materials and captive markets for its industrial products. In order to raise itself to the level of the bourgeois nations, Italy had to contemplate war and conquest. The syndicalists, coming as they did from the extreme left, with its internationalist and anti-militarist traditions, initially found imperialism hard to swallow. Little by little, however, they came to realize that their mobilizing myth of the 'general strike' had failed to achieve its goals and that war could be the catalyst for moral renewal. They increasingly argued for national solidarity and distanced themselves from the rhetoric of class struggle. The alliance between radical nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism brought about the idea of a corporate state, one of the distinctive elements in Italian fascism's assault on 'bourgeois' democracy.[71]

[68] 'Nazionalismo e democrazia', in E. Corradini, *Scritti e discorsi: 1901–1914*, ed. L. Strappini (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 199, 202–3. This was originally a speech delivered in Rome in 1913.

[69] Ibid. 206–8.

[70] E. Corradini, 'Nationalism and the Syndicates' (speech delivered to the Nationalist Convention in 1919), in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 159, 161.

[71] Zeev Sternhell argues persuasively that this alliance was crucial to the development of fascism, and that fascism was therefore a Marxist heresy, crucially shaped by syndicalism's anti-materialist and elitist revision of Marxism. See *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially ch. 4.

Most of the prominent theoreticians and activists of 'national syndicalism' helped to found the Italian fascist movement after the Great War. Early fascist doctrine (and rhetoric) was also influenced by Marinetti and the Futurists, whose heroic and rebellious mystique fit in well with the syndicalist demand for spiritual renewal. The final piece of the jigsaw was provided when the older Nationalist Association fused with the Fascist Party in 1923. The nationalists contributed a traditionalist respect for established authority which the fascist intellectuals and *squadristi*, with their anarchic brand of nationalism and exaggerated love of novelty, usually lacked. Indeed, most of what we call fascist ideology is set out in the writings of Papini, Corradini, and other ultra-nationalists, who—as we have seen—combined the Maurrasian belief in a national 'soul' with the Nietzschean themes of heroism and will-to-power. Nevertheless, on the question of democracy, Mussolini himself, in collaboration with the idealist philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, made an important contribution.

Gentile (and, by implication, Mussolini) identified a subtle difference between fascism and nationalism. Whereas the latter doctrine regarded the nation as a 'given fact of nature' to which the individual owed obedience, it should instead be viewed as a continuous act of creation within the individual consciousness. For the nationalist, the elements which constitute the nation—land, race, history, language, religion—pre-exist the individual and determine his consciousness. The emphasis is on the past rather than the present or the future, and the individual's relationship to the national state is a passive one. Nationalism, that is to say, is backward-looking and apt to worship traditional authority structures. Fascism, on the other hand, demands not merely obedience but active identification.[72] As Mussolini phrases it, a nation's existence 'derives not from a literary and ideal consciousness of its own being, still less from a more or less unconscious and inert acceptance of a *de facto* situation, but from an active consciousness'.[73] The fascist state, Gentile informs us, is therefore a dynamic and popular state; it 'exists inasmuch as and to the extent that it is given existence by its citizens'. This is why 'the party and all the propaganda and educational institutions' must 'ensure that the ideas and will of the Duce become the ideas and will of the masses'.[74]

In the fascist lexicon, then, 'active consciousness' has nothing to do with independent thought. Yet it is true that the fascist (and Nazi) regime differed from old-style authoritarianism insofar as it encouraged mass mobilization for the purposes of national reconstruction and expansion. This fact allowed Mussolini to claim that he was creating something called 'authoritarian

[72] G. Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo* (Rome: Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura, 1934), 44–9.

[73] 'The Doctrine of Fascism', in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 43.

[74] Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, 49.

democracy'.[75] If democracy meant majority rule, if it necessitated the triumph of the lowest common denominator, then fascism was opposed to democracy. But what if society is not seen as the sum total of all individuals within it and is instead viewed as an organic whole? In that case, according to Mussolini, democracy could be understood not quantitatively but qualitatively, as the will of the few, even of One, who embody the 'real' will of all by virtue of their special insight or historical mission. Where the multitude is unified by a single idea, there is no need for periodic consultation with the majority.[76] Since the fascist state is 'founded in millions of individuals who recognize it, feel it, are ready to serve it', it has 'nothing in common with the absolutist States that existed either before or after 1789'. In the fascist state, the 'individual is not suppressed, but rather multiplied, just as in a regiment a soldier is not weakened but multiplied by the number of his comrades'.[77] And so Mussolini's regime is, in Gentile's words, 'the democratic state *par excellence*'.[78]

Some may wonder why a movement which 'affirms the irremediable, fruitful and beneficent inequality of men' should nevertheless wish to claim democratic credentials.[79] Mussolini's attempt to redefine democracy was his response to what he saw as a dilemma posed by modern society. On the one hand, it is no longer possible to govern without or against the masses, now that traditional patterns of authority have broken down. The masses are a new political reality; their needs and prejudices cannot be ignored. On the other hand, he explicitly endorsed Machiavelli's deep pessimism about human nature. Impelled by egoism, most people tend towards 'social atomism'—they evade social responsibility, break laws where possible, and do everything in their power to avoid paying taxes: 'Few are those—heroes or saints—who will sacrifice their own selves on the altar of the state.' The liberal democratic revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tried to cure social indiscipline and indifference by making all power spring from the free will of the people. But, for Mussolini, the 'sovereignty of the people' has become a 'tragic hoax', fooling only the most gullible of citizens. The perpetual threat of social decay remains in all societies, and the best response is absolute state power, concentrated in the indisputable will of a *capo*, a *principe*.[80] However,

[75] 'The Doctrine of Fascism', in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 50.

[76] Ibid. 42. [77] Ibid. 56.

[78] *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, 49. According to Andrew Hewitt, fascist theatricality—the uniforms, the overwrought speeches, the Hollywood-style choreography—can be seen as an attempt to establish 'the immanence of fascist representation' by invoking the suspension of disbelief that allows theatre audiences to identify with the characters on stage. The suppression of the parliamentary system could thus be interpreted as an expression of direct rule by the people, unencumbered by 'the bourgeois system of mediated representation'. *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 180–1.

[79] Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 49.

[80] B. Mussolini, 'Preludio al Machiavelli', *Gerarchia* (Apr. 1924).

the people must not be relegated to the periphery of the state; on the contrary, they must be made to feel that the regime gives expression to their deepest needs, including the need for order and discipline. The state must become 'the true reality of the individual'.[81] 'Duce sei tutti noi!' ('The Duce is all of us!'), a famous fascist cry, conveys the point well enough.

Emilio (as distinct from Giovanni) Gentile is substantially right to argue that Mussolini's attack on liberalism and parliamentarism was by no means rooted in reactionary beliefs such as those espoused by nostalgic nationalists. Il Duce, a former Marxist, was no great admirer of Italy's traditional institutions and hierarchies. Rather, his critique of democracy originated, says Gentile, in a kind of Machiavellian hyper-realism: disaster looms unless the naturally unruly masses are transformed, through the use of 'carrot and stick', into an 'army regiment' who wholly identify with their commanders.[82] Mussolini shared with Machiavelli a desire to mobilize the Italian people, to release them from their torpor, their passivity, their casual acceptance of mediocrity. But, *pace* Gentile, this went beyond a *mere* concern for social order. The Italian dictator's realism, like that of his Florentine mentor, was tinged with nationalistic idealism. What Mussolini feared was not the Hobbesian war of all against all; he knew that absolute government could no longer be justified in those terms. The malady brought about by liberal democracy was cultural enervation, not social chaos. Inspired by Nietzsche as well as Machiavelli, he thought that the ideal society would be governed by heroic values and inhabited by citizens who followed a strict code of discipline and willingly submitted to the rule of 'supermen'. What liberal democracy offered, instead, was 'a social state in which a degenerate mass would have no other care than to enjoy the ignoble pleasures of vulgar men'.[83] Audacity and the martial spirit, he believed, were never going to survive, much less thrive, in a climate of petty materialism and endless bargaining. Alas for Mussolini, those who do not share his futile disdain for the 'comfortable life' are unlikely to concur with his attack on liberal democracy. Where he sees cultural degeneracy, they will see tolerance, humanity, and prosperity. Like all fascist and proto-fascist thinkers, he argues in circles: democracy is bad because it is bad.

(ii) The conservative variant

Whereas fascists saw 'democratic man' as antithetical to the 'new fascist man', cultural conservatives have insisted upon a connection between the two. Liberal egalitarianism, by its incessant liberationist work on the traditional

[81] Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 42.
[82] E. Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista* (Bari: Laterza, 1975), 407.
[83] Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', in Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms*, 50.

authorities and rules in society, weakens the social structure, encourages the multiplication of 'mass-types' of human beings, and thus beckons in its way to waiting totalitarian masters. Freed from his place in a stable hierarchical order, a source of identity and security, the liberated democratic man falls prey to the primitive instincts and primal emotions of the barbarian. This argument was a twentieth-century version of the perversity thesis. But where modern conservatives have made their greatest contribution to anti-democratic thought is in their argument that liberal egalitarianism entails a coarsening of aesthetic sensibilities and threatens to destroy the intellectual and artistic refinement that creates 'high' culture. Agreeing with Tocqueville that a mania for equality goes hand in hand with obsessive materialism, they added that this devastating combination of evils would produce a cultural desert.

The most prominent exponents of this school of thought during the past century were José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, and T. S. Eliot, the Anglo-American poet and critic. Before examining their ideas, though, I would like to say a few words about their spiritual godfather, Matthew Arnold, whose classic work, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), lamented the disintegration of traditional 'organic' societies and their replacement by our 'mechanical and material civilisation'.[84] The condition of modernity, to Arnold, was one of profound sickness, the cause of which lay in the crisis of belief provoked by Enlightenment science, individualism, and liberal democracy. There was no 'center' to modern thought; men were longer nourished by a tradition of shared beliefs. An anarchic individualism had taken root, especially in liberal England. By setting up the individual as the final court of appeal, liberalism had a centrifugal effect on society. The right of everyone to do as he likes, reinforced by expansion of the franchise, has brought with it a democratic culture of contestation, in which the community's identity and purposes are constantly up for grabs. This situation of perpetual conflict and negotiation is precisely what Arnold meant by anarchy. While he was not entirely unsympathetic to *political* democracy, he could not reconcile himself to democracy as a *cultural* concept—certainly not if it meant seeing controversy as a central and constitutive feature of culture. Unlike J. S. Mill, Arnold had no faith that a society could flourish once its fundamental values were thrown open to democratic debate. Either the core values are shared by all or there is no culture in the higher normative sense: i.e. a type of culture that can promote 'the harmonious perfection of our whole being'.[85] For one thing, anarchy spells the death of intellectual and artistic standards. Moreover, the 'every man for himself' culture downgrades the spiritual connection between individuals and forces them into outward displays of their superiority. By becoming intensely

[84] *Culture and Anarchy*, 34. [85] Ibid. 15.

absorbed in particular pursuits, in the hope of impressing our neighbours, we neglect the *harmonious* expansion of our human attributes. 'Doing' has become more important than 'thinking' or 'feeling', and we see national greatness in terms of visible material wealth alone, rather than 'absolute inward peace and satisfaction'.[86] Arnold was terrified by the prospect of vulgarity enthroned and institutionalized.

