



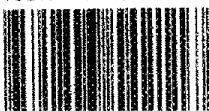
JOHN DUNN

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SETTING THE PEOPLE FREE  
THE STORY OF DEMOCRACY

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## Chapter Four

### WHY DEMOCRACY?

It is tempting to believe that democracy has won its present eminence for either or both of two reasons. Some prefer to attribute its victory to its evident political justice, its being plainly the best, and perhaps the sole clearly justifiable basis on which human beings can accept the apparent indignity of being ruled at all. Others find it easier to believe that it owes this eminence to the fact that it and it alone can ensure the well-protected and fluent operation of a modern capitalist economy. Neither cheery view, unfortunately, can possibly be right. Democracy in itself, as we have seen, does not specify any clear and definite structure of rule. Even as an idea (let alone as a practical expedient) it wholly fails to ensure any regular and reassuring relation to just outcomes over any issue at all. As a structure of rule, within any actual society at any time, it makes it overwhelmingly probable that many particular outcomes will turn out flagrantly unjust. The idea of justice and the idea of democracy fit very precariously together. They clash constantly in application. Any actual structure of rule will face incentives quite distinct from, and often sharply at odds with, the requirements for the fluent operation of a capitalist economy. But democracy, quite explicitly, thrusts upon its sovereign

and notionally equal electors the right, and in some measure the opportunity, to insert their own preferences directly into the operating conditions of the economy, in the attempt to do themselves a favour. As a bargain, this has many great advantages. But no one could reasonably see it as a safe recipe for ensuring the dynamic efficiency of the economy at the receiving end.

If we want to understand how democracy has won this eminence, we must set aside these presumptions and think again and less ingeniously.

Let us take again the four questions which must have reasonably accessible answers. Why, in the first place, has the word democracy changed so sharply in meaning from the days of Babeuf to those of Tony Blair? Why, in the second place, is the form of government to which it now predominantly applies, through all its striking variation over time, culture and political economy, always so different, both from its Greek originals, and from Robespierre's or Babeuf's dreams? Why, in the third place, has that drastically different form of government won such extraordinary power across the world, so rapidly and so recently? Why, in the fourth place and somewhat more elusively, should this highly distinctive regime have picked this word of all words for its political banner? The first two questions are quite easy to answer, once you recognize that their answer depends on the answers to the last two. The third question today (now that the victory is in) is also relatively easy to answer, at least in outline. Once it has been answered, it also gives us the vital clue to the fourth question's answer. What is not possible is to answer that fourth question on its own, and solely through its own terms.

In retrospect Babeuf's Conspiracy was always a less than plausible embodiment of democracy. Free and open choice by all the citizens deliberating together can scarcely be mistaken in good faith for a secret conspiracy intent on seizing power and passing it promptly on to a government hand picked to exercise it acceptably.<sup>1</sup> But it was certainly important for Babeuf himself that this new government was

to be only a temporary expedient, in face of the repressive power and will of the existing Thermidorian incumbents, with their shameless dedication to serving the interests of the wealthy. Babeuf himself did not accept the legitimacy of the Thermidorian regime. What he hoped would supplant it was less a clearly defined political structure (like the Assembly and Council of Athens) than a continuing practice of rule, not merely on behalf of the poorer majority of France's population, but with their active co-operation. This was still extremely close to Aristotle's or even Plato's conceptions of the least edifying variant of democracy (the rule of all by the poor majority for the poor majority), with the allegiance simply inverted. Babeuf's democrats might find themselves for a time forced to convert themselves, however nebulously, into a clandestine party. But there was nothing furtive about their political objectives. They saw no occasion for apology in a new regime in which most of the (adult male) population, in the modest circumstances in which they found themselves, would rule on their own behalf, or at least actively monitor and promptly correct any of those whom they chose to rule for them. By 1796 this was not a prospect which attracted the rich anywhere in the world. Today, by a long and winding route, in all the wealthiest countries in the world, the rich have learned to think better of the proposal and become quite thoroughly inured to it.

Democracy has changed its meaning so sharply between the days of Babeuf and those of Tony Blair, above all, because of and through a vast shift in political expectations. It is natural for us to see this shift predominantly as a movement from ingenuousness to sophistication, from the simple-minded delusions of Babeuf to the cool acuity of those who staff the re-election campaigns of George W. Bush (or even Tony Blair). But it is more illuminating to see it instead as a passage from one horizon of political experience to another, very different horizon. On the matter of democracy as each understood it, there was very little difference in expectation between Babeuf and his Thermidorian enemies. What each meant by democracy and

imagined it would imply in practice was virtually the same. Where they differed intractably was in their evaluation of it and in the practical implications which they drew from that evaluation: in what they felt moved to try to bring about or avert.

A blithe view of the history of modern democracy would see this change in expectations as following docilely in the wake of a prior shift in moral and political conviction. It would see democracy's triumph as the victory of a compelling formula for just and legitimate rule, aptly rewarded after a discreet interval by the happy discovery that such rule holds few terrors for the rich, and promises at least some benefits to practically everyone. But with the partial but weighty exception of the United States, that was scarcely the history which in fact occurred.

Babeuf's own political venture was too ineffectual to shed any light on the realism of his political expectations. In the hands of more effective successors, most notably Lenin,<sup>2</sup> political expectations had already been recast purposefully before the bid for power was launched; and the tensions between egalitarian and democratic goals and authoritarian means and structures became and remained acute. It was not hard for those who detested the goals to highlight the gap between pretension and consequence, and present the continuing project of equality, through that yawning gap, as a deliberate fraud or a hideous and murderous confusion. After 1917 this ceased to be a simple debating point and became an extremely potent political accusation. The world of which Babeuf dreamed, a rich-free world at last made safe for the poor, never won widespread credibility. But the grander and far more intellectually self-congratulatory project of Communism, Equality on Stilts,<sup>3</sup> in due course secured very large numbers of overt adherents. For as long as it retained at least their titular allegiance, it clung on tight to Babeuf's political nostrum, interpreted with all the flexibility which he found natural himself. Democracy became in effect the regime name of the route towards equality, gracing whatever political institutions volunteered to

shoulder the responsibility of pressing on towards that elusive goal. It was not until the change in expectations had run its course, and the defenders of equality had formally surrendered, that the claim to a special tie to democracy was surrendered along with it. This was not an internally generated change in belief or taste. It was a capitulation to the crushing weight of a wholly unwelcome experience.

The main battleground on which the struggle for democracy's mantle was initially fought out was the continent of Europe, and more particularly the western parts of Europe which Napoleon's armies controlled for longest and with least effort. The one key setting which those armies barely touched was the largest of the British Isles. (The record of Ireland was somewhat different.) But even in Britain, as throughout the European continent, until almost the end of the nineteenth century, democracy, under that name, remained the political goal of small groups of extreme dissidents, or movements which sought to challenge the existing order frontally and fundamentally.<sup>4</sup> Viewed from today, the practices which make up democracy, legislative elections based on widening franchises, greater freedom or even full secrecy at the ballot itself, executives at least partially accountable to those whom they ruled, were extended dramatically, sooner or later, across most of the continent. But their main forward movements, especially when these proved relatively durable, came not from the revolutionary collapse of the old order, or under the banner of democracy itself, but from deft defensive gambits by audacious conservative politicians, Count Cavour in Piedmont and in due course Italy, Otto von Bismarck in Prussia and later Germany, Benjamin Disraeli in Britain.<sup>5</sup> Even in France itself, under the revolutionary Second Republic, the new electors promptly ushered in the Second Empire of Bonaparte's unexhilarating descendant Louis Napoleon. Universal suffrage, as the anarchist Proudhon noted morosely at very considerable length, was a most uncertain political good and could readily in practice be hard to distinguish from counter-revolution.<sup>6</sup>

The extension of legislative representation and the widening of the franchise aroused bitter conflict sooner or later almost everywhere, often threatening the survival of the regime. With the Great Reform Bill, even Britain seemed for a time to many contemporaries, and at least some subsequent historians, very close to revolution. At least in peacetime, however, the cumulative experience of electoral representation proved remarkably reassuring. The prerogatives of ownership, and even the flourishing of commerce and industry, survived the extension of the franchise more or less intact, and with surprisingly little strain. By the early twentieth century the idea that even women might safely be permitted to vote no longer seemed an extravagance; and mass socialist parties with democracy on their banners could be left to compete with their rivals, if not in most settings yet on equal terms, at least without constant harassment. Madison's early-nineteenth-century discovery that universal male suffrage was no real threat to property was made independently, if appreciably later, in well over half the countries in Europe, not always by direct experience, but by ever more obvious inference. But virtually none of this, as yet, not even the first stirrings of the enfranchisement of women, had happened under the rubric of democracy itself. (The inclusion of women within the electorate was always an excellent proxy for the literal-mindedness of democracy as an idea. If everyone has to rule (or at least have a hand in rule) for rule to be legitimate or safe, what clearer evidence could there be for the idea being treated with reserve than the spontaneous and almost wholly unreflective omission of over half the adult population from the ranks of the rulers?)

