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Introduction

The Promise of Democracy

To present democracy as a "promise" means that it is not presently an actuality or concrete reality. But at the same time, to call it a "promise" does not stamp it a mere whim or empty pipe dream. For, a genuine promise is somehow anchored or latently present in reality: as a possibility or potentiality whose realization may require a long process of maturation and cultivation. Thus, a child may have the promise of becoming a great artist or scientist—but this is not going to happen by itself or without further ado; in fact, it usually requires sustained practice and training. For too long, democracy has been treated either as a readily achieved fact, or else as a hopeless illusion (hopeless because of human viciousness). Little investigation is required to see that presently existing democracies are in large measure travesties, given the enormous abuses and glaring inequalities flourishing in them. As it appears, many so-called liberal democracies hover just an inch over a war-like "state of nature," with slim procedural formalities serving as fig leaves to cover prevailing modes of domination. But it also seems to be a fact of life that millions of people around the world eagerly cling to democracy as a hope or promise to rescue them from their miseries.

To say that millions of people in the world hope for democracy may seem a bold and not fully persuasive claim. As cynics are prone to retort: what people are eagerly striving for are food, shelter, and a decent living—not democracy. However, the retort easily can be rebutted. People striving for food, shelter, and decent living also necessarily strive for a society in which the production and distribution of goods is equitably managed from the people's angle—and this happens (or is meant to happen) precisely in a democracy. Another objection is more difficult to answer because it relies on theological and metaphysical

arguments. When we speak of promise in an elevated sense, the objection goes, we usually mean something like the "promised land," the "coming kingdom," the "reign of the Mahdi," or the like—and none of these phrases is a synonym for democracy. In fact, according to some "fundamentalist" theologians, the rule of God and the rule of the people are radically incompatible, such that the latter undermines the former. I cannot fully delve into this issue here (some of it has to be left to the rest of the study)—except to point out: If it is true, as many religions hold, that the "image" of God is implanted in the human heart, then it would seem to follow that, rather than being a pointless appendix, that image is meant to become steadily more manifest in history and approximate society to a promised democracy (which is not at all the opposite of God's kingdom).

Allowing myself to be inspired at least in part by this trajectory, I turn now to several more immediate concerns having to do with democracy as a political regime. First, I discuss the possibility of seeing democracy as an ethical or properly humane form of political life. Next, I turn to detractors of this view, especially to procedural minimalists and rational choice theorists. Finally, I reflect on the promise of democracy in the context of current debates regarding modernity versus postmodernity and against the backdrop of the relentless process of globalization.

Democracy as an Ethical Community

Throughout long stretches of human history, democracy has had a bad press. Philosophers as well as theologians assigned the common people—presumably in charge of democracy—to the low end of a totem pole whose upper reaches were reserved for kings, priests, and sages. Predicated on a fixed or "essentialist" metaphysics, the people were assumed to be base, fickle, and incapable of self-rule—and hence needed to be governed by a qualified elite in the same manner as passion needs to be governed by reason and desire by duty and moral principles. To be sure, different societies exhibited variations of this scheme and different historical contexts allowed for modifications. The most illustrious modification—a kind of fluke of Western history—was the Greek and especially the Athenian *polis*. However, as we know, this "cradle" of Western democracy did not produce a sturdy and long-lasting offspring. Quite apart from being severely limited in its membership, the *polis* was in a way sandwiched between very undemocratic alternatives: the earlier period of tyrants or des-

pots, and the later periods of imperial domination (omitting here the interlude of the Roman Republic). One reason for the short-lived or episodic character of the *polis* may have been the prevalence of a static metaphysics that seemed to foreclose the possibility of genuine transformation (as exemplified by the institution of slavery).