Writing in 1930, Ortega concluded that Arnold's worst fears were justified:

> The command over public life exercised today by the intellectually vulgar is perhaps the factor of the present situation which is most novel, least assimalable to anything in the past. At least in European history up to the present, the vulgar had never believed itself to have 'ideas' on things. It had beliefs, traditions, experiences, proverbs, mental habits, but it never imagined itself in possession of theoretical opinions on what things are or ought to be—for example, on politics or literature . . . its action was limited to being an echo, positive or negative, of the creative activity of others.[87]

Not any more. When it comes to artistic pleasure or political judgement, the 'intellectually vulgar', the masses, are no longer willing to defer to 'qualified minorities'. The '*commonplace mind*' now has the assurance '*to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will*'.[88] Ortega is especially disturbed by the smug self-satisfaction of the 'mass-man'. He 'feels himself lord of his own existence' and refuses to appeal to external authority. He makes no demands on himself, but rests content with what he is, and is delighted with himself.[89] Being born into a liberal and prosperous society, he finds himself surrounded by 'marvellous instruments, healing medicines, watchful governments, comfortable privileges'. On the other hand, he has no conception how difficult it is to invent those medicines and those instruments and to assure their production in the future. For him, civilization is 'as spontaneous and self-producing as Nature', not something in need of tremendous effort and commitment. Since he is incapable of humility or self-discipline, he will seek to impose his own vulgar tastes and shallow preferences in every walk of life, thus precipitating a catastrophic decline in standards. Ortega contemplated the future with great anxiety: 'humanity is threatened with degeneration, that is, with relative death'.[90]

For Ortega, the term 'mass' has as much to do with the quality of human beings as with their numbers: 'The mass is the assemblage of persons not specially qualified. By masses, then, is not to be understood, solely or mainly, "the working masses".' Neither is the elite equivalent to the upper social class. The division he has in mind is between two types of people: those who make great demands on themselves, and those who demand nothing special of

[86] Ibid. 34, 35, 38.
[87] J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (London: Unwin, 1961), 54.
[88] Ibid. 13–14, emphasis in original text. [89] Ibid. 47. [90] Ibid. 68, 77–8.

themselves.[91] The former are the select few who pursue excellence and see life as a perpetual striving; the latter, the multitude, are naturally inert, 'incapable of any other effort than that strictly imposed on them as a reaction to external compulsion'.[92] Surprisingly, Ortega includes in 'the masses' people who would normally be considered well educated: scientists, technicians, doctors, engineers, specialists of all sorts. Previously, we are told, 'men could be divided simply into the learned and the ignorant . . . but your specialist cannot be brought in under either of those two categories'. He is not learned, as he is ignorant of all that does not enter into his speciality; but neither is he ignorant, for he is very knowledgeable about his 'tiny portion of the universe'. He is therefore 'a learned ignoramus', a person who is highly trained but lacking in integral culture. Nevertheless, his training induces in him an exaggerated sense of his own worth and a desire to express his views outside his own speciality. The 'barbarism' and 'stupidity' of these interventions is especially evident in politics, art, and religion, and constitute the 'immediate cause of European demoralization'. So a typical physicist, when discussing subatomic particles, is 'qualified' and must be taken seriously. In all other spheres, however, he behaves like 'the unqualified, the mass-man'.[93] The mass, on Ortega's understanding, seems to refer more to an attitude of mind than to a fixed multitude of persons. An individual who is 'specially qualified', a member of an elite, in his day job can become a 'mass-man' at the weekend—a member of 'the crowd', who considers himself 'exempt from all submission to superiors'.[94]

Some may think that Ortega was way ahead of his time. His strictures about the confusion between training and education will strike a familiar chord in observers of mass higher education as we enter the new millennium. The traditional 'man of culture' is on the verge of extinction, as is the educational philosophy that spawned him. University degrees are increasingly linked to commerce and industry; those who possess them often have little or no knowledge of their intellectual or artistic heritage. One might object to Ortega's language, but the epithet 'learned ignoramus' describes a real phenomenon of modern democratic society. Still, Ortega's attempt to establish a connection between the 'mass mind' and declining standards is woefully unspecific. What evidence is there to indicate that people try to impose their views in areas where they are ignorant? That 'the mass, without ceasing to be mass, is supplanting the minorities'?[95] To be sure, 'the average man' sometimes expresses his political views forcefully, through riots or demonstrations. But more often than not—as the classical elitists noticed—he is passive and allows the specialized minority he has elected to rule more or less undisturbed. Ortega seems

[91] J. Ortega y Gasset, 11–12. [92] Ibid. 49. [93] Ibid. 85–6.
[94] Ibid. 143. [95] Ibid. 13.

appalled by the thought that the 'mass-man', who 'accepts the stock of commonplaces, prejudices, fag-ends of ideas or simply empty words which chance has piled up within his mind', should *ever* presume to place his political 'ideas' on the same level as those of his 'natural' leaders.[96]

In the areas of 'high culture'—art, scholarship, literature, classical music—it is not even clear that the mass of people have any opinions at all, let alone ones they wish to impose. With the possible exception of modern 'conceptual' art, where works of almost laughable banality can now win prizes, these fields of endeavour have maintained traditional standards and continue to be dominated by select minorities with special qualifications. Even in modern art, the descent into vulgarity has been sanctioned by a narrow elite, not by the masses, who tend to view artistic excesses as a joke. Of course, there is a 'mass culture' which is far less refined than 'high culture', but—as yet—it has not driven out the complex works of imagination that Ortega so revered. However, we must not speak too soon. With the decline of classical educational values and the growth of an instrumental attitude to life, the audience for subtle, challenging works may eventually dwindle to nothing. The logic of democracy is to destroy elites, to search for the lowest common denominator. The democratic assumption that everyone is (in some fundamental respect) as good as everyone else could degenerate into the relativistic belief that every*thing* is as good as everything else: no cultural artefact is more beautiful or more profound or more 'valid' than any other. The postmodernist attack on 'universalism' in art and literature, for example, is conceptually linked to an egalitarian contempt for hierarchical structures of all kinds—which is why postmodernism, despite its hostility to 'grand narratives', is widely regarded as (yet another) Marxist heresy. If democracy were taken to its logical conclusion, mass taste would indeed obliterate refined taste. What apparently escapes the notice of critics of democracy like Ortega is that only an isolated minority *wants* to take democracy to its logical conclusion. The jury is still out on his predictions of cultural decline, but their verdict is unlikely to be the one he would have expected.

T. S. Eliot shared Ortega's cultural and aesthetic perspective but not his indifference to religion. Indeed, for him, culture is the *incarnation* of religion. Although he was strongly anti-democratic, he did not openly sympathize with fascism to the extent that Pound or Yeats did. In contrast to the fascists and their literary cheer-leaders, Eliot was a resolute believer in the principle of non-action and fastidiously avoided association with political movements. Nevertheless, he derived many of his opinions from the proto-fascist, Charles Maurras;[97] in particular an attachment to fixed rules, habit, and discipline. A social system embodying these values would be hierarchical and

[96] Ibid. 53.

[97] J. Harrison, *The Reactionaries* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967), 149.

differentiated—a Platonic pattern, with each individual gaining happiness from the proper exercise of his own function. Eliot's model was the medieval Europe of Dante, where the Christian Church served as the binding force of an organic community. This vision was coupled with an anti-Semitism only slightly more genteel than that of Maurras, who used the word 'Jew' as an adjective indicating monopolist and usurer. Eliot's poetry contains many unflattering references to Jews, castigating them as symbols of money-making and decadence. But Eliot's anti-Jewish feeling goes deeper than a dislike of their supposedly materialistic values and economic adventurism. He looks to the Christian Church, rather than political movements, to prevent the disintegration of civilization as we know it. Unity of religious background is necessary, he insists, to preserve the traditional order, and such unity is impossible if there are large numbers of Jews in society. Not just the presence but the freethinking of Jews strikes at the heart of Christian dogma and threatens the assumptions on which religious orthodoxy is based. Like Maurras, like Matthew Arnold, he envisaged a society that was stationary and harmonious—beautiful, because beauty was identical with the classical idea of timeless order. Cultural pluralism, predatory capitalism, democracy—all these promoted ugliness because they entailed disunity and change.

By now, it should be obvious that Eliot rejects the idea of 'Progress'. In part two of *The Dry Salvages*, he writes:

> It seems, as one becomes older,
> That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—
> Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy,
> Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
> Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.

Our modern fascination with Progress has, according to Eliot, brought us the ghastly sterility and spiritual emptiness of industrial society. In his most famous poem, *The Waste Land*, he depicts this decay, in both its outward and inward manifestations. The visual imagery of ugliness—'brown fog', 'stoney rubbish', 'a handful of dust', 'the dead tree', 'withered stumps', 'rats' alley', 'the dull canal'—is meant to reflect the psychological states of the people who inhabit the cultural wasteland of liberal democracy. Broken social bonds are represented by failures between men and women. The typist is 'bored and tired', but her young man's 'vanity requires no response' and 'makes a welcome of indifference'. When he leaves, the typist is:

> Hardly aware of her departed lover;
> Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
> 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'

With the break-up of 'organic' society, Eliot is telling us, 'organic' relationships between people have disappeared. The decay of civilization reveals itself in the difficulty of communication between individuals.

Eliot, though a confirmed traditionalist, was something of a revolutionist in poetic form and imagery. But his innovations were based on classical foundations. What he and his fellow 'modernist' poets (e.g. Yeats, Pound) rebelled against was, paradoxically, the romantic notion of the artist as rebel, projecting his personality on to the world, valuing spontaneity over conventional authority or accepted artistic forms. Eliot, by contrast, valued austerity, precision, bareness, and adherence to strict rules, in both literature and the fine arts. Following a conservative tradition stretching back to Coleridge and Hegel, he saw the arts and letters of a people as being just as much the outcome of history and tradition as is the language people speak. Even in the most individual parts of a poet's work, dead poets, his ancestors, will assert their immortality. Art, in this sense, is an organic product of the nation's cultural traditions and involves the continual extinction (not projection) of the artist's personality. The necessary link between traditional order and cultural vitality is explored at some length in Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*.[98] The main argument is that great art and literature cannot flourish in a society like ours, one that is dull, ugly, mechanical, and besotted by the idea of equality. But if society is arranged 'organically', so that each person has a definite function according to his abilities and background, great works will result from the healthy state of cultural interaction and diversity.