What came out with ever greater clarity was the stark political logic of ever-widening representation: that it was obviously in practice quite unnecessary to confine electoral representation, and equally obviously on balance advantageous, both to ruling politicians and to those they ruled, to extend it more or less as far as it would go. This plainly is what we now call democracy, incomplete no doubt, and far

from fully self-convinced, but unmistakably the thing itself. But why should we have come to call it democracy? Why indeed is it even distantly appropriate to describe this form of government as a democracy? Why is the term not an obvious and brazen misnomer?

It is still not clear how to answer this last question. Perhaps democracy simply is a misnomer for any of the regimes to which we now apply it, a flagrant, and at some level deliberate, misdescription. But misnomer or not, the term has clearly come to stay. It is no use wringing our hands at the semantic anomaly or moral effrontery. What we need to grasp is why it has come to stay. The key to this is to register when the term arrived. It made its entry in this essentially new guise, beyond the North American continent, as the christening of a new formula for civilized rule (rule of the civilized by the civilized), offered by the victors of two successive World Wars to a world in dire need of civilization. The first offer was made by Woodrow Wilson, an academic political scientist and former President of Princeton University, who became President of the United States and would-be architect of a new world order.<sup>7</sup> At this point, the offer was not a practical success. Wilson's recipe for world order foundered in the vindictive intrigues of the Versailles conference and was essentially repudiated back home in America (a repudiation which did little to give democracy a good name anywhere else). The Europe it left behind it remained in acute economic peril, riven by bitter social conflict and intense ideological and national rivalries, biding its time none too patiently to unleash world war all over again. Democracy was challenged savagely from the right by those who volunteered to defend Europe's populations against the continuing menace of equality, pressed home by an equally authoritarian political movement with its own primary allegiance to a very foreign power. It was defended principally, and with far greater conviction, by those who still hoped to press far closer to equality themselves. It was neither a natural name nor a compelling practical formula for the unruffled hegemony of the order of egoism.

For it to become so, a second vast war had to be fought and won, and another and far lengthier struggle, which at times menaced even greater destruction,<sup>9</sup> had to be endured and survived. It was in that second struggle, and in face of the horrors of the Third Reich and the brutalities of Japan's Asian conquests, that Europe's threatened and largely conquered peoples joined ranks with America beneath the banner of democracy. At first they did so very much alongside the Soviet ally whose immense sacrifices and sustained military heroism did so much more to check Germany's advance, break its huge tank armies and drive it relentlessly back home.<sup>9</sup> After Operation Barbarossa, the *blitzkrieg* in which Hitler destroyed more than a third of its airforce on the ground and broke through its forward defences for many hundred miles, it also had no residual difficulty in identifying the Third Reich as its primary enemy. On the matter of democracy the Soviet Union learned nothing and forgot nothing from the bitter ordeal of the Second World War. But further west the political leaders of the order of egoism did learn one great and enduring lesson from this overwhelming trauma. They learned that there could be circumstances in which that order, the basic operating principle of their economies and societies, needed this word and the ideas for which it stood very urgently indeed. In the last instance, and in face of intense suffering, they needed it above all to focus their citizens' allegiance, and to define a cause worth fighting to the death for in a way that the order of egoism could never hope to provide for a good many.

Neither the Third Reich or Italy's Fascists, nor imperial Japan in its own phase of fascist militarism, set any store by democracy. So the term served comfortably enough to define their enemies without further need to resolve its ambiguities. Only once the war was over, and the grip of the Soviet Union tightened over eastern Europe, did it become necessary to define democracy more resolutely, to explain the proper bases for political alliance or enmity both domestically and across the world. At that point a quarrel which had mattered intensely for Socialists ever since Lenin seized power became of far wider

interest.<sup>10</sup> Before October 1917 virtually all twentieth-century western Socialists were democrats in their own eyes, however much they might differ in goals, political temperament or preferred institutional expedients. Within three years, socialists across the world were divided bitterly by the new Russian regime, rejecting it categorically for its tyranny and oppression, or insisting that it and it alone was the true bearer of the torch of the Equals.<sup>11</sup> For those who adopted the second point of view, anyone who disputed its title to democracy or censured its governmental style simply showed themselves partisans of the order of egoism: abject lackeys of the rich. The charge that they were lackeys of the rich stung Social Democrats everywhere. But for electoral politicians with other allegiances it carried no special stigma; and they found it relatively effortless to adopt the democratic element in the Social Democrats' denunciation, shorn of any associated egalitarian encumbrances. The ensuing quarrel was never a well-shaped political argument; and it is far from clear that in the end either side can be accurately said to have won it. What was quite unmistakable by 1991, however, was that one side had emphatically lost it.

It was not that the victors' pretension to embody democracy was vindicated by the collapse of the Soviet Union: simply that the claims of the vanquished Communist Party of the Soviet Union to rule as the people, along with their claims to deliver equality in any shape or form, dissolved into absurdity once they no longer retained the power to rule at all. By 1991, too, that absurdity was already a very open secret. The four decades of the Cold War provided something less than transparent collective self-education; but they did establish beyond reasonable doubt that it is a simple and ludicrous abuse of language to describe a wholly unaccountable ruling body, which denies its subjects the opportunity either to express themselves freely, or organize to defend their interests, or seek their own representation within government on their own terms, as a democracy (or indeed, for that matter, a People's Republic).

What made the term democracy so salient across the world was the long post-war struggle against the Soviet Union and its allies. From its outset, that quarrel was certainly between defenders of the order of egoism and those who openly wished it ill. But it came increasingly to be a quarrel, too, over the political ownership of the term democracy. Because of its intensity, scope and duration, the lines of battle within it were often confused and disconcerting. For decades at a time, in Indonesia, in South Korea, in Taiwan, in South Vietnam, in Chile, quite open and unabashed dictatorships were enrolled with little apology in the ranks of the western democrats. (The enemy of my enemy is my friend.) But this lack of fastidiousness attracted unfavourable comment at the time; and as the decades went by, it became increasingly clear that it was not merely politically unprepossessing but also costly to spread the democratic mantle quite so widely. American statecraft became, very slowly, a little more fastidious; and wealthier and better-educated populations in many different countries took sharper exception to authoritarian rule, whenever the latter faltered for a time, or the economic cycle turned sharply against it. Under this American provenance democracy was presented and welcomed as a well-established recipe both for nurturing the order of egoism and combining its flourishing with some real protection for the civil rights of most of the population. It threatened relatively few and held out modest hopes to a great many. Economic prudence (a due regard for the requirements for nurturing the order of egoism) was incorporated, sometimes with some pain,<sup>12</sup> into the professed political repertoires of most contending political parties within democratic regimes.

After 11 September 2001, abruptly and with strikingly little embarrassment, the spread of democracy across the globe shifted in meaning all over again, and acquired a wholly new urgency. From being the heraldic sign on America's banners, it became as well, at least for a time, a key political weapon. As President Bush himself acknowledged in November the following year, 'The global expansion

of democracy is the ultimate force in rolling back terrorism and tyranny.'<sup>13</sup> The United States had found little difficulty in reconciling itself to tyranny in foreign countries for decades at a time, if the tyrants in question proved servicable in other ways. It had viewed with studied indifference (or even limited sympathy) the practice of terrorism itself, sometimes over equally lengthy time-spans, in a variety of foreign countries, from the State of Kashmir to the Russian Republic, and perhaps even at some points Northern Ireland. What made it suddenly imperative to roll back tyranny was its presumed link to terrorism, and more pressingly to terrorism within the United States itself.