It was not until the period of the early Renaissance that something akin to the Greek *polis* (or the Roman Republic) emerged again in Europe. Particularly in the context of the Italian city-states, the classical spirit of civic autonomy and participatory citizenship resurfaced again in several places; at the same time, learned humanists sought to infuse city life again with some elements of classical (Aristotelian or Stoic) virtues. However, the times were not propitious to this kind of political classicism: soon city-states were overwhelmed by the rise of modern kingdoms or nation-states, while classical learning succumbed to the powerful onslaught of modern rationalism or "enlightened" rationality. The rise of rationalism brought to the fore a radically new worldview or metaphysics. In lieu of the older hierarchical (and qualitatively differentiated) order, modern science favors quantitative measurement, a conception where general laws neutrally govern all parts of the world. In the words of Theodor Adorno, "number" became the modern passkey unlocking the secrets of the universe.[1] Despite the noted radical shift, however, there were at least two important markers of continuity. The first marker was the acceptance of a fixed, static essentialism prevailing outside of human conventions: according to the founders of modern "liberalism," human beings were said to be endowed by "nature" (or nature's God) with certain *a priori* properties, especially liberty and equality. The second, and equally crucial marker was the privilege accorded to reason or rationality (what Descartes called the *cogito* or thinking substance). With this privileging of rationality—presumably shared by all humans—the modern age became saddled with a string of bifurcations or divisions that persist to our time: the divisions between mind and matter, subject and object, thought and practice, duty and sensibility. It is these divisions that Hegel later called "diremptions" (*Entzweiungen*) and that he valiantly strove to overcome through a more "holistic" philosophy.

As one should note, the quantitative and egalitarian character of modern metaphysics did not directly entail an endorsement of democracy. After all, a philosophical conception where all particular elements are equally subject to uniform rules is readily compatible with the kind of enlightened absolutism prevalent during the Age of Enlightenment or else constitutional monarchies constrained by a general rule of law. For enlightened absolutism to give way to democracy a new shift

was required, a radically new metaphysics that looks at the world not from the "top down" but from the "bottom up." Basically, what the shift called for was an outlook that may be called a metaphysics of potentiality or possibility: that is, a perspective that treats ordinary people as potentially capable of self-government—*potentially*, which means not by nature or without further ado, but as corollary of a process by which "natural" endowments are translated into practical competences. This process is nothing else but a process of learning and ethical transformation. During the heyday of the Enlightenment only a few voices articulated such a metaphysics of potentiality, but some did it with great verve and insight. Some of the names that can be mentioned in this context are Giambattista Vico, Erasmus, and Johann Gottfried Herder—the latter especially through his idea of a "cultiva- tion toward humanity" (*Emporbildung zur Humanität*). But by far the most famous philosophical pioneer of the time was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In his metaphysics, Leibniz departed from both the ancient and the modern worldviews: he did not subscribe to a qualitative hierarchy where some elements would for ever be inferior to others; but neither did he subscribe to the modern bifurcations of mind and matter, reason and passion. As seen from his angle, the universe was rather a network—and a steadily expanding network—of interactions and relationships, with each element mirroring and being mirrored in all others, in a complex process of learning and transformation.[2]

Leibniz was not himself a political philosopher; but some of his thoughts could be marshaled in support of democracy—especially if his "relationism" is seen as the antipode to super- and subordination and if transformation is grasped as an ethical or "spiritual" process. Without directly relying on Leibniz, the needed political shift was accomplished with erudition and élan by Montesquieu. As it happens, by the time of Montesquieu, almost all political thinkers had fallen in line with Thomas Hobbes by considering the "polity" or political "state" as nothing but a machine or mechanical artifact constructed with the help of a "contract" reflecting human rationality. Hobbes had consigned whatever ethical inspiration might have been involved in this construction to a private sphere (*forum internum*) with little or no effect on public life. With greater or lesser enthusiasm, most of the "liberal" successors of Hobbes shared the addiction to machines and mechanical procedures. Some relief was provided for a time by a group of Scottish moralists who sought to reconnect social and ethical life—but failed to overturn the Hobbesian paradigm. Viewed against this background, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws* was a revolutionary intellectual event. Instead of being the outgrowth of contractual engineering, political