He begins by criticizing Matthew Arnold for portraying the 'cultured individual' as someone who, in his quest for perfection, has risen above the limitations of his social background. For Eliot, the culture of an individual is dependent upon the culture of his group or class, and the culture of his group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society. Therefore it is the culture of the society that is fundamental. If it is not 'organic', if it lacks harmony, then it will contain a disparate collection of narrow specialists in various fields, none of whom can be considered 'persons of culture'.[99] Eliot is not antagonistic to specialization as such. Only in primitive communities are the several activities of culture inextricably interwoven. As civilization grows more complex, religion, science, politics, and art become abstractly conceived apart from each other. Moreover, the functions of individuals become hereditary, and hereditary function hardens into class or caste distinction. This process of differentiation leads to the emergence of several cultural levels. On the one hand, we will get *Paradise Lost*; on the other, folk poetry. Different classes or groups will find their own level. All this is perfectly healthy as long as there is some commonality of interests, some mutual appreciation, some underlying cohesion to unite the different levels and areas of culture. This is

[98] *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962). First published in 1948.

[99] Ibid. 21–3.

why Eliot was so keen on the idea of a common religion. The decline of religious faith—a consequence of the growth of liberalism—encourages the disintegration of the national culture, and disintegration, to Eliot, spells decline. Artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from religious sensibility and vice versa. Also, in a society without common religious faith, artists may withdraw into their own distinctive world and lose all contact with ordinary people—to the detriment of both artistic endeavour and practical life.[100]

Equally damaging to culture excellence, says Eliot, is the modern dogma of egalitarianism, which, like religious scepticism, stems from the liberal preoccupation with the autonomy of the individual person. This harmful effect takes two forms. First, in an egalitarian society, positions of responsibility and influence would be filled purely on merit, and meritocracy implies an atomistic view of society. The different elites—political, artistic, scientific, philosophical, economic—would come from a variety of backgrounds, and this would tend to isolate each elite from the others. There would be little circulation of ideas; nor would there be 'those contacts and mutual influences at a less conscious level, which are perhaps even more important than ideas'.[101] Culture, Eliot reminds us, 'is not merely the sum of several activities, but a *way of life*'.[102] For this reason, the family is the primary channel of transmission of culture. Educational institutions can transmit skills and knowledge, but not the traditions and habits that invest those skills, that knowledge, with meaning. Accordingly, 'when family life fails to play its part, we must expect our culture to deteriorate'.[103] This is true at every cultural level. The best craftsmen, for example, usually learn their trade at their fathers' knees. But if we are interested in preserving the 'higher level of culture', then we must accept that its guardians and practitioners will normally be members of the 'higher' (i.e dominant) class—the only class that can impart a reverence for the past, a sense of historical continuity.[104] Eliot is a vigorous defender of the hereditary principle:

> for it may be argued that complete equality means universal irresponsibility; and in such a society as I envisage, each individual would inherit greater or less responsibility towards the commonwealth, according to the position in society which he inherited.[105]

In its own terms, Eliot's position is perfectly logical. If, as he says, the main vehicle for the transmission of culture is the family, then it follows that to ensure the transmission of culture there must be groups of families persisting from generation to generation, each in the same way of life. Meritocracy therefore equals cultural deterioration at every level.

[100] *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), 23–7.
[101] Ibid. 37–8. [102] Ibid. 41. [103] Ibid. 43. [104] Ibid. 43–4. [105] Ibid. 48.

Eliot's fear that the higher reaches of culture had been invaded by parvenus with narrow skills and little feeling for the nation's broader cultural inheritance was one he shared with Ortega. In Eliot, this fear was compounded by the conviction that 'more means worse': i.e. the greater the number of people who participate in a difficult and refined activity, the less difficult and refined it becomes:

to aim to make everyone share in the appreciation of the fruits of the more conscious part of culture is to adulterate and cheapen what you give. For it is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of the culture of the minority, that it should continue to be a minority culture.[106]

Clearly, Eliot had no faith in 'the perfectibility of man' or the growth of the human personality. He saw human potential as essentially limited. Like all reactionaries, he was a pessimist who was haunted by the tragedy and futility of life. To him, there was no point in imagining a future where all good things fit together in a state of mutual reinforcement, for our hopes and wishes were often incompatible. In an explicit statement of the jeopardy thesis, he advises the reader that if 'he finds it shocking that culture and equalitarianism should conflict, if it seems monstrous to him that anyone should have "advantages of birth"—I do not ask him to change his faith, I merely ask him to stop paying lip-service to culture'.[107]

Much of what Eliot feared has come to pass. Christian religion is even less of a binding force than it was when he wrote his *Notes* in 1948. Immigration from non-Christian countries and declining church attendance (at least in Europe) have put paid to his monocultural vision. What is more, the various cultural elites—artistic, literary, scientific, scholarly—are isolated from one another, if not from ordinary citizens, as never before. No doubt crucial features of our democratic order—tolerance, scepticism, equality of opportunity—are responsible for these fissiparous trends. Whether cultural fragmentation means cultural deterioration is another matter, however. Eliot implicitly assumes that a cultural loss can never be compensated by a cultural gain. While Christian religious faith has declined, it has been replaced by a secular 'religion' of freedom and democracy, a religion which favours diversity over unity. Is this a sign of decay? It depends on your scale of values. And does more really mean worse? Efforts to extend the appreciation of 'high culture' through mass higher education have not noticeably led to an erosion of quality at the top level. Democratic societies still produce great scientists, philosophers, poets, novelists, composers, etc. Indeed, the expansion of educational opportunities should enable us to discover more 'geniuses' than ever before, since the cultivation of natural talent is no longer hindered by

[106] Ibid. 106–7. [107] Ibid. 16.

oppressive poverty or ancient preconceptions. While so-called 'dumbing down' is an empirical fact (e.g. the decline in degree standards), it simply means that culture descends in refinement as it filters down the social scale. This may be regrettable, and aesthetically unpleasing, but it hardly heralds the death of high culture.

A more fundamental weakness of Eliot's argument, as John Harrison points out, is that he misunderstands the nature of the tradition he purports to defend. For example, he evidently admires the achievements of English literature but does not see that Shakespeare, Milton, and those who came later were the products of an essentially bourgeois and individualistic society whose logical development was in the direction of democracy, urbanization, and rampant capitalism—the very things that Eliot detested. With the exception of Dante, the 'organic' society of the Middle Ages did not spawn great literature.[108] Indeed, for all his anti-materialist posturing, the tradition and class structure that Eliot wished to preserve were necessarily those of a capitalist industrial society, albeit one with some superficial feudal residues. In a well-known critique of Eliot, Raymond Williams expressed this paradox well:

> a genuine theoretical objection to the principle and the effects of an 'atomized', individualist society is combined, and has to be combined, with adherence to the principles of an economic system which is based on just this 'atomized', individualist view. The 'free economy' . . . is the only available method of ordering society to the maintenance of those interests and institutions on which Eliot believes his values to depend.[109]

Nostalgic for a golden age of aristocracy and agrarianism, Eliot tried to uphold this vision in a setting where it was completely inappropriate.

Jeopardy Thesis (2): Democracy vs. Individual Liberty

The simplest but also the most persistent of all jeopardy arguments against democracy is that it somehow threatens individual liberty. This argument overlaps, to a degree, with the claim that the worship of democracy leads—perversely—to an all-powerful state, that attempts to make the people self-governing will instead transform them into the passive playthings of an irresponsible elite, whose arrogance, inflated by democratic legitimacy, will dwarf that of traditional elites, bound as they are by customary arrangements and habitual practices. The jeopardy thesis, however, concentrates not on the size or accountability or paradoxical logic of the supposedly democratic state

[108] *The Reactionaries*, 156.
[109] R. Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 237.

but on its tendency to destroy independent thought or uncommon lifestyles. The danger is eloquently expressed by Burke:

> Of this I am certain, that in a democracy, the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppression upon the minority, whenever strong divisions prevail in that kind of polity, as they often must; and that oppression of the minority will extend to far greater numbers, and will be carried on with much greater fury, than can almost ever be apprehended from the dominion of a single sceptre. In such a popular persecution, individual sufferers are in a much more deplorable condition than in any other. Under a cruel prince they have the balmy compassion of mankind to assuage the smart of their wounds; they have the plaudits of the people to animate their generous constancy under their sufferings; but those who are subjected to wrong under multitudes, are deprived of all external consolation. They seem deserted by mankind; overpowered by a conspiracy of their whole species.[110]

A few decades later, Tocqueville—as we saw in Chapter 2—referred to this phenomenon as the 'tyranny of the majority' and linked it to—in his words—'a depraved taste for equality', which impels the weak and the ordinary to reduce the powerful and the exceptional to their own level, and induces 'men to prefer equality in slavery to inequality with freedom'.[111] Behind the apparently anarchic impulses of modern democracy are social forces for conformity and dependence that encourage the growth of an over-mighty state. In particular, the elimination or (as in America) absence of traditional authorities leads to social isolation and debilitating feelings of insecurity. In such a condition, citizens find it difficult to resist the pull of public opinion, which mirrors the combined prejudices of a majority of their equals.[112]

John Stuart Mill, a liberal committed to democratic reform, nevertheless acknowledged the tyrannical potential of universal suffrage. He pointed out that before the large-scale establishment of democratic regimes, it was generally assumed that, if the people were ruling in their own interests, it would be impossible for political oppression to exist. How could the people oppress themselves? But, as Mill indicates, the fallacy here is to think of the people as a homogeneous mass with a single interest, each person affected in the same way by each policy. Since we are not like this, since—to quote Burke—'strong divisions prevail', since our goals and interests differ, it is easy to see how the majority could exercise a pitiless form of oppression that crushes down or annihilates every opposing group. A pertinent point made by Mill is that majority tyranny need not operate 'through the acts of the public authorities'. In a democratic system, the tyrant may be not the state but 'society

[110] E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. C. Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 229.

[111] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. i, ed. P. Bradley (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 56.