Tyranny, it now appeared, bred terrorism. To stamp out terrorism (or at least prevent it reaching as far as North America) it was now necessary to stamp out tyranny too. The modern name, and the uniquely efficacious modern practical recipe, for eliminating tyranny was now democracy. Only a globe united under the sway of democracy could be a world in which the United States felt wholly safe from terror. This particular strategic appraisal may not last very long. The globalization of democracy, even in this limited sense, is a costly political agenda with many immediate enemies. It is far from clear that achieving it would yield the desired outcome. There is no obvious reason why those who feel bitterly enough to sympathize with terrorism or succour its practitioners should feel more inhibited in acting on their feelings merely because they acquire somewhat more control over their own rulers. Democratizing the West Bank and Gaza would do little by itself to endear the citizens of the state of Israel to most of the existing inhabitants of either. In its present form this looks less like a reliable political talisman than a glaring instance of ideological overstretch.<sup>14</sup> But temporary though it will surely prove, it does represent the culmination of one particular ideological sequence. We may change our mind quite drastically (and even the American government may change its mind somewhat) over whether this is a good way in which to understand what democracy is or

means. Succeeding American leaders will almost certainly modify their assessments of what it is reasonable to hope (or cease to fear) from democracy so understood. What can scarcely happen is that anyone raises substantially this estimate of the benefits which democracy, so understood, is likely to prove able to supply.

We can now see how to answer three of our four questions. Democracy has altered its meaning so sharply since Babeuf because it has passed definitively from the hands of the Equals to those of the political leaders of the order of egoism. These leaders apply it (with the active consent of most of us) to the form of government which selects them and enables them to rule. It is a form of government at least minimally adapted to the current requirements of the order of egoism, shaped within, and adjusted to, the continuing demands to keep that order in working condition. The Greek originals of democracy could scarcely have provided that service, either organizationally or politically; and the service itself cannot plausibly be claimed to have figured in the dreams of either Robespierre or Babeuf. The conjunction of representative democracy with the increasingly self-conscious and attentive service of the order of egoism has faced pressing challenges throughout these two centuries. But within the last fifteen years it has surmounted all these challenges and settled with unprecedented resolution on the conclusion that democracy, in this representative form, is both the source and to a large degree also the justification for the scale of its triumph. What has enabled it to surmount the challenges is still open to question. But much of the answer unmistakably lies in the sheer potency of the order of egoism.

Early in the last century, a determined Russian statesman, Pyotr Stolypin, made a last desperate effort to rescue the Tsarist regime by breaking up the egalitarian torpor of Russia's peasant communities and subjecting them to the stern demands of the order of egoism.<sup>14</sup> His name for this strategy was 'The Wager on the Strong'. It is a good general name for the political strategy of serving the requirements of the order of egoism, whether in one country or across the globe. In

contrast with Babeuf's or Buonarroti's disapproving vision of a political regime centred on defending the privileges of those who were already rich (and always potentially somewhat effete), it captures admirably the momentum of a strategy which aims at constant change, and at harnessing the power to realize that change in whoever proves to possess it. Robespierre's unnerving associate on the Committee of Public Safety, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, proclaimed thrillingly at one point at the height of the Terror that it was the poor (the *malheureux*) who were the real powers of the earth.<sup>16</sup> But he has proved a most inferior prophet. The Wager on the Strong is a wager on the rich, to some degree perforce on those with the good fortune to be rich already, but above all on those with the skill, nerve and luck to make themselves so. In the long run the Wager on the Strong has paid off stunningly. But what of the fourth question? Why did the Strong select this of all words to name the form of government which has served them best of all in their titanic struggle to mould the world to their purposes?

Even now I do not think we quite know the answer to that question. But what is clear is that the key phase in their selection of it occurred in the United States of America, and did so before the young Alexis de Tocqueville took ship to appraise its implications. From then on it is relatively easy to follow this word as it moves onwards with the stream of history, sometimes hurtling through rapids, sometimes drifting out in great slow eddies, or disappearing for lengthy intervals into stagnant pools. It is easy too to see why it attracts or repels so many different users, summoning up allegiances or fomenting enmities. It is even easier to see why it constantly loses definition along the way, stretched in one direction then another, and largely at the mercy of anyone who chooses to take it up. What still remains harder to see is just how it aids or impedes those who do choose to use it, augmenting their political strength, exposing their deceit or blurring their comprehension of their own goals. (Whatever its other merits, it is hard to believe that this is a term which has greatly



assisted anyone to clarify their own political goals for any length of time.)

At this point democracy's ideological triumph seems bewilderingly complete. There is little immediate danger, of course, of its running out of enemies, or ceasing to be an object of real hate. But it no longer faces compelling rivals as a view of how political authority should be structured, or of who is entitled to assess whether or not that authority now rests in the right hands. Its practical sway, naturally, is very considerably narrower, crimped or disrupted almost everywhere. But the surviving doctrines which still contend with it at the same level, and without benefit of special supra-human validation, and which have also kept the nerve bluntly to deny its hegemony, are all faltering badly. None of them any longer dares to try to face it down in free and open encounter.

This odd outcome leaves many questions open. Is it still right, at this late stage, to think of democracy primarily as a form of government? If so, just what form of government, and quite why? Or is it equally or more appropriate to think of it instead as a political value, very imperfectly embodied in any actual form of government, and perhaps flatly incompatible with many obvious aspects of the form of government to which most of us now habitually apply it? If we see it primarily as a political value, a standard of public conduct or political choice to which forms of government should ideally measure up, should we also go on to recognize in it, as Tocqueville in effect did,<sup>17</sup> an entire way of life, social, cultural and even economic, just as much as narrowly political? Can there be truly democratic politics (for better or worse), without democratizing every other aspect of social, cultural and economic life?

No one, after the last century, can sanely doubt that forms of government matter greatly. It may be true that even the grandest of states are in some respects less powerful today than their predecessors of half a century ago.<sup>18</sup> But it is certainly also true that most states are vastly more powerful in a great many other readily specifiable respects

than they have ever been before. Government may shift elusively between levels, moving upwards and downwards from the individual nation state; and governmental aspirations can shrink as well as expand. But the world in which we all now live is governed more extensively and more intimately than it has ever been before;<sup>19</sup> and few things matter more in practice to most of its inhabitants over time than what form that government takes.

The form of government to which most of us do now apply the term democracy is more than a little blurred in outline. What causes it to operate as it does in any particular setting and at any particular time remains exceedingly obscure.<sup>20</sup> But some aspects of it are more settled and less contentious than they have ever been before. Very few countries which entertain the idea of democratic rule at all any longer dispute that the sovereign ruling body, the citizens, should consist of virtually all the adults duly qualified by birth. There is more continuing dissension even today over the terms on which citizenship can be acquired from the outside, or non-citizens admitted equally to the vote. There is also continuing strife over the terms of personal exclusion, of derogating from the privileges of citizenship by sufficiently egregious breach of its responsibilities, or through crippling mental incapacity (crime, insanity, even the purposeful withholding of tax). But virtually nowhere on earth which stages voting at all as a means for forming a government still excludes women from the opportunity to participate in it on formally equal terms. (Saudi Arabia, which apparently at present still does, emphatically does not envisage democracy as a way of forming its government.) This vast change has come everywhere within less than a century. In most places it can scarcely yet be said to have had the effect of democratizing every other aspect of social, cultural or economic life. But the most jaundiced observer now can hardly miss its impact anywhere where it has obtained for any length of time.