regimes for Montesquieu are animated by a qualitative disposition he called their *esprit général* or *caractère commun*. Whereas the animating spirit or disposition in monarchies, in his view, is "honor" and whereas despotic regimes are pervaded by "fear," the animating well-spring or soul of democratic regimes is a relational kind of virtue: namely, "love of the democracy," which in turn means "love of equality." This spirit or disposition, *The Spirit of Laws* states explicitly, is not merely cognitive or theoretical virtue or "a consequence of acquired knowledge"; rather, it is "a sensation that may be felt by the meanest as well as the highest person in the state."[3]

"Love of equality" in Montesquieu's work is sometimes taken to be a synonym for egalitarianism—which is far from the mark. In his account, equality does not designate a quantitative or mathematical formula but rather a qualitative, ethical relationship. Moreover, equality is not a static *a priori* essence, but rather a possibility or potentiality requiring nurturing care. Like every other form of love, love of equality demands steady cultivation so that possible dispositions grow into the animating spirit of a regime. This is the reason why Montesquieu puts such emphasis on general education—an aspect ignored by most other Enlightenment philosophers (apart from Rousseau). As he writes in one of the early chapters of his book: It is in a democratic (or republican) regime "that the whole power of education is required"; for love of equality, like every ethical virtue, involves "a self-renunciation which is always arduous and painful." Hence, in a democracy, "everything depends on establishing this love [of equality] in a republic, and to inspire it ought to be the principal business of education; but the surest way of instilling it into children, is for parents to set an example." Wherever this effort is neglected, by contrast, the alternate possibility of corruption and injustice quickly comes to the fore: For, "whenever virtue is banished, ambition invades the heart of those who are capable of receiving it, and avarice possesses the whole community."[4]

As one should note, Montesquieu broke with the Hobbesian model not only by his reliance on *esprit* but also through his conception of "law"—which he construed not as a command from a superior to an inferior but rather as an ethical linkage (in line with Leibnizian relationism). In both his invocation of spirit and his conception of law, Montesquieu earned the strong praise of the German philosopher Hegel. As the latter observed in his introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, Montesquieu upheld indeed "the true historical view and the genuinely philosophical position, namely, that legislation [or law] both in general and in its particular provisions is to be treated not as

something isolated and abstract but rather as an integral moment in a whole, interconnected with all the other features which make up the character of a nation and an epoch." Only when seen in terms of this "holism" or interconnectedness do laws acquire "their true meaning and hence their justification." At a later part of his treatise, Hegel applauds "the depth of Montesquieu's insight in his now famous treatment of the animating principles of forms of government." This insight, he adds, is particularly evident in the discussion of democracy where virtue is extolled as the governing principle, "and rightly so because that regime rests in point of fact on moral sentiment (*Gesinnung*) seen as the purely substantial form in which the rationality of absolute will appears in democracy."[5] As is well known, of course, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* was not a primer of democracy, but placed its focus on the ethical and legal requisites of constitutional monarchy. Yet, several crucial elements of his perspective, above all the notions of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) and moral sentiment (*Gesinnung*), can be recuperated as part of a democratic *ethos*—as I show in chapter 2, "Hegel for Our Time."

By the time of Hegel's treatise, a new democratic (or republican) regime had emerged in America following a prolonged struggle for independence from the British monarchy. The founders of the new regime relied largely on classical examples, but also incorporated important features of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws* into their constitutional design. Innovative both in terms of geographical size and the combination of guiding ideas, the American republic was studied with great attentiveness by observers around the world. By far the most astute and perceptive observer was a traveler from France: Alexis de Tocqueville. Profiled against monarchical France and the largely hierarchical order of the *ancien régime*, de Tocqueville immediately perceived the close connection between democracy and equality. Among all the "novel objects" confronting the visitor, the opening sentence of *Democracy