[112] See Chapter 2.

collectively over the separate individuals who compose it'. Even Victorian Britain, with its liberal political regime, suffers from a form of 'social intolerance' which 'kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion'. Social tyranny, Mill argues, can be 'more formidable than many kinds of political oppression', since it penetrates into the 'details of life' and enslaves 'the soul itself'.[113]

There is, of course, a connection between the argument that democracy endangers cultural standards and the argument that democracy imperils individual liberty. Both variants of the jeopardy thesis manifest a fear of 'the unreflecting passions of the multitude'.[114] To critics of mass democracy, the ignorance and prejudices of the vulgate are no bad thing within the confines of a hierarchical and traditional society, where public affairs and cultural life remain safely in the hands of educated elites. Indeed, for Burke, the ingrained attitudes and unthinking behaviour of the 'swinish multitude' were a benign force for stability and continuity. The problem arises when those who make no intellectual or spiritual demands upon themselves presume to direct and control those who do. Democracy was never meant to be like this. Its early defenders assumed that ordinary people, afforded the opportunity to be self-governing, would become rational, tolerant, informed citizens, calmly reflecting on the various alternatives before them. Critics of democracy dismiss this image as a victory of hope over experience. One of their number, José Ortega y Gasset, wrote in 1930 that the main characteristic of our democratic age is 'not that the vulgar believes itself super-excellent and not vulgar, but that the vulgar proclaims and imposes the rights of vulgarity, or vulgarity as a right'.[115] In his estimation, the classic expression of the 'rights of vulgarity' is the lynch mob, then so popular in the USA, that 'paradise of the masses'.[116] Direct action of this sort, mob rule, has now become an acceptable form of political intervention, affirms Ortega. The mass man, essentially incapable of coherent thought, has no desire to engage in rational debate; he simply wishes to *impose* his opinions. Traditional formalities and careful reasoning yield pride of place to ideology ('appetites in words') and violence.[117] Fascism, says Ortega, is a totally predictable outcome of the new mentality. While Mussolini may have ridiculed democratic egalitarianism, he was himself living proof of its potency—a vulgar man, pleased with himself, and impatient of any external standards that might impose constraints on his will.[118] It is supremely ironic, notes Ortega, that the state Mussolini urged his fellow Italians to worship was built up not by him but precisely by the ideas and forces he was supposedly

[113] J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government* (London: Dent, 1910), 68, 93.

[114] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, i. 283.

[115] Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 53. [116] Ibid. 89.

[117] Ibid. 56. [118] Ibid. 56, 93.

combating: by liberal egalitarianism. For the 'mass man' of modern democracy exhibits an insatiable desire to surrender his autonomy to the state:

> When the mass suffers any ill fortune or simply feels some strong appetite, its great temptation is that permanent, sure possibility of obtaining everything—without effort, struggle, doubt, or risk—merely by touching a button and setting the mighty machine in motion.

Society, that it may live better, creates the state as an instrument. Then the state, reflecting majority whims and prejudices, gradually absorbs all spontaneous social effort. Individuals begin to live for the state rather than vice versa. When Mussolini proclaimed, 'All for the State; nothing outside the State; nothing against the State', he was merely taking democracy to its logical destination: the destruction of individual freedom.[119]

The reader will notice by now the emergence of a regular pattern: many critics of democracy predict dire consequences by exposing the unappealing logic of majority rule. The unrestrained application of the democratic principle, they warn us, must mean that the barbaric tastes and attitudes of the masses will eventually triumph in every walk of life. Traditional standards, excellence in its manifold forms, individual or group initiative must all fall by the wayside as we ritualistically bow before 'King Demos' (Pareto's term). But it is worth repeating that democracy is never taken to its logical conclusion. Society continues to be differentiated in terms of wealth and achievement. Elites stubbornly remain in power, spontaneous social action refuses to disappear, the diverse and independent forces and institutions of civil society continue to thrive. In an interesting variant of classical elitist analysis, the American political scientist, Robert Dahl, demonstrated that 'majority tyranny is mostly a myth', for the simple reason that 'the majority cannot rule'. Because of widespread apathy, interest groups with intense preferences will set the agenda in different areas of public policy. The diversity of, and competition between, these groups makes 'the tyranny of the majority' an impossibility. Dahl assures us that what he calls 'polyarchy', or 'government by minorities', safeguards our freedom more surely than any constitutional checks and balances.[120]

While Dahl was basically correct, even he later realized that his analysis was a little complacent.[121] Majority tyranny is not the sole type of oppression in a democracy. Vast concentrations of private power, or the irresponsible behaviour of private individuals, can also curtail personal freedom. State intervention is often necessary to deal with these threats to the individual. Regulations

[119] Ibid. 92–4.

[120] R. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 133–45.

[121] See, for example, his *After the Revolution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

and restrictions—laws in general—are as likely to enhance as to diminish liberty. Laws to extend the rights of employees, for example, may seem oppressive to employers, but their workers are certain to welcome such laws as a form of liberation. Those who believe that democracy undermines freedom generally ignore this reality and assume that every act of the state reduces the scope for individual action. However, champions of democracy tend to err in the opposite direction. Sometimes they simply define the problem away, by invoking a 'positive' or 'republican' concept of freedom, equating it with active participation in the political life of the community.[122] Thus understood, freedom could never clash with democracy. But, in the main, they claim that any attack on the prerogatives or bank balances of the privileged and anti-social minority *ipso facto* increases freedom for the less privileged and socially responsible majority—and must therefore be a small step towards human emancipation. This line of reasoning is far from persuasive. State interference will often produce a net gain in human freedom, but not necessarily. Such calculations are, by their very nature, complicated and subjective. There is no denying, however, that some rules and regulations are primarily designed to restrict rather than expand our range of personal choice. Banning things, for example, may be popular and justified, but how can such laws *not* engender a net loss of individual freedom? Paradoxical though it may seem, democracy and bureaucratic control are natural companions—in practice if not in principle. While the fears of Tocqueville, Ortega, and their ilk may have been exaggerated, they were right to remind us that the 'sovereignty of the people' is not always compatible with the sovereignty of the individual. The simplicity of this point in no way detracts from its cogency and enduring relevance.

Jeopardy Thesis (3): Democracy vs. Economic Efficiency

The idea that democracy will impoverish the nation may seem counterintuitive, given our 'post-communist' tendency to assume that democracy brings prosperity. But until recently, it was far from uncommon to link popular government with economic enfeeblement. We have already seen how Pareto thought that society's fiscal resources would be depleted by the 'democratic' politician's need to 'buy-off' strategically placed interests. Money that could be used for productive investment would be squandered in government spending and immediate consumption. Eventually, the politicization of the

[122] Isaiah Berlin famously explored the distinction between 'positive' ('freedom to') and 'negative' ('freedom from') liberty in his 1958 inaugural lecture at Oxford, entitled 'Two Concepts of Liberty'; reprinted in Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), ch. 3.

economy would bring about terminal decline and hasten the demise of the parliamentary system.[123]

Pareto was a free-market liberal, but similar arguments were advanced by authoritarian traditionalists, including Charles Maurras, who—in a most un-Paretian manner—denounced 'international speculators' and the 'abuses of the private ownership of capital', and wished to protect national industry and national labour 'against the inroads of foreign industry and foreign labour'.[124] For him, democracy was a vicious system of mediocrity, sacrificing quality to quantity. Because most people lack the power of reflection, political appeals are made *via* simplistic formulas and generalizations.[125] Worse, the democratic conception of society as a contract of wills creates a state of atomistic division where every individual seeks the best 'deal' for himself. The public interest yields to immediate and selfish interests. The voter begs favours from the deputy, the deputy begs favours from the minister, the minister begs votes from the deputy, the deputy begs votes from the elector. Elections are won by those who have perfected the techniques of bribery: 'the resources of the nation are put to the sack. Useless expenditure, electorally inspired, increases daily and the revenue declines for the same reasons . . . Our financial power is dissipated to satisfy the electoral clientele of influential deputies and senators.' What is just as debilitating, opposition parties have an incentive to 'provoke the greatest possible number of scandals and disasters', thus causing governments to fall with a rapidity that is detrimental to economic stability: 'What department store or corner shop, what vegetable stall or shoeshine stand would survive this continual and systematic change of management?' The combination of wasteful public expenditure and ceaseless electoral turbulence will, Maurras informs us, cause industry and commerce to dwindle.[126] In his view, these defects were not lamentable but remediable departures from the norms of parliamentary government; rather, they were inherent in the system itself. Democracy *meant* a regime of immediate gratification, negligent of the future and unmindful of the lessons of the past.

As an advocate of protectionism and controlled markets, Maurras saw nothing essentially wrong with subjecting the economy to political considerations—provided that the considerations in question were determined outside elected parliaments. But the belief in a natural antagonism between democracy and economic productivity has normally been propounded by free-market liberals, who would deplore Maurras's mystical reverence for the state. Their most celebrated exemplar, F. A. von Hayek (born 1899 in Austria), started out as an economist but soon applied his deductive method to

[123] See Chapter 3. [124] 'Dictator and King', in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 233.
[125] C. Maurras, *La Contre-révolution spontanèe* (Paris, 1943), 112.
[126] 'Dictator and King', in McClelland (ed.), *The French Right*, 221–5.

questions of political philosophy. In attempting to derive certain political and economic institutions from the universal features of human action, he revived the classical liberal tradition and inspired a new generation of liberal individualists. While they are not, by and large, overtly hostile to democracy, and—indeed—tend to view it as a better guarantor of market freedoms than any dictatorial alternative, they recognize that democracy affords a permanent temptation to interfere with the workings of the market for political purposes. Their ideal is therefore a democracy with built-in restraints on collective activity. Where such restraints are weak, democracy, it is feared, will destroy economic efficiency (in the sense of an optimal use of the factors of production).

Being of the classical variety, the 'new' liberalism rejects the 'constructivist rationalism' of Voltaire and Rousseau and instead stresses the beneficial social effects of evolution and spontaneous order. For the first systematic expression of spontaneity, we must thank the philosophers of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment, particularly David Hume and Adam Smith. Hume's attack on the pretence of reason was designed to demonstrate that appropriate rules and institutions emerge by a process of gradual evolution (historical trial and error, if you like) rather than by deliberate plan. Smith gave the argument a specifically economic twist by describing how the coordinating mechanism of the market, operating through a benign self-interest, automatically promoted a desirable end (prosperity) which was no part of anyone's deliberate intentions.