The variations within this form of government, Presidential or Parliamentary rule, judicial review, contrasting party or electoral

systems, even republics or monarchies, matter greatly for the politics of any individual country. In some cases, in practice, they leave little room for doubt that their main purpose is to insulate the rulers as radically as possible from the erratic sympathies and judgements of the citizens at large. What unites them is their common acceptance of a single compelling point, the expediency of deriving the authority to rule, in a minimally credible way, from the entire citizen body over whom it must apply. The claims made by these rulers on their own behalf, and in some measure endorsed by less partial champions of the form of government itself, naturally reach much further. They claim that the election of representative legislatures and executives, however structured, not only confers upon them the authority of the citizen electors, but also provides those electors with an effective control over the laws to which they are subject, and the persons who make, interpret or enforce those laws upon them. In itself this is an extremely far-fetched claim. It is also one which loses plausibility fairly steadily with experience. But it is not absurd. The predicament of being governed by those whom a clear majority can eventually dismiss is far less dire than the corresponding predicament of being governed indefinitely by those of whom you can hope to rid yourself only by rising up and overthrowing them by force of arms.

Is democracy a good name for a system of rule in which, in the end, a steady and substantial majority can be confident that it holds the power to dismiss rulers it has come to loathe? That is not what the term *democracy* originally meant; but it is also not a plainly illegitimate extension of that original meaning. The case against the extension of meaning, nevertheless, remains simple and weighty. In Athens it may have been the Laws, rather than the *demos* itself, who held final authority over the Athenians.<sup>21</sup> But the Laws could exercise that ultimate ascendancy only through the continuing interpretation and the active choice of the citizen Assembly and the Law Courts. Athenian democracy had very serious reservations about the division of political labour. Except under the special conditions of open

warfare, where Generals were elected and often left to fend for themselves for as long as the annual campaign lasted, it simply refused to pick individuals to exercise power in its name, and without further recourse to it. It organized the daily tasks of government, quite largely, by rotating them across the citizen body; and it made every great decision of state, legislative, executive, or even judicial, by the majority choice of very large numbers, whether in the Assembly or the Courts. Under democracy the citizens of Athens, quite reasonably and accurately, supposed that they were ruling themselves. But the vastly less exclusive citizen bodies of modern democracies very obviously do nothing of the kind. Instead, they select from a menu which they can do little individually to modify, whichever they find least dismaying amongst the options on offer. Benjamin Constant, who wished to commend this arrangement, saw the goal of their choice as stewardship, the full management of their interests by suitable persons chosen for the purpose.<sup>22</sup> This, he underlined, was how the rich approached the allocation of their own time. There was nothing humiliating or necessarily alarming in having your interests managed for you. The rich at least were never in serious doubt that they could find many more rewarding things to do with their time.

But even for those who approved of it, this was never the only way in which to view the bargain. Constant was writing well before the professionalization of politics. By the time, over a century later, that the Austrian émigré economist Joseph Schumpeter<sup>23</sup> set out his own more elaborate picture of what democracy really is and means, the practical implications of governing on the basis of electoral representation had become far clearer. To Schumpeter, democracy was essentially a competition between teams of politicians for the people's vote and the power to govern which would follow from it. The victors in that competition won the opportunity to govern for a limited period. As a system, therefore, electoral democracy was 'the rule of the politician'.<sup>24</sup> What the electors picked their politicians for was still the prospective quality of their stewardship. But once the politicians in

question had been picked, the terms of the relationship changed abruptly. For most citizens most of the time there was little room for doubt that they were still being ruled. The rich might find themselves cheated or even tormented by individual stewards whom they had been injudicious enough to select. But it was not a credible picture of the relationship between the two to describe the rich as being ruled by their stewards. The amalgam of rule with stewardship is a far more rigid and committing transfer of power and responsibility than any the citizens of democratic Athens were ever asked to make (except on those rare occasions when they were asked, or compelled, to abolish the democracy itself). It is easy for electors not merely to regret individual past choices (bargains that have gone seriously astray), but also to lose heart more generally in face of the options presented to them. It is not simply because modern liberty can take so many other forms (because it offers so many more amusing ways of spending one's time) that the percentage of those who bother to exercise their vote has fallen so relentlessly across the democratic world. Some of the fall in voting rates is best attributed less to a preference for private enjoyments<sup>25</sup> than to dismay at what electors have got for their votes. At its most dismaying, this can result in the desertion of the electoral forum by very large sections of the population. Career politicians can come to be seen as systematically corrupt manipulators, reliably intent on nothing but furthering their own interests<sup>26</sup> by using public authority ruthlessly in the service of the evidently sinister interests of small groups of independently powerful miscreants. 'Democracy', the French syndicalist Georges Sorel sneered almost a century ago, 'is the paradise of which unscrupulous financiers dream.'<sup>27</sup>

The ethos of democratic Athens evoked in Pericles's great speech could scarcely have been more different. But it is wrong to see the contrast between Periclean glory and the squalid financial scandals of the Third Republic as one which mirrors an essentially valid application of a clear term over against an obvious abuse of the same term. Some of the contrasts between the two unmistakably come out in the

wrong direction. Even in Sorel's day, the franchise of the Third Republic was very considerably less exclusive than the citizenship of ancient Athens.<sup>28</sup> Even those contrasts which do clearly come out in the right direction often turn on something quite other than democracy itself. The citizen pride celebrated by Pericles certainly encompassed the freedom (for the citizens themselves) embodied in the political organization of the polis. But it turned more in the end on the splendour and dynamism of the life of the polis community, the former funded largely by resources drawn from other communities, and the latter also often exerted very much at other peoples' expense. Democracy probably meant more to some contemporaries of Pericles than it can have meant to any of France's population in the opening decade of the twentieth century. But it did not mean more because the Athenians understood democracy, and the French did not, but because the Athenians saw their city as being at the zenith of its greatness, and associated that greatness with the form of its rule, while the French, in the lengthy shadow cast by the Franco-Prussian War, were in no position to do so, and had correspondingly little occasion to congratulate themselves on the distinctiveness of their political arrangements.

If democracy is simply a way of organizing the relationships between communities and their governments, it can scarcely in itself be an occasion for intense pride. Where communities are self-confident and proud, some of that pride will rub off on their political institutions, however the latter are structured (a point familiar to tyrants across the ages). Under less ebullient circumstances, the attitudes of communities to their governments are likely to be moulded largely by how groups or individuals within them see their own interests as served or damaged by their government, a matter of skill and luck as much as good or ill will, sense of duty or culpable neglect. Political scientists and advertising agencies have each studied these shifts of sentiment and sympathy in great detail, and developed enough insight into what determines them to earn, at least in the latter case, consid-

erable sums of money for passing their conclusions on to the competing teams of politicians. The formidable scale, cost and elaboration of a modern American Presidential campaign, already certain to be larger than ever in 2004, could rouse a sense of personal freedom in most individual citizens only through sheer delusion. But neither the remorselessness of the manipulation attempted, nor the lavishness of the resources squandered, are enough in themselves to invalidate its claims to embody democracy. To run against it, any coherent complaint must in the end once again be made on behalf of the order of equality, and against the order of egoism. However else we understand democracy today, we cannot safely or honourably brush aside the recognition that it has been the clear verdict of democracy that the struggle between these two orders is one which the order of egoism must win. It is above all democracy, in this thin but momentous sense, which has handed the order of egoism its ever more conclusive victory.

The big question raised by that victory is how much of the distant agenda of the order of equality can still be rescued from the ruins of its overwhelming defeat. That question can be seen in two very different ways, as one of institutional architecture and the meanings to ascribe to it, or as one of distributive outcomes (with the ascription of meanings left severely to the individual winners or losers). The first way of seeing the issue is bound to attach special weight to the sense that democracy can only be adequately seen not as a form in which individual states are or are not governed, but as a political value, or a standard for justifiable political choice, against which not merely state structures, but every other setting or milieu in which human beings live, can and should be measured.

Democracy, so viewed, promises (or threatens) the democratization of everything (work, sex, the family, dress, food, demeanour, choice by everyone over anything which affects any number of others). What it entails is the elimination of every vestige of privilege from the ordering of human life. It is a vision of how humans could live with one another, if they did so in a context from which injustice

had been eradicated. Even thought through with limitless energy,<sup>29</sup> this remains quite an elusive idea. What is not elusive about it, however, is that it requires the systematic elimination of power (the capacity to make others act against their own firm inclinations) from human relations. At the very least it demands the removal of any form of power stable enough to disclose itself to others, and resistant enough to survive for any length of time once it has done so. The removal of all power (what thus far causes much of human life to go as it does) from the relations between human beings is most unlikely to prove coherent even as an idea. It is also spectacularly unlikely to occur, since it forswears in the first instance the principal medium through which human beings bring about consequences which they intend.<sup>30</sup> But incoherent and implausible though it almost certainly is, it is also unmistakably the full programme of the Equals, and in a clearer and more trenchant form than Babeuf ever took the trouble to elaborate it. What it is not, however, is a programme ever widely adopted by any groups in the real world, still less one even weakly reminiscent of a form of government. It is a value that might perhaps inspire a form of government, and which, at least in negative forms, often has inspired groups of men and women, sometimes on a very large scale. But it is not a coherent description of how power can be organized, or institutions constructed: not a causal model of anything at all.

The democratization of everything human is not a real possibility: as illusory as a promise as it is idle as a threat. But as a political programme it carries very considerable allure. In many places it has already made far greater progress than the Abbé Sieyès could have imagined. Within the richer countries of the world the back-breaking toil and casual brutality which dominated the lives of huge numbers of people even a century ago have been lifted from the shoulders of all but relatively small minorities. When the conditions of those minorities emerge sporadically into public view they cause as much shock as they arouse shame. Entire dimensions of social, cultural

and economic life have been challenged irreversibly: most dramatically of all the relations between men and women. Usually slowly, often bemusedly, and almost always grudgingly, those relations have begun to recompose themselves comprehensively to fit the requirements of equality. The surrender of the vote was the merest beginning. None of us yet knows how far that transformation can go, or quite where it will end. If you view democracy solely as a value, you can be very sanguine about the extent of this progress. Gender may seem not merely a privileged and uniquely urgent domain for equality to conquer. It can serve as a proxy, too, for every other domain in which equality is still effectively obstructed: race, ethnicity, literacy, even class. The sole boundaries to its progress are the limits to human capacities to think clearly and imagine coherently.

But that gives far too little weight to democracy as a form of government. It misses entirely the significance of its diffusion across the world, as one very particular form of government, over the last two centuries. It simply suspends political causality (what causes politics to work the way it does). Almost certainly, on careful analysis, *it must suspend along with it most forms of social, economic and even cultural causality too.* If in this guise democracy has spread across the world, especially over the last half-century, by backing the order of egoism to the hilt, the order of egoism reciprocally has built itself ever more drastically at the same time by adopting and refashioning democracy in this particular sense. The world in which we all live is a world principally structured by the radicalization and intensification of inequalities. Between the inhabitants of much richer countries, these inequalities need not result in wider gaps in wealth, status or personal power than those which existed many centuries earlier, or still exist in far poorer countries today. But, by the principle of economic competition and its cumulative consequences, they work through, and have to work through, the sharpening and systematization of inequality in the lives of virtually everyone.

It is by its pervasiveness and its peremptory practical priority that the order of egoism precludes equality. It tolerates, and even welcomes, many particular impulses towards equalization. But what drives it, and in the end organizes the entire human world, is a relentless and all-conquering principle of division and contrast. That was what Babeuf saw and hated. It is still there to see (and, if we care to, to hate) to this day. What there can be, today and as far as we can see into the future, is not the democratization of human life in its entirety, either in one institution, or in one country, or in the globe as a whole. What there can be is the democratization of human life anywhere, as far as the order of egoism proves to permit. This is not a struggle which equality is going to win. The precise limits which the order of egoism sets to equality do not form a clear fixed structure which can be specified in advance of political experience. They are an endless and ever-shifting battleground. What is clear and fixed, however, is the strategic outcome of that long war, and the identity of its victor.

The outcome itself is not one which any of us cares to see very clearly, and perhaps not one which anyone who did see it clearly could unequivocally welcome. It makes no direct appeal to the moral sentiments,<sup>31</sup> let alone the moral sense.<sup>32</sup> To put the point less archaically, it is an outcome which must offend anyone with the nerve to recognize what it means.

The role of democracy as a political value within this remarkable form of life (the World Order of Egoism) is to probe constantly the tolerable limits of injustice, a permanent and sometimes very intense blend of cultural enquiry with social and political struggle. The key to the form of life as a whole is thus an endless tug of war between two instructive but very different senses of democracy. In that struggle, the second sense, democracy as a political value, constantly subverts the legitimacy of democracy as an already existing form of government. But the first, too, almost as constantly on its own behalf, explores, but then insists on and in the end imposes, its own priority over the second. The explorations of democracy as a value vary in

pace, urgency and audacity across time and space. At times, as in the work of the American philosopher and educator John Dewey,<sup>33</sup> the imagery of a democratic way of life bites very deep and summons up intense imaginative energies. More often, the mobilizing force of the value is negative and far more specific – the demolition of spectacular and long-entrenched injustice in one domain after another of collective life. Everyone will have their own favourites among these stirring stories. Many, too, no doubt, their own especial aversions. What adult men or women may or may not do with their own or one another's bodies or their own embryonic fellows. How one (self- or other-defined) racial grouping may or may not treat another. How money may or may not be exchanged directly for office, power or honour, or office, power or honour in their turn be exchanged directly instead for money. The terms of trade, overt or covert, on which we live our lives together.

Most of modern politics is taken up by quarrels over what to revere or repudiate within these struggles. The true definition of democracy is merely one prize at stake in those quarrels. None of the stories ends in unalloyed triumph. What sets the limits to their triumph is often hard to ascertain; but almost always, sooner or later, it turns on definite decisions by powerful agents within the formal apparatus of democratic rule, career politicians or those whom they in the end license. The balance between cultural exploration, social struggle and public decision by ruling institutions of representative democracy is never fixed firmly or clearly. But there are denser barriers to how far it can go in one direction than in the other. The periods when, for a brief time, these barriers seem lifted, like the youth uprisings of 1968, can be times of fervent collective hope, as well as transitory personal transformation. But they offer no rival instruments with which to leave behind them solid institutional guarantees for any ground they may win. Grand victories are often largely undone by long strings of petty defeats.<sup>34</sup> Where they fail to carry through to the laws passed by representative legislatures, and to the political decisions to ensure that

those laws are enforced, they can vanish as easily and rapidly as they came.

One important fact about this strange form of life we now share is that almost no one within it tries to take in the fate of democracy in both of these two key senses anywhere at all. This is neither surprising nor simply inappropriate. Only someone of great arrogance, and probably also someone in considerable intellectual confusion, would dream of attempting to grasp the fate of both across the entire globe. But the sharp bifurcation of attention for the vast majority of us between these two domains, however natural its sources or individually prudent its grounds, has extraordinarily malign consequences. It prompts us to split a preoccupation with the ethical and the desirable from any sustained attempt to grasp what is happening in the world and why it is happening. It sanctions the cultivation of normative fastidiousness, a connoisseurship of the prepossessing and the edifying. It also recognizes and applauds a cumulative knowledge and mastery of the practicalities of political competition. But it makes virtually no demand that these two should meet, and at least confront one another. Except opportunistically and by individual contingency, they therefore virtually never do.

The clearest setting of this disjunction in our social and political understanding is the organization of academic life, the modern intellectual division of labour at its most aspiring and self-regarding. What no competent modern student of politics can sanely attempt is to master both with equal resolution. Even to try to do so betokens either intellectual confusion or personal frivolity. But if the synthesis is beyond any possible professional, how are the huge amateur majorities of modern citizens to undertake it, as the sovereign choosers they presume themselves to be? (And what, if they prove to have neither the time, the nerve nor the inclination to do so, can they honourably do instead?)