The idea of a natural and spontaneous order based on free exchange is central to the classical liberal critique of modern democracy. The constructive rationalist, as Hayek points out, believes that order must be created through the *commands* of political superiors, whether these be monarchs or popularly elected legislative chambers. Such an order, Hayek maintains, can be neither efficient nor free. (For him, these two things are intertwined.) In a complex society, knowledge (or information) is dispersed among millions of actors, each one of whom can be acquainted only with that knowledge which affects him personally. The idea that social and economic knowledge (of production costs, consumer tastes, prices, and so on) can be centralized is an epistemological absurdity to Hayek. Better then to adopt a system of social organization that allows the maximum amount of personal freedom. Free individuals, using the market as a discovery procedure, can respond quickly and sensitively to the demands of their fellows, and to the unknowable consequences produced by the infinite number of transactions that take place in a complicated social whole.[127] An order created by command simply cannot

[127] F. A. von Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 162.

maximize the benefits of human interaction. Any governmental 'command' will necessarily impose some unitary conception of relative 'merits' or 'needs', thereby restricting spontaneous human action and disrupting the 'natural' flow of knowledge as well as the 'natural' adaptations to it.[128] A familiar example of how state intervention can impair efficiency is rent control, which by placing a ceiling on prices reduces the supply of rented accommodation—which, in turn, reduces labour mobility. Another example, at the micro-level, is government support for industries which would otherwise be eliminated, and the factors of production associated with them reallocated, by spontaneous market mechanisms. These and similar cases illustrate, to the satisfaction of Hayek and other classical liberals, the point that decentralized market processes exhibit a greater 'rationality' than could be achieved by centralized control systems. For liberal political economists, any dislocations and breakdowns in the market system can occur only through impediments to the exchange process—i.e. distortions of the signalling function of the market, which would otherwise direct factors of production to their most efficient use. It is government intervention, then, that prevents the flexibility and rapid response to changing circumstances that the evolutionary process of adaptation requires.

However, this is not to deny that governmental action can be beneficial in certain areas. 'In no system that could be rationally defended', says Hayek, 'would the state just do nothing.'[129] Apart from preserving law and order and enforcing contracts, a liberal state will do a great deal to promote competition, by voiding all agreements in restraint of trade, for example. Classical liberals also recognize the non-coercive *service* functions of government. The market mechanism, it is admitted, cannot satisfy *all* needs, and government should intervene (*a*) to help those who, through misfortune or personal failings, are unable to earn a living wage, and (*b*) to provide so-called 'public goods', such as defence, education, clean air, which—though desired by everyone—must be supplied collectively since no private supplier of such goods could make enough profit to justify his expenses.[130] But, generally speaking, the prevailing attitude to the state is one of hostility. Unlike traditionalists or Hegelians or fascists or social democrats, classical liberals refuse to see the state as some kind of natural entity, with a life of its own. Instead, they see it as little more than an artificial device for transferring income from one group to another. If it is not to be a hindrance to economic well-being, its activities must be kept to a bare minimum.

The crucial assumption is that predictability and regularity in social

[128] Ibid. 165. [129] *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944), 29.

[130] There are a few extreme libertarians (anarcho-capitalists) who do not accept the need for the state. Prominent among them is Murray Rothbard, who makes his case with admirable clarity in *For a New Liberty* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1973).

arrangements can exist without central direction and control. It is therefore necessary to specify constraints on political action. The classical liberal ideal of law is that it should be a general body of rules which enables individuals to pursue their own freely chosen ends in a climate of security. These rules must be 'purpose-independent' in the sense that no one person or group's purposes should override those of other persons or groups. The liberal society, that is to say, has no end itself, save that it should maintain the framework for a variety of ends to be pursued with a minimum of frustration. The overall order is *facilitated* by rules of law, not directly created by them. As these rules have a negative cast, delineating a private sphere where individuals are protected from coercion by other individuals or by the state itself, they must, in Hayek's influential analysis, be distinguished from 'commands'. The latter are *directive*; they are addressed to particular individuals and are intended to produce a state of affairs that is determined by the person or persons issuing the command. In contrast, general rules 'are abstracted from all particular circumstances of time and place and refer only to such conditions as may occur anywhere at any time'.[131] Since these rules inhibit the actions of others, they provide individuals with a degree of certainty that they can take into account when deciding how they will act. When people obey commands, they follow other people's ends, but when they act within the laws or rules that sustain the 'spontaneous order',[132] they follow their own. The key point is that the resulting outcome, or 'pattern', is not the intended result of one mind, or one 'collective mind', but the unintended consequence of the activities of innumerable individuals who are dedicated to their own separate goals and interests.

Given the fact that classical liberalism denies the right of the state or society to impose collective ends on individual choosers, any attempt by government to achieve distributive or social 'justice' must be illicit. A government is rarely justified in employing coercion except in the enforcement of general procedural rules, and it therefore has no right to promote substantive ideals or to redistribute wealth and privileges in accordance with politically determined criteria. Hayek and other liberals have developed a political economy where the requirements of economic efficiency and those of good government are identical.

Since democracy, on its most basic definition, implies the imposition of majority preferences, it cannot in principle guarantee submission to the demands of the classical liberals. Democracy *in practice* has never fought shy of redistributing wealth, and some would see this as its *raison d'être*. Hayek,

[131] F. A. von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 150.

[132] F. A. von Hayek, *The Confusion of Language in Political Thought* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 15.

for his part, denies that free-market liberals are anti-democratic: 'it is not democracy but unlimited government that is objectionable'. He distinguishes liberalism as 'a doctrine about what the law ought to be' from democracy as 'a doctrine about the manner of determining what will be the law'. Liberalism and democracy agree that the majority should determine what is law, but they conflict where the democrat believes that the majority determines what is *good* law. Democracy is a method which must be judged by what it achieves, whereas liberalism is a belief-system concerning the scope and purposes of government.[133] Hayek, in effect, is positing a hierarchy of values according to which democracy is subordinate to liberal ideals of freedom and limited government. Of course, most modern democrats would readily acknowledge the priority of basic rights and principles over majority preferences. But it must be remembered that Hayek's liberalism is restrictive in the extreme: only the most basic and uncontroversial public goods should be delivered collectively. Ideally, the government should devote itself exclusively, or almost exclusively, to the enforcement of general rules which are 'directed to unknown people . . . abstracted from all particular circumstances of time and place'.[134] As most laws extend government activity and redistribute benefits and burdens from one group to another, it is clear that legislators in a classical liberal parliament would have much free time on their hands. In Hayek's terminology, democracy, as it has evolved, is a type of 'command' theory, resting on the assumption that beneficial human arrangements are mainly due to deliberate collective action. There is an objective contradiction between this assumption and the core assumption of classical liberalism: that beneficial order results from spontaneous reciprocity rather than the pursuit of common purposes. Modern democracy may have originated in liberal individualism, but it by no means follows that the two doctrines are, in all circumstances, mutually supportive. While market liberals have always been suspicious of democracy, the growth of the welfare state after 1945 turned suspicion into despair. Without renouncing democracy as such, they issued a direct challenge to the post-war consensus that Keynesian demand-management politics and economic growth were not just compatible but almost providentially reinforced each other.

Hayek and his followers argued that the operation of simple majority-rule democratic procedures was preventing the emergence of the public interest, defined by liberals as the achievement of maximum economic prosperity. Traditional democratic theory made the rather optimistic assumption that individual citizens would, as a rule, vote for the public interest. Individual rationality was somehow identified with the pursuit of 'objective' communal ends rather than with the calculation of the means necessary for the successful

[133] *The Constitution of Liberty*, 403. [134] Ibid. 150.

realization of subjectively chosen ends. But classical liberalism—the liberalism of 'possessive individualism', as C. B. Macpherson would have it—views individuals as maximizers of their private utilities. The inference is that rational self-interest will drive the citizen to vote for his immediate personal or group interests at the expense of the public interest. This is because the benefits that accrue from policies sanctioned by this noble principle are remote and long-term in their effect, and thinly spread across the members of the community. However, the benefits from the securing of a particular privilege are immediate and tangible. What liberals have in mind here are privileges granted to politically favoured interests, in the form of tax relief, exemption from general rules of law (e.g. trade union immunities), direct subsidies (e.g. welfare payments), and protective tariffs for politically significant industries to shield them from the natural forces of the market. Taken individually, all of these programmes and policies will have a small effect on the functioning of a free society, but in the aggregate they constitute a destructive force on the structure of the market. According to this liberal argument, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that political leaders are themselves utility-maximizers, like everyone else. Electoral success requires parties to form coalitions of interests by offering 'bribes' to various groups across the political spectrum. Politicians resemble entrepreneurs who must appeal to the desires and whims of the consumers. Thus there is a kind of *political* market, a competition for votes that may be seen as analogous to economic competition. Why, then, is there no political equivalent of Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', benignly integrating the actions of self-seeking agents to form a rational whole? The decisive difference, we are told, is that the ambitions of politicians, unlike those of entrepreneurs in private markets, are subject to no immediate budget constraint. Competition between firms for the favour of the consumer is controlled by the threat of bankruptcy hanging like a sword of Damocles over any entrepreneur who misjudges the market. Things are different in the public sphere. The acceptance of budget deficits means that bribes to the electorate do not have to be immediately paid for in terms of increased taxation. Governments can finance their vote-winning strategies by borrowing and/or inflation, the pains of which are experienced only by subsequent generations. Neither politicians nor voters have any incentive to seek the public interest. Debilitating interest rates, diminished private investment, and devalued currencies are therefore inherent in the system of competitive democracy. For there will always be more interest groups demanding political action that culminates in government expansion than those demanding financial probity and personal responsibility.[135] The pessimism of the market liberals seemed to grow in direct proportion to the size

[135] For a seminal statement of these themes, see S. Brittan, 'The Economic Contradictions of Democracy', *British Journal of Political Science*, 5 (1975).

of the state. Mancur Olson, a liberal economist renowned for his application of rational-choice techniques to the study of politics, predicted a spiral of economic decline. He argued that group bargaining—seen as a source of benign order by pluralist democrats—had in fact attenuated market processes, impeded economic growth, and led to a gradual atrophying of society's productive forces. As he colourfully put it, pressure groups, an intrinsic component of modern democracy, behave like 'wrestlers struggling over the contents of a china shop'.[136]

During the 1970s there emerged an interesting variant of the market liberal argument, according to which incessant political intervention undermined not capitalism but political stability. In this form, the jeopardy thesis was invoked to persuade us that democracy posed a serious threat to democracy—which was another way of saying that democracy suffered from internal contradictions. The malaise then afflicting key Western countries moved a number of political analysts to speak of a 'governability crisis' caused by 'governmental overload'. Speaking for America, the Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington, lamented a '*substantial increase in governmental activity and a substantial decrease in governmental authority*'.[137] What, then, was the nature of this growth in state activity, or 'overload', that produced such a dismal consequence? Huntington pointed to the massive increase in spending on health, education, and welfare during the 1960s, which raised social expectations beyond the capacity of any government to fulfil them.[138] In general, 'overload' was attributed to the propensity of voters to see government as a provider of unlimited benefits irrespective of economic considerations. Ambitious politicians, with their inflated promises and reckless disregard for long-term outcomes, had managed to spread the idea that government could deliver prosperity and benefits costlessly, and that it was only ill will or incompetence that prevented it from so doing.

The 'overload' thesis suffered from a lack of rigour. There was never, for example, any clear delineation of what constituted a 'governability crisis'. How widespread must disaffection or disorder be before a country is declared 'ungovernable'? Even if we leave this consideration aside and accept the existence of a correlation between hyperactive government and supposed 'ungovernability', it does not follow that the former *caused* the latter. Other candidates for this causal role include the Vietnam war and the consequent proliferation of left-wing ideas, dissatisfaction with the spiritual emptiness of the consumer society, or a feeling that the prosperity of the post-war boom

[136] M. Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 44.

[137] M. J. Crozier, S. P. Huntington, and J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 64. Emphasis in original.

[138] Ibid. 73.

was not being evenly distributed. In the American case, we can add the Watergate scandal and the growing self-confidence of blacks, following the successful campaign for anti-discrimination legislation. At any rate, the 'ungovernable' democracies managed to survive without major breakdowns or permanent damage, and the idea of a 'governability crisis' quickly vanished from the scene.

The sudden disappearance of the 'overload thesis' does not in itself undermine the market liberal case against democracy. Remember, Hayek, Olson, and their like were (and are) primarily concerned with economic growth rather than political stability. That their analysis contained a measure of truth was confirmed by its appeal to theorists at the opposite end of the political spectrum. In the early 1970s, James O'Connor, a Marxist, argued that the 'capitalist state' was involved in 'two basic and often mutually contradictory functions'. On the one hand, it has an 'accumulation function', which means that it must create the appropriate conditions for capital investment and formation; on the other, the state must fulfil a 'legitimation function', which requires it to bind citizens to the existing order by providing acceptable standards of security, consumption, health, and education. The first function calls for low public spending, low taxes, and punishment for failure; the second calls for high public spending, high taxes, and compassion for the weak or the unsuccessful. O'Connor sounds just like a market liberal when he explains that the 'accumulation of social capital and social expenses is a highly irrational process from the standpoint of administrative coherence, fiscal stability, and potentially profitable private capital accumulation'.[139] Of course, O'Connor (along with other Marxists and neo-Marxists[140]) welcomed this 'contradiction' whereas the market liberals deplored it. But when people with diametrically opposed perspectives see the same thing, it would be foolish to dismiss the thing in question as imaginary. By the 1990s, even politicians of the (moderate) left came to recognize that there were limits to public spending and that the relentless expansion of the state was reducing economic initiative and flexibility. Perhaps the proudest achievement of the new consensus is European Monetary Union, whose most salient purpose is to impose external constraints on government expenditure.

But in paying tribute to the market liberal case, we are already signalling its limitations. For it appears that democracy is perfectly capable of curbing its appetite for economically dysfunctional intervention by the state. In other words, there is no *inherent* incompatibility between economic dynamism and contemporary democratic practices. If there were, it is hard to understand how Western countries could have become so wealthy. The idea that democ-

[139] J. O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1972), 6, 10.
[140] See e.g. J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

racy impedes economic progress is as old as the idea of democracy itself. Ever since universal suffrage first appeared on the political agenda, liberals have delivered anxious warnings about its dire effects on our material well-being. Listen to Sir Henry Maine, writing in 1886:

> Universal suffrage, which today excludes free trade from the United States, would certainly have prohibited the spinning jenny and the power loom; it would certainly have forbidden the threshing machine.[141]

How absurd this now sounds. Democracy notwithstanding, technological development has proceeded apace. While voters have often demanded public intervention to protect their jobs or their industries or their environment, the general trend has been towards innovation and liberalization. No doubt market liberals would argue that we would all be richer if the state never, or hardly ever, interfered with the operation of markets. But this is a proposition that remains in the realms of theoretical speculation; there is no empirical evidence to support it. Indeed, consideration of the facts—the unparalleled wealth of the Western democracies, despite massive public spending and regulation—suggests otherwise. The matter can be brought into focus by reference to O'Connor's two functions of the state. Are they necessarily contradictory? If the state did not remedy or mitigate the grievances and dislocations caused by the capitalist system, if it did not successfully carry out its 'legitimation function', would the system have survived? Democratic states are in a position to serve their 'accumulation function' only because the class of wage-earners refused to take Marx's advice. Who would gainsay, moreover, that secure, healthy, and well-educated workers are more productive than miserable, frail, and ignorant ones? It may be that the market could have alleviated the condition of the workers on its own, but its failure to do so is why governments intervened in the first place. At any rate, extensive state regulation and provision has manifestly not prevented the Western democracies from enjoying living standards that are, by any comparison, spectacularly high.

None of this means that there can *never* be a tension between democracy and economic efficiency. In any system dependent on popular support, resources will be allocated according to political as well as economic criteria. The efficient production of goods will never be the sole standard for the conduct of public policy. But the market liberal version of the jeopardy thesis is just too crude to capture the complexities of the situation. Democracy has several aspects and effects, some of which may be conducive to productive efficiency while others may be at cross-purposes with it. In addition, democracy may have different consequences at different periods in its development.

[141] H. S. Maine, *Popular Government: Four Essays* (New York: Henry Holt, 1886), 35–6.

It may, for example, initially facilitate capital accumulation but later come into conflict with it. Why should a mutually beneficial relationship turn sour? As is well known, state intervention is a cumulative and self-generating process. Experience tells us that the public sector contains internal mechanisms of expansion that are fuelled by the public's fondness for political solutions to problems. Eventually, the strain on the economy leads to conflict, in much the same way as marriages descend into bitterness and recriminations when one partner becomes too demanding. However, recent experience also confirms that the pressures leading to the growth of the state can be checked when they become blatantly counter-productive. Was this volte-face the result of sudden illumination, a spontaneous transformation of ideas, or were deeper structural trends at work? The evidence seems to point in one direction. The present reluctance to finance public spending by inflation is largely explained by the globalization of competition and markets, which (as we saw in Chapter 3) has greatly diminished the independence of supposedly sovereign states. If our democratic procedures now pose no threat to economic efficiency, this is primarily attributable to the fact that democratic electorates have an increasingly confined range of choice. For countries that wish to compete in the global market-place, printing money to pay for more generous benefits and services is no longer a serious option. To the extent that the futility thesis is true, it undermines the jeopardy thesis.

Again, we see that those who deploy the jeopardy thesis against democracy endow the object of their fears with awesome powers it does not possess. Democracy cannot obliterate traditional attachments or patterns of thought. Neither can it eliminate the need for hierarchies or do away with the economic constraints on human activity. The nightmare of a uniform and oppressive democratic order, culturally sterile and economically impoverished, will never become reality. Democracy is less of a danger than the jeopardy thesis claims because it can only ever be realized in attenuated form. It is destined to remain a mere 'copy' of its Platonic 'Idea', for it will always exist in uneasy compromise with the values it is supposed to destroy.

5

Conclusion

In *An Enemy of the People*, the play's hero, Dr Stockmann, harangues an excited assembly of his fellow citizens:

The majority *never* has right on its side. Never, I say! That is one of these social lies against which an independent intelligent man must wage war. Who is it that constitutes the majority of the population in a country? Is it the clever folk or the stupid? I don't imagine you will dispute the fact that at present the stupid people are in an absolutely overwhelming majority all the world over. But, good lord!—you can never pretend that it is right that the stupid folk should govern the clever ones! [*Uproar and cries*] Oh yes—you can shout me down, I know! but you cannot answer me. The majority has *might* on its side—unfortunately; but *right* it has *not*. I am in the right—I and a few other scattered individuals. The minority is always in the right.[1]

Henrik Ibsen wrote these words in 1882, when it was still respectable to demonize 'the majority'. But it is intriguing that those who watch or read *An Enemy of the People* continue to identify with the good doctor and regard his crusade against 'the crowd' as eminently moral. This illustrates an oddity of modern life. Almost everyone believes in democracy and deems it a necessity—but only up to a point. Even the most committed democrats do not want their private lives or personal finances subjected to the scrutiny of the mass public. I know of no one, moreover, who thinks that academic promotion or honours in the world of arts and letters should be based on popularity. In the UK, there are many who argue that political life should be brought closer to the people, but not a single one of these radicals, I feel sure, would wish the question of capital punishment to be decided by referendum. A curious disjunction between theory and practice is also evident in the United States, where people who describe themselves as progressive democrats exhibit a remarkable disposition to transfer power from democratically elected legislatures to unelected judges, whenever the latter seem more likely to come up with the 'right' answer. In all countries, the consensus in favour of democracy would disappear overnight if the democratic principle were extended to the

[1] H. Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, in *The Best Known Works of Ibsen* (New York: Bartholomew House, no date given), 139.

governance of business enterprises. In truth, our supposed love affair with democracy is conditional upon its being limited or circumscribed by other values: efficiency, privacy, excellence, justice, and so on. Pure democrats, urging slavish subordination to the 'popular will', are hard to find.

But critics of democracy have been transfixed by the abstract logic and model of democracy. They have, by and large, refused to contemplate the possibility that something called 'democracy' could enjoy a symbiotic or even a stable relationship with traditional values and practices. This is why some of them (the normative critics) predicted varying degrees of disaster, while others (the empirical critics) predicted that old oligarchic habits would never die. Following Hirschman's suggestion, I have claimed that the arguments advanced by these critics fall into three main categories: perversity, futility, and jeopardy. Reflection on these categories reveals that they all invoke—albeit in different ways—the idea of unanticipated consequences, the idea that the social world resists our conscious control and mocks our confident expectations. The perverse effect is a special and extreme case of the unintended consequence. Here the failure of foresight of ordinary human actors is catastrophic, as their actions are shown to produce precisely the opposite of what was intended. The ancestry of the perverse effect goes right back to ancient Greek mythology, where man's arrogance is punished by defeat and disaster. This is the classic Hubris–Nemesis sequence. The Gods, as vigilant Guardians of the existing order and its sacred mysteries, frustrate our insolent human aspirations.[2] When futility rather than perversity is invoked, the unintended side effects simply cancel out the original action, instead of going so far as to generate a result that is the reverse of the one that was intended.[3] The perversity thesis has recourse to Divine Providence, or else to what Machiavelli called *Fortuna*, the unfathomable concatenation of events and circumstances that prevent human beings from moulding the world to suit their objectives. For the futility thesis, on the other hand, human actions are shown to be irrelevant because they fall foul of certain social laws, invariant regularities that are susceptible of rational comprehension. As Hirschman points out, the perverse effect has an affinity to myth and religion and to the belief in fate, whereas the futility argument is 'tied to the subsequent belief in the authority of science and particularly to the nineteenth-century aspiration to construct a social science with laws as solid as those that were then believed to rule the physical universe'.[4]

[2] A. O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 37.

[3] Hirschman claims that the futility thesis is a case not of unintended consequences but of no consequences at all. However, neither Mosca nor Pareto ever said that universal suffrage would literally engender ' "null" effect'—and, in any case, the absence of expected consequences is itself an unexpected consequence. See A. O. Hirschman, 'The Rhetoric of Reaction—Two Years Later', *Government and Opposition*, 28 (1993), 295.