There is something deep about the structure of this outcome. The condition of involuntary collective befuddlement which it unrelentingly

guarantees is not what Plato held against democracy. But it is hard not to see it as a blemish within our own form of life. It is hard to see, too, how in the end it can fail to corrupt each sense of democracy pretty thoroughly, abandoning the form of government to the tender mercies of the professionals, and abandoning too the conduct of refined cultural and intellectual enquiry to ever more scholastic and narcissistic introspection.

The strongest pressures behind democratization are resentment at condescension, and the will of individuals or groups to find better ways to defend their own interests. The power of the first is admirably captured by Tocqueville.<sup>37</sup> It focuses essentially on form and appearance, and rightly presupposes that democracy, however obstructed it may prove in practice, must at least surrender privilege at the level of form. It must recognize all citizens as equals and give each at least some opportunity to insist on being treated equally in ways which especially concern them. What it cannot in practice give them is equal power to defend their own interests. What prevents it from doing so above all is the scale and pervasiveness of inequality dictated by the order of egoism. In the Assembly at Athens any fully adult male with the good fortune to have been born a citizen, if they happened also to be present on the occasion and wished to do so,<sup>38</sup> had an equal right to address the people on what was to be done. They could, if only they had the courage, defend their own interests in person with their own judgement and in their own voice. In the law-making (and still more the war-making) decisions of a modern democracy, nothing vaguely similar is ever now true. Ordinary citizens are never present in their personal capacity within a legislative assembly. Still less do they ever hold executive authority as ordinary citizens within a modern state. In most modern democracies, most of the time and on most issues, ordinary citizens are almost certainly freer to speak or think than the Athenians ever were. The penalties they face for voicing views which most of their contemporaries dislike or find scandalous are far less harsh and altogether less public. But most also have

little chance to make themselves at all widely audible; and no one at all, except by resolute, strenuous and extremely successful competitive effort, has an effective right of direct access to legislative deliberation. The newspaper press, which John Stuart Mill offered to mid-nineteenth-century Britain as an effective substitute for the political immediacy of the Athens Assembly,<sup>37</sup> still does something to offset the lobbying power of great economic interests. But most of it, in many different parts of the world, belongs to a relatively small number of private individuals; and the ways in which it operates cannot be said seriously to modify the evident political impotence of the great majority of citizens at most times and over almost all issues. This effect is even more pronounced in the cases of television and radio, the most insistent of contemporary media of public communication. In Italy, in a scandalous but deeply symbolic conjunction, a single man at present owns several of the national television channels (as well as the biggest publishing company), controls most of the other television channels in his capacity as Prime Minister and heads the government as leader of a party which is effectively a personal fief.<sup>38</sup> What furnishes most of us with almost all the effective representation we receive for most of our interests is not our own access to any public forum or site of binding political choice. It is an enormously elaborate structure of divided labour, most of which operates wholly outside public view, and can be dragged into the light of day only sporadically, with great exertion, and as a result of some wholly undeniable political disaster. It is not, of course, part of the meaning of the term *democracy* that the political institutions which govern our lives should be so far beyond the reach of most of us almost all the time. But it remains clearly true that this is what democracy as a form of government now amounts to. How far could it still really amount to anything fundamentally different?

Because this complex of institutions and practices was never designed or chosen by anyone, it must be true that every aspect of it could perfectly well be quite different. Because it has spread so widely

now, however, and spread principally by imitation and competition, it can scarcely also be true that the complex as a whole could readily or rapidly alter into something drastically different. Still less could it hope to do so in ways which relied on winning general applause or even on gratifying most of those who were consciously aware of them. The key issue for this modern variant of democracy is how far it necessitates a level of alienation of will, judgement and choice which any ancient partisan of democracy could only see as its complete negation: at most a partially elective aristocracy,<sup>39</sup> and at worst a corrupt and heavily mystified oligarchy.

If ancient democracy was the citizens choosing freely and immediately for themselves, modern democracy, it seems, is principally the citizens very intermittently, choosing under highly constrained circumstances, the relatively small number of their fellows who will from then on choose for them. There are many obvious ways in which modern citizens have no need whatever to accept this bargain. They could insist on taking particular state decisions personally for themselves: putting them out to referenda, in which every adult citizen is just as eligible to vote as they are in a legislative election. Referenda do indeed play a role in the national politics of some states, both over key issues of inclusion or exclusion, and over especially contentious decisions, sometimes including constitutional amendments.<sup>40</sup> In the case of Taiwan, for example, early in 2004, an incumbent President even used the threat of a referendum asserting the right of the citizens to choose for themselves whether or not to reunite with China, to strengthen his hand against local opponents who favoured a more diplomatic approach to the People's Republic. (This came very close to putting the central issue of state security out to direct popular decision.) What referenda today have in common is that the terms of the choices offered are always decided by a ruling group of career politicians. It is more reasonable to see them as manoeuvres open to career politicians who expect them to work to their own advantage than as real surrenders of power back to the citizens from whom it

supposedly came. Where their expectation is disappointed, or the sway of the ruling group is successfully disrupted by their opponents, the consequences of adopting the expedient may dismay its initial sponsors. But the role of the electors who vote in the referendum will still be principally to hand the victory to one team of career politicians at the expense of another.

A more substantial democratic opportunity would go beyond the right to vote on issues which it suits the incumbent government to put to a referendum (on terms they can largely control for themselves). It would demand as well the opportunity to put to a referendum whatever issues the citizens themselves happen to wish, and permit them to define the terms of the resulting referendum on their own behalf. The first element in this opportunity is quite substantial, and not hard to supply. A right of citizen initiative in placing issues on the ballot has existed for some time, both in the State of California and in the Swiss Cantons.<sup>41</sup> In each setting it has naturally had many critics; and some of its consequences have proved extremely damaging. The right to take such decisions can readily extend as wide as the citizen body, or the openness of the Athenian Assembly to any citizen who wished to speak in it. What cannot be distributed so widely is the opportunity to focus the terms of the choice offered. There the division of labour which rationalizes, and in some degree causes, the professionalization of modern politics enforces an effective alienation of the task of formulation from a constituency as wide as the citizen body to a relatively small group entrusted to think, choose and write on its behalf. To draft a coherent text of any length requires in the end a single process of consecutive thought: if not the mind and pen of a single person, at least a conversation between modest numbers of people, who can hear one another and respond to the pressure of each other's thoughts.

In recent years academic political philosophers have devoted considerable attention to outlining the qualities which deserve most weight in taking public decisions of any consequence.<sup>42</sup> They have



taken their cue from Aristotle's acknowledgement of the principal merit of democratic choice: its capacity to reach out to, and bring into play, the full breadth of knowledge and awareness of the entire citizen body.<sup>41</sup> The assemblage and sifting of this range of experience, as Aristotle saw it, was a process of deliberation. For a group of human beings who can communicate with one another, deliberation might hope ideally to become a common enquiry, and an exercise in public reasoning, which could bring into play every element of wisdom present in the citizen body. It could also hope to subject the less wise and more grossly partial elements within the judgement of each citizen to disciplined public scrutiny and mutually accountable criticism.

Deliberative democracy, democracy which embodies and realizes democracy at its best, attempts to prescribe how a community of human beings should wish for its public decisions to be taken. Many themes have naturally suggested themselves. It should take these decisions reflectively, attentively and in good faith. It should take them as decisions about what would be publicly good, and not as calculations of what would be personally most advantageous. It should take them non-exclusively: ensuring that all those whom they affect, and all who are sufficiently mature and rational to identify their own interests,<sup>42</sup> can play an active part in determining their outcome. More exactingly still, it should take them in a way in which all can enter, and all who wish to in fact do enter, the deliberation as equals, and hold equal weight within it.<sup>43</sup>

The order of egoism clashes more drastically with some of these requirements than it does with others. But both as a form of life and a milieu within which to live, it is at best neutral, and at worst blankly indifferent, towards any of them. Towards some it is, and will always remain, quite openly hostile. Within the order of egoism a large part of the point of power is always money, and a large part of the point of money is always power.<sup>44</sup> Individuals can, and conspicuously do, shape their own lives in very different terms. But it

is difficult (and possibly flatly impossible) for them to override the main structuring principle of the form within which they live. Democracy as a form of government and democratization as a social, cultural, economic and political process have very different rhythms. They are also subject to quite different sorts of causal pressures. Democratization is open-ended, indeterminate and exploratory. It sets out from, and responds to, the conception of democracy as a political value, a way in which whatever matters deeply for a body of human beings should in the end be decided. Democracy as a form of government is rather less open-ended, considerably more determinate and far less audacious in its explorations. Because in government some human beings always extensively control very many others in numerous ways this fundamental contrast between value and form of government has some obvious merits. It is better for there to be clear limits to how far you can be controlled by others. Democratization today can be both more exploratory and braver than democratic government because, unlike the latter, it is neither licensed by, nor responsible to or for, the order of egoism. It sits much lighter within our form of life, always searching out the limits of licence, but leaving the task of securing that form of life, with varying degrees of gratitude, firmly to others.