[4] *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, 73.

It might be objected that certain forms of jeopardy argument have nothing to do with the concept of unintended consequences. Where, for example, democratic reformers deliberately set out to demolish a value cherished by their reactionary critics—say, the hereditary principle—we are, it seems, confronted by *intended* consequences. This observation would be superficial, however. When reactionaries praise aristocratic rule and condemn democratic egalitarianism, they are unlikely to rest content with the assertion that the former is a good-in-itself; rather, they warn us that the destruction of aristocracy will undermine liberty or religious piety or heroic virtues or cultural excellence or social stability or effective governance—values that are not normally rejected by progressives. One rarely comes across ardent democrats who concede that such negative effects are the likely outcome of translating their ideals into reality. They are typically in thrall to the 'synergy illusion',[5] the belief that all the good things in life are mutually supportive. Jeopardy arguments, implicitly if not explicitly, appeal to the opposite assumption. The jeopardy thesis, like the perversity thesis, recalls the Hubris–Nemesis myth, where man is punished by the gods for his vaulting ambition. In trying to 'have it all', he ends up worse off than he was before.[6] Of course, the jeopardy critics of democracy do not always frame their arguments in terms of unintended consequences. Sometimes they create the impression that democrats actually *want* social instability, drab materialism, and the like. Such attributions are typically based on misperception or deliberate falsification, though there is no denying that reactionaries and progressives will assign different priorities to different values. Heroism and manliness, for example, are not normally uppermost in the democrat's scale of values. But the fact remains that if we are concerned with the *underlying structure* of jeopardy arguments against democracy, and not just the subjective purposes of their proponents, we can usually describe them as arguments from unintended consequences. The 'metaphysical pathos', in Lovejoy's term, of *all* anti-democratic thought is one of pessimism and fatalism: the world is an alien, obstinate place, full of traps and pitfalls that will put paid to our rational plans or utopian dreams. The splendid society pictured in the democrat's imagination will never become a reality.

Having established that anti-democratic thought relies—often implicitly—upon the idea of unanticipated consequences, I think it opportune to consider this idea further. Let us, in particular, examine the barriers to the correct anticipation of the consequences of purposive action. For this task, we can turn to a famous article by Robert Merton,[7] published in 1936, where he probes a number of reasons why our collective intentions may be thwarted by unforeseen consequences. One reason he ignores is the inscrutable will of God or

[5] Ibid. 149–52. [6] Ibid. 123.

[7] R. Merton, 'The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action', *American Sociological Review*, 1 (1936), especially pp. 898–904.

Providence or Fate. Those of religious or mystical bent may therefore compare his analysis to a production of *Hamlet* without the prince. But even such readers, I hope, will acknowledge that *something* is to be gained from a scientific study of the problem.

Merton suggests six reasons for the phenomenon of unanticipated consequences, of which *five* would seem to be relevant to our purpose.[8]

1. Our ability to predict future human behaviour is strictly limited by the complex nature of the social world, with its innumerable interactions and variations. Properly speaking, the social scientist almost always finds conjectural associations and not, as in most fields of the physical sciences, functional associations. In the study of human behaviour, the set of consequences of any repeated act is not constant; instead, there is a range of consequences, any one of which may follow the act in any given case. In some instances, we may have adequate knowledge to determine the statistical probabilities, but it is impossible to predict with certainty the results in any particular case. Social actions and situations are too varied to fit into homogeneous categories. Whereas past experience is the sole guide to our expectations on the assumption that certain past, present, and future acts are sufficiently alike to be grouped in the same category, these experiences are in fact different—and even small differences in the initial conditions can cause very great ones in the final phenomena.

2. A second major cause of unexpected consequences is the common assumption that actions which have in the past produced the desired outcome will continue to do so. Merton observes that this assumption is often 'fixed in the mechanism of habit', and it there finds pragmatic justification, for habitual action does usually meet with success.[9] But precisely because habit is a mode of activity which has previously led to the attainment of certain ends, it tends to become automatic and undeliberative through continued repetition, so that social actors fail to recognize that procedures which have been successful in certain circumstances need not be so under any and all circumstances.

3. A third factor in unanticipated consequences is wish-fulfilment, a situation where emotional involvement leads to a distorted view of the objective situation and of the probable future events. If action is predicated upon 'imaginary conditions', then it must inevitably elicit unintended effects.

[8] The (apparently) irrelevant factor is what he labels the 'imperious immediacy of interest' (ibid. 901–2), which refers to instances where the social actor's 'paramount concern with the foreseen immediate consequences excludes the consideration of further or other consequences of the same act'. Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', according to which the individual tends to increase the annual revenue of society though his sole aim is to employ his capital where most profitable to him, may serve as an illustration of how behaviour motivated by immediate interest can have remote consequences that never entered into the consciousness of the social actor.

[9] Ibid. 901.

4. There are instances where commitment to a system of values enjoins certain courses of action, and adherents are simply not concerned with the objective consequences of these actions but only with the subjective satisfaction of duty well performed. The classical analysis of the influence of this factor is Weber's study of the Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Active asceticism—supposedly a commandment of God—paradoxically led to its own decline through the accumulation of wealth entailed by decreased consumption and intense productive activity. The early Puritans did not foresee this decline, and perhaps it was unforeseeable. But the crucial point is that they refused to submit religious obligation to any utilitarian calculation of future advantages or disadvantages.

5. There is one final circumstance, peculiar to human conduct, which stands in the way of successful social forecasting. Public predictions of future social developments are frequently not sustained precisely because the prediction has itself become a new element in the concrete situation, thus tending to change the initial course of developments. By way of example, Merton offers Marx's prediction of the increasing misery of the proletariat. Made conscious of their unfavourable bargaining position as well as their dreadful prospects, labourers became increasingly organized, and the advantages of collective bargaining subsequently prevented the developments Marx had foretold.

A paradoxical feature of anti-democratic thought is that its purveyors, while founding their various critiques on the concept of unanticipated consequences, themselves view the social universe as essentially predictable. In a mirror image of Marxist arrogance, they claim a privileged foresight that is somehow denied to their ideological adversaries. Critics of democracy are therefore in danger of being 'hoist with their own petard'. In order to explore this possibility, Merton's analysis, when combined with Hirschman's categories, should prove useful. Are the 'reactionaries' guilty of making hasty assumptions about the effects of mass suffrage? Did they ignore the volatility and uncertainty of social reality? The immediate answer is 'yes'. Since our ability to predict the future is strictly limited by the inherent complexity of social life, the dogmatic certainties of democracy's critics are without justification. And, indeed, the dire forecasts of vicious tyranny and cultural degeneration have turned out to be unfounded. But the futility 'school' is most vulnerable in this respect, for their predictions were apparently based on the erroneous assumption that the study of human behaviour could be modelled on the techniques of natural science. If this is not possible, if there are no inescapable laws of social existence, then democracy need not be dismissed as a forlorn hope.

Still, it is hard to deny that the futility theorists uncovered definite 'trends', if not 'laws'. Had they contented themselves with maintaining that the 'rule of

the *demos*' was literally impossible, but that democratic accountability could exist in some shape or form, they would have avoided the charge of naïve 'scientism'. This more open-ended position was adopted by Max Weber, who met Mosca and Pareto halfway when he assured critics of democracy that their nightmare scenarios were groundless:

> . . . those who constantly fear that in the world of the future too much democracy and individualism may exist and too little authority, aristocracy, esteem for office, or such like, may calm down . . . According to all experience, history relentlessly gives rebirth to aristocracies and authorities . . .[10]

In the modern context, as we have seen, the new 'aristocracies and authorities' are the unelected experts or specialists—often attached to transnational corporations and organizations—who increasingly control the distribution of resources. If vigorous democracy requires citizens to be active participants, mounting complexity and global interconnectedness are turning them into passive recipients of initiatives formulated by mysterious 'others'. Recent trends confirm that the elitists were right to be pessimistic about the prospects for popular control. Globalization, in particular, poses a threat to democracy as we know it, since it diminishes the autonomy of nation-states, and—for better or worse—democracy flows in national channels. The comforting idea that international decision-making can be subjected to the scrutiny and control of a world electorate, that we can create something called 'cosmopolitan democracy', seems like nothing more than a pious hope. Most people wish to deliberate and act as a national collectivity, on the basis of their own national priorities. Although it may be a social construction, the attachment of individuals to national definitions of community is very real. In any case, international matters are beyond the capacities of many, probably most, citizens to appraise. They have neither the time nor the inclination to delve into the complications of issues that are outside their personal experiences. But even if people throughout the world were willing to undertake the heroic effort needed to make transnational citizenship a reality, how would they set about the task? As Will Kymlicka reminds us, 'democracy is not just a formula for aggregating votes, but is also a system of collective deliberation and legitimation'.[11] Issues must be debated, options considered, and the outcomes must be acceptable to, if not welcomed by, all citizens. This surely presupposes some degree of commonality or shared identity. How much deliberation can there be in the absence of a common language? Kymlicka notes that political communication has a 'large ritualistic component' and that 'these ritualized forms

[10] Quoted in the Introduction to *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 71.

[11] W. Kymlicka, 'Citizenship in an Era of Globalization', in I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón (eds.), *Democracy's Edges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 119.

of communication are typically language-specific'. Even if one understands a foreign language in the technical sense, one will not necessarily understand political debates conducted in that language.[12] The evidence from Europe suggests that linguistic differences remain an obstacle to the emergence of 'a European public' and 'a European political discourse'. According to Dieter Grimm, genuine public discourse is 'bound by national frontiers', while the European level is 'dominated by professional and interest discourses conducted remotely from the public'. The prospects for creating a European mass media in the foreseeable future are—Grimm concludes, with a pessimism that suits his surname—'absolutely non-existent'.[13] To speculate about a '*world* media' or a '*world* public' is to enter the realms of fantasy. Equally significant, the individuals within a democratic unit must be prepared to share each other's fate and make sacrifices for the benefit of their fellow-citizens. It is difficult enough to achieve this measure of solidarity in a modern nation-state with its multiple and incompatible interests. At the global level, the cleavages based on economic position, language, religion, region, ethnic or social identity, culture, national affiliation, and historical memories would ensure a state of mutual incomprehension and permanent conflict.

There is also the rather obvious point that size matters. The authenticity and effectiveness of participation is inversely related to the number of participants. Thus, as Sartori puts it, 'participation can be neatly operationalized as a ratio expressed by a fraction. As the denominator grows, the "part" (share, weight, import) of each partaker diminishes in the same amount.'[14] The capacity of an ordinary citizen to participate effectively in a 'cosmopolitan democracy' would approach zero. In an era of staggeringly complex interactions, many of them across national boundaries, there is no solution to what Dahl refers to as 'Goldilocks' dilemma'. If a democratic unit is small enough to accommodate equal and effective participation by all, then it is unlikely to be large enough to deal with matters of great importance; if it is large enough to deal with such matters, 'not even a faint approximation to equal participation is possible'.[15]

As we saw in Chapter 3, the scientific claims of the classical elitists were ultimately bogus. But while it was presumptuous of them to argue that—everywhere and under all circumstances—complexity would *negate* democracy, their less contentious thesis that democracy and complexity pull in opposite directions does carry conviction. However, it needs to be modified, for complexity and democracy are not *always* antithetical. Consider the second reason given by Merton for the phenomenon of unexpected consequences: the

[12] Ibid. 121.
[13] D. Grimm, 'Does Europe Need a Constitution?', *European Law Journal*, 1 (1995), 296.
[14] G. Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987), 113.
[15] R. Dahl, *After the Revolution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 148.

dubious assumption that habitual practices, so successful in the past, will continue to work in the future. This spells bad news for critics of democracy, most of whom defend (or defended) ancient institutions and traditional hierarchies as being expressive of fundamental human needs. No wonder their predictions went awry. Democracy, whatever its shortcomings, may be the only appropriate form of government in modern circumstances: customary ways may no longer be viable under conditions of urbanization, mass literacy, and corporate capitalism. In the early stage of modernization, democracy and complexity work in tandem. The erosion of traditional communities and the consequent growth of individualism provided the underlying impetus for Western democracy, and the same forces now fuel the process of 'democratization' in other parts of the world, where 'reactionaries', like their earlier counterparts in Western Europe, face formidable odds in their rearguard struggle against 'progress'.

So far we have seen how the phenomenon of unanticipated consequences can be turned against the critics of democracy, even though it underlies their own arguments. This may not be the case with the third factor isolated by Merton—that of wish-fulfilment. It is an axiom of much anti-democratic thought that attachment to democracy is based on faith or emotion as opposed to ratiocination. Le Bon, for example, compared the 'sovereignty of the people' to 'the religious dogmas of the Middle Ages'.[16] Pareto, for his part, made this kind of reductionism a central feature of his analysis: our political ideas are ultimately rooted in sentiment, though we always take care to provide them with a logical veneer. To conservatives and reactionaries, reason is a servant of the passions. And as Merton warns us, emotional involvement can blind us to the possible consequences of our actions. I suspect that Le Bon and Pareto were more right than wrong about why people embrace the democratic ideal. Many advocates of democracy are impervious to any negative arguments. Attempting to reason with a true believer is like trying to 'oppose cyclones with discussion', in Le Bon's apt phrase.[17] There is always the danger that passionate commitment to democracy will lead to its implementation in inappropriate settings or at too great a speed or without due regard for other values. Human identity is at least partially created by participating in a shared way of life. This being so, the flourishing of society cannot be secured by rigid adherence to abstract principles, but rather has to trade on values which are implicit in society as it exists. This much was understood by the romantic conservatives, who believed that viable political institutions needed to be embedded in an appropriate cultural context. Perhaps it is best for democratic

[16] G. Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920), 210. First published in 1896.

[17] Ibid. 211.

reforms to be put in place by those who do not genuinely believe in them, such as those far-sighted members of the British establishment who reluctantly extended the franchise as a way of dissipating the revolutionary energy of the masses. The hesitancy of this approach may help to explain why the doom-laden forecasts of Burke and Maistre and others never looked like becoming reality in Britain. But one suspects there is another reason. While critics of democracy prided themselves on their hard-headed realism, the more reactionary among them exhibited a romantic longing for a bygone era of organic wholeness and unchallenged verities. No doubt their assessment of what democratic reform would or would not achieve was coloured by their visceral hatred for the values it expressed—a kind of negative wish-fulfilment, if you like, that distorted their perception and made them prone to exaggeration.

The fourth reason given by Merton for the problem of unintended consequences was—please recall—that strong value commitments to a course of action might induce social actors to dismiss empirical consequences as irrelevant. One must obey universal moral standards even if a vulgar cost/benefit analysis might suggest otherwise. For all its rigidity this stance is perfectly rational, though the rationality in question is substantive rather than formal or instrumental. Still, at first glance, a dogmatic *moral* commitment to democracy would seem as dangerous as a dogmatic *emotional* commitment. To be sure, it is hard in practice to disentangle the two types of commitment, since moral beliefs inspire passion, while—as Pareto argued—passions underpin moral belief. Nevertheless, it is worth maintaining the distinction. The emotional champion of democracy simply ignores negative consequences; the rational advocate can devise strategies for avoiding or minimizing these consequences, or else demonstrate why such consequences would be an acceptable price to pay. The jeopardy thesis assumes that democracy is less important than the values it allegedly threatens; the defender of democracy on moral grounds may wish to argue the opposite. If democracy really is a moral imperative, then it could in principle 'trump' cultural excellence or even individual liberty. Pareto may have been right to say that moral values are, in the final analysis, reducible to sentiments, but it does not follow that *his* preferred values are superior to those he rejected. The jeopardy thesis implicitly posits a hierarchy of values with democracy at the very bottom. This hierarchy is no more rational than an alternative one that puts democracy at the very top. But constructing such an alternative—and thus diminishing their susceptibility to jeopardy arguments—would require a change of attitude on the part of committed democrats. They would have to abandon the 'synergy illusion' and admit that the values they hold dear might contradict one another—in practice if not always in theory. For example, schemes to increase participation, by introducing new 'interdependencies between contrary and diffused

powers of veto', are certain to create a degree of 'power inflation' or 'sluggishness'.[18] Wedded as they are to the pretence that popular participation could never diminish efficiency, fervent democrats effectively surrender to their opponents, allowing them to conduct the debate on grounds favourable to themselves. If radicals wish to persuade people to fight against the rationalizing and centralizing tendencies of the modern world, they must first acknowledge what is obvious: that there are going to be costs. To do otherwise is to fall into a 'credibility gap'.

The final reason for our inability to predict the consequences of purposive social action—that the prediction itself becomes an element in the equation—is especially useful in accounting for why the critics of democracy went wrong. Cognizant of the possibility that democracy could transmute into majority tyranny or bureaucratic dictatorship, those charged with implementing it took care to do so gradually and to temper it with checks and balances, including a plethora of individual and minority rights, often enshrined in written constitutions. Neither personal freedom nor intellectual standards have been destroyed, nor has economic efficiency been seriously compromised. As for the rights of opposition, they remain secure—at any rate in Western democracies. Predictions of disaster now seem ridiculous. With the unwitting aid of the critics, dangers were identified and circumvented.

Partisans of the futility thesis are least vulnerable to the charge of having alerted their enemies to the potential snags of democracy. Because they thought that popular sovereignty was impossible, they did not need to predict its consequences. From their own perspective, moreover, any warning given to democratic reformers about the futility of their efforts would have no practical relevance, since the 'iron laws' of social life could not be broken or averted by human ingenuity. In this respect, I fear, elitists such as Mosca and Pareto laboured under the same misapprehension that effectively killed off Marxism: they assumed that certain social or historical laws operated independently of human choice or intentions. Once we drop this assumption, we can explore how the undoubted tendencies towards oligarchy might be checked, if not reversed, through mechanisms deliberately designed to strengthen popular control: devolution, referenda, more frequent elections, more civic education, and so forth. In contrast to, say, the perversity thesis, the futility thesis is like a self-fulfilling prophesy. Those who find it convincing thereby lose the will to fight for, or strengthen, democracy—and democracy may therefore succumb to the oligarchic propensities underlined by the thesis. In this sense, the fact that predictions themselves become a new element in the concrete situation serves to bolster rather than undermine the anti-democratic case.

[18] D. Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 64, 71.

Final Reflections

Critics of democracy typically committed the very same mistake they attributed to their opponents: they abstracted from the complications of the social world and arrogated to themselves a privileged foresight. The drive for democracy was *bound* to have paradoxical or otherwise unwelcome consequences, they predicted with all the confidence of a Marxist gloating over the 'insoluble contradictions' of capitalism. But this does not mean that their criticisms hold no lessons for the present. The perversity thesis alerted us to the cultural prerequisites of democracy; the jeopardy thesis has reminded us that there are rarely benefits without costs, that democracy is only one value amongst many, potentially conflicting with others we may wish to pursue; and (most interesting of all) the futility thesis taught us that modernity could be the enemy, not the friend, of democracy. The futility critics did not foresee globalization, but they nevertheless succeeded in exposing the contradictions between complexity and popular self-determination. While the process of modernization can assist in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, it ultimately engenders new hierarchies and limits the possibilities for democratic accountability. Widespread disenchantment with the reality of democracy has deep structural causes which cannot be made to disappear by the incantations of well-meaning academics, anxious to revive a flagging ideal.

Perhaps, though, this should not be a cause for despair. Zolo has argued convincingly that democracy as we know it is 'a wholly modern phenomenon'; it developed in opposition to the organic and naturalistic model of political life that underpinned the classical *polis* or medieval city. Liberal democratic thought has always presupposed the inviolable autonomy of the individual agent as well as a clear functional distinction between the state and civil society. Protecting the individual and his private activities was the end; elected assemblies were merely the means. In consequence, early advocates of parliamentary representation demanded 'freedom from politics', a freedom understood 'as the differentiation of social functions and individual roles *vis-à-vis* the political body', a freedom no longer conceived in Aristotelian terms as adherence to rational forms of collective life.[19] If the primary goal of democratic reformers was individual autonomy, then maximizing this goal need not require further participation in rituals of collective integration. Devolution of power to the individual citizen, implicit in the modern preoccupation with 'rights', voluntarism, and consumer choice, may serve, in some circumstances, as a functional equivalent to political participation. Or, if I may once again borrow terminology from Hirschman, 'exit' may be the preferred

[19] Ibid. 58–9.

'democratic' option when 'voice' becomes unfeasible or meaningless.[20] In our complex and differentiated societies, where 'the "general will" dissipates and fragments itself into a confused multiplicity of particularisms and localized interests',[21] the demand for individual action and expression is far stronger than the demand for new channels of collective control and participation. The reality of the situation seems to be reflected in people's preferences. If democracy means informed discussion and majority rule, its future may be bleak. If, however, democracy is defined to include the empowerment of individuals, allowing them to exercise more control over their own lives, then its prospects seem brighter. Either way, proponents of 'strong' democracy, who adopt the Aristotelian view that political action is a condition of civic virtue and human fulfilment, will have to scale down their expectations.[22] None of this means that the critics of democracy will enjoy the last laugh, but they may, at the very least, be permitted a wry smile.

[20] A. O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[21] Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity*, 63.

[22] For a lengthy analysis of why this should be so, see J. V. Femia, 'Complexity and Deliberative Democracy', *Inquiry*, 39 (1996), 359–97.

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