Representative democracy, the form in which democracy has spread so widely over the last six decades, has equipped itself for the journey by making its peace ever more explicitly with the order of egoism. It offers a framework within which that order can flourish, but also one in which the citizens at large can set some bounds both to its pretensions and to its consequences. Wealth by permission of the people may or may not present less of a practical hazard to any of them than wealth secured in open defiance of their will. At least it is less obnoxious. The battle lines between the two orders which Babeuf and his fellow conspirators saw run very differently in any actual representative democracy, losing all their starkness and most of their political plausibility. You can track the progress of representative democracy as

a form of government from the 1780s until today, sticking pins into the map to record its advance, and noting not merely the growing homogenization of its institutional formats as the decades go by, but also the cumulative discrediting of the rich variety of other state forms which have competed against it throughout, often with very considerable initial assurance. The state form which advances across this time-span was pioneered by Europeans; and it has spread in a world in which first Europe and then the United States wielded quite disproportionate military and economic power.

For much of this time that state form was taken up by others for its promise to withstand or offset the power wielded by its inventors, or spurned instead in favour of rivals (above all communism or fascism) which promised more credibly to provide the same service. For most of the twentieth century, it was spurned with particular contempt in the great wounded former empires of Russia and China. But for much of the first half of the century it was spurned too in temporarily more potent and menacing states like Germany and Japan, with better immediate prospects of turning the tables on their overweening enemies. Its most decisive advances, the largest number of fresh pins moving across the map, came with three great defeats. The first was the breaking of German and Japanese military power in the Second World War. The second, which followed closely, and also required much violent struggle if of a more dispersed kind, was the collapse of western colonial empire across the world, most of it within two decades of the close of the Second World War. Representative democracy was the model imposed on their defeated enemies by that war's western victors.<sup>47</sup> It was also the model which, after much preliminary foot-dragging, they chose to bequeath to most of their former colonies, from the stunning precedent of imperial India,<sup>48</sup> to the most parlous of Caribbean or Pacific island dependencies. Only with the return of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China was the choice firmly repudiated from the outset by the new sovereign (if scarcely by the inhabitants themselves). With the third great defeat, the end of the

Soviet Union and the collapse of the bloc of states which it had built so painstakingly around it on its own model, representative democracy shook off all remaining exemplary rivals, and became virtually an index of global normality. It was still firmly rejected in China, site of the lengthiest and proudest tradition of political autonomy of any human society, and very little dented in its rulers' sense of self-sufficiency by more than half a century of rule under the aegis of a local variant of an openly western political doctrine. It was excluded tenaciously and brutally in many other parts of the world, in most cases by the rulers of societies visibly faltering in the struggle for wealth and power. But none of its numerous and sometimes well-armed enemies could any longer confront it with a countervailing model of their own, with the power to reach out to and convince populations with different cultures and any real opportunity to decide their political arrangements for themselves. On a global scale nothing like this had ever occurred before, although there were more local precedents scattered throughout history, in the Asian states encircling the Central Kingdom of China,<sup>49</sup> or the long shadows cast by Rome across the continent of Europe.

In the course of this last advance, a number of plausible and widely credited assumptions have been refuted. It is clearly not true, for example, that the western provenance of this political model makes it somehow ineligible for other parts of the world or for populations with sharply contrasted cultural traditions. It can be (and has been) adopted with some success in every continent, in societies with long and cruel experiences of arbitrary rule, cultures of great historical depth, and religious traditions which insist on the profound inequality of human beings and the duty of most of them to view their superiors with the utmost deference, in East and South and South East Asia, in Latin America, and more sporadically and precariously, in Sub-Saharan Africa and even the Middle East. In itself this is scarcely surprising. Every element in these supposed disqualifications had prominent counterparts over most of the history of the

European continent. Behind the resistance to its advance there lies sometimes antipathy towards the western societies from which it originated, and sometimes a more urgent hatred of the immediate power and arrogance of the United States itself. But accompanying both there is also always an understandable reluctance on the part of those who hold power within them on other bases and by different means at the prospect of being subverted openly and from within.

This advance has occurred in a world of intensifying trade and ever-accelerating communication, in which people, goods and information traverse the globe incessantly. It is a world in which human populations are drawn more tightly together, and depend more abjectly for their security and prosperity on the skills and good intentions of those who rule them than they have ever done before. That world certainly needs many facilities which it has yet to acquire, and not a few which it has yet even to invent or imagine. But one facility which it clearly needs all the time, and with the utmost urgency, is a basis on which its human denizens can address the task of ensuring the skill and good intentions of their rulers for themselves. This task has many different components. It requires the searching out and assemblage of a vast range of information, the strenuous exercise of critical judgement, the permanent monitoring of the performance of those who devote most of their lives to competitive politics or public administration. There are no cheap or reliable recipes for guaranteeing a successful outcome, and little evidence that institutional design on its own can hope to shoulder most of the burden. There are also a great many sites, including numerous formally independent nation states, in which the rulers show little sign of recognizing any such responsibility, and the great majority of the population has little, if any, effective power to protect themselves against the fecklessness or malignity of those who do for the moment rule them.

In the midst of impotence and despair, representative democracy is scarcely an impressive recipe for building order, peace, security, pros-

perity or justice. No one could readily mistake it for a solution to the Riddle of History. But, in its simple unpretentious way, it has by now established a clear claim to meet a global need better than any of its competitors. The fact that the need itself is still so urgent, and now so evidently confronts every human population of any scale, make the question of how to meet it genuinely global. They also make it a question to which, for the first time, there might be a truly global answer. The fact that none of representative democracy's surviving rivals acknowledges the need as clearly, and none at all volunteers to provide the question with a global answer, lend it a unique status, fusing timeliness and well-considered modesty with a claim for the present to something very close to indispensability.

It is hard to judge how long this claim will hold up. There are many ineliminable limitations to the form of government, and much that it cannot in principle ensure for any human population. It cannot hope to render professional politics ingratiating to most of us anywhere for any length of time; and it duly fails to do so. It guarantees a disconcerting combination of shabbiness of motive and pretence to public spirit throughout most of the cohorts of practising politicians. That shabbiness might be veiled in more closed and less audibly competitive conditions; but it is bound to be highlighted mercilessly throughout the political arena by the vigorous efforts of competitors, inside and outside their own political groupings. All of this was seen from democracy's outset in Athens itself; and its key elements were described with unsurpassed panache and scorn by Plato himself.

It fashions a world in which political leaders call incessantly for the rest of us to trust them, and rely implicitly on their competence, integrity and good intentions. But within that world they must press their appeal permanently in the teeth of their rivals' indefatigable explanations of just how misplaced such trust would be, and how naïve it must be to confer it. For many decades, in many settings, the mass political party served to some degree to generate and sustain this kind of trust, at least between particular groups of the citizens and

the party itself as an organization. It lent a political shape to communities of residence or occupation, helped to define a sense of shared interest across them, and established salient outlines for political conflict over the exercise of governmental power.<sup>50</sup> But in the long run many different influences have dissipated most of the plausibility of party structures. The struggle to sustain a trust in political leadership has been submerged increasingly by the rising waters of popular disbelief. Schumpeter's electoral entrepreneurs<sup>51</sup> must trade now on a market where trust is more elusive and expensive than ever, and the grounds for distrust easier and cheaper than ever to disseminate effectively. Even the more insistent of their newer weapons, the skills of the advertising profession and the ever-extending facilities of the media of communication, are far better suited to dispelling trust than to nurturing it or creating it in the first place. Whatever you should learn from advertisements, it can scarcely be a generalized credulity.

Seen as a whole, this is a disenchanted and demoralized world, all too well adjusted to lives organized around the struggle to maximize personal income. But it is also a world permanently in quest of opportunities for re-enchantment, and often ready to identify and respond to the most fugitive and unreliable of cues: not just the youth, energy and determination of Tony Blair, but the cinematic vigour of Arnold Schwarzenegger, or the entrepreneurial momentum of Silvio Berlusconi.<sup>52</sup> Viewed with charity the modern democratic politician's world is a strenuous ordeal, scanned intermittently by most citizens, often querulously and always with some suspicion. It is a world from which faith, deference and even loyalty have largely passed away, and the keenest of personal admiration seldom lasts for very long.

If this is the triumph of democracy, it is a triumph which very many will always find disappointing. It carries none of the glamour which Pericles invoked for its Athenian namesake. Over the two centuries in which it has come to triumph, some have seen it simply as an impostor, bearer of a name which it has stolen, and instrument for the rule of the people by something unmistakably different. No one

anywhere nowadays can plausibly see it as rule by the people. In itself, this is no occasion for regret. Had it really been rule by the people, as Madison and Sieyès, Robespierre and even Buonarroti, all warned, it would assuredly not have triumphed, but dissolved instead, immediately and irreversibly, into chaos. The least ambitious case which can be made for it is that it is so very far from the worst that we have to fear: that it offers the inhabitants of the world in which we find ourselves the safest and least personally offensive basis on which to live together with our fellow citizens within our own states. That service is not one which we have yet learned to provide at all reliably by any other means; and no one could reasonably deny its fundamental importance. But that is a case essentially for the practical merits of representative democracy as a form of government. It shows no evident appropriateness in our selection of the word *democracy* as the name for this form of government.

For that name to be appropriate, it must mean more than this. More stirring perhaps, it must also imply that representative democracy as it now is cannot be all for which we can reasonably hope. There must be some link between the historical fact that the word itself means so much more (or means something so different) and the possibility that the way in which we are now governed can be altered to fit that word better, or at least recover some imaginative contact with it. This may or may not prove to be so. (It will depend, amongst other things, on how we act politically in the future.) There are at least two drastic ways in which the democracy of today might perhaps be altered in this direction. One is in the flow and structuring of information amongst citizens, and the degree to which all governments restrict and withhold information from the governed. Governmental seclusion is the most direct and also the deepest subversion of the democratic claim,<sup>53</sup> sometimes prudent, but never fully compatible with the literal meaning of the form of rule. The more governments control what their fellow citizens know the less they can claim the authority of those citizens for how they rule. The more governments

withhold information from their fellow citizens the less accountable they are to those who give them their authority. Even to fit its own name, modern representative democracy would have to transform itself very radically in this respect. The struggle for that transformation will certainly be arduous because the interests in obstructing it are both so huge and so well positioned to impede it. But the case against transforming it has now become merely one of discretion. No powerful imaginative pressures still survive to challenge the judgement that this is how it plainly should be altered.

The second drastic way in which our existing practice of rule might converge more with its democratic title finds itself for the present in very different circumstances. But it is just as simple, and not obviously any less compelling. As a word, *democracy* has won this global competition to designate legitimate rule largely by courtesy of Buonarroti's order of egoism, the thought-through self-understanding and endorsement of a capitalist economy. For Buonarroti himself its victory in this guise would have been a single vast act of theft. But since he had so little comprehension of the basis on which that economy had grown in his own day, and no foreknowledge of the utterly different world which it has since constructed, his assessment carries very little weight. What still retains most of its original force is the simple perception that a ruling people cannot confront one another in conditions of acute inequality, where a few control many before, during and after every governmental choice or action. For well over a century capitalist economies faced fierce political pressure from well-organized mass political parties, representing many millions of citizens, to compress these inequalities and place all citizens on something closer to an equal political footing. At least for the moment those pressures have largely disappeared. But their disappearance does nothing to lessen the anomaly of the chasm between the meaning of democracy as a word and the substance of contemporary representative democracy in action. At present that chasm seems unbridgeable even in principle. It could be spanned at all only

if we came to understand economies well enough to establish some real control over them, an idea which may not even make sense, and an achievement which certainly seems practically quite beyond our reach.

For the moment, therefore, democracy has won its global near-monopoly as basis for legitimate rule in a setting which largely contradicts its own pretensions. It remains blatantly at odds with many of the most obtrusive features of existing practices of rule. It still clashes systematically and fundamentally with the defining logic of economic organization. But its victory is no mere illusion. It clashes with each as an independent power in its own right, and with an appeal altogether warmer than either. It may for the present have less power than either (certainly far less than the logic of economic organization). But it still mounts a permanent challenge to each. Melodramatically but not essentially misleadingly, you can see the relations between the three as a long drawn-out war of position, in which the fronts are always under pressure, and no one can foresee quite where they will run even a few years ahead.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond (or beneath) this war of position runs another and older struggle, to which democracy as yet barely applies even in the breach. The main elements of rule amongst human beings still occur within the individual politically sovereign units of the nation state. Democracy has won its global near-monopoly as an answer to the question of how a nation state should be governed. Much else is adjusted, co-operatively or quarrelsomely, among groups of nation states in the endless variety of arenas constructed for the purpose. But the scope of the adjustment is still determined by (and its enforcement still overwhelmingly left to) individual states.

Many hope (and a few even believe)<sup>55</sup> that in the long run democracy can and will provide a good name for a quite different basis both for adjustment and for enforcement. It will keep its global title to define the conditions for legitimate rule, but it will also itself enforce those conditions, unitarily and comprehensively, across the entire

globe. In this vision democracy would become global not just in pretension or aspiration but in simple fact. One *demos*, the human population of the whole globe, would not merely claim a shared political authority across that globe, but literally rule it together. This is a natural yearning (with a lengthy Christian and pre-Christian past).<sup>66</sup> It reflects powerful and wholly creditable sentiments. But it is an extremely strained line of thought.

It ignores the direct link between adjudication and coercion in defining what a state is. It thinks away (or temporarily forgets) the vast chasm of power and wealth between different populations across the world. It sets aside not merely the victory of the order of egoism, but also the factors which have caused it to win. It grossly sentimentalizes the sense in which democracy ever does rule even in an individual nation state. As an expectation about the human future it is little better than absurd. But it gets one key judgement exactly right. Democracy may or may not provide either a compelling or a reliable recipe for organizing political choice and its enforcement within one country. It certainly cannot hope, just by doing so, to provide at the same time a compelling or realistic recipe for organizing the political or economic relations between that country and others. Unless we can make more impressive headway in identifying and installing such a recipe within our own country and for our own country, there is little danger of hitting on a remedy for the brutal historical gap between the world's different populations. Perhaps, given world enough and time, there could be such a remedy, and not merely in moral philosophy or welfare economics, but even in economic organization and political practice. If there really could be, what is quite clear is that we are not for the present moving towards it. Until we do, we should at least expect to go on paying the price for the scale of our failure to do so.

## NOTES

### NOTES TO THE PREFACE

1. This movement of transliteration and translation across the languages and societies of the world is a piece of genuinely global intellectual and political history which has yet to be traced with any care. Until we know why and how it has happened, we cannot hope to understand one of the central features of modern politics (or perhaps simply to understand modern politics?). For a stimulating comparative study centring on concepts and practices of freedom see Robert H. Taylor (ed), *The Idea of Freedom in Asia and Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), especially Sudipta Kaviraj's superb analysis of India's experience. The most ambitious attempt to assess the significance of its impact in the key case of China (oldest, densest, most defiantly autonomous of the world's cultures, and globalizer in its own right and in its own terms very long ago) has been made over the last thirty years by Thomas A. Metzger. (See conveniently his 'The Western Concept of Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History', Sudipta Kaviraj & Sunil Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society: History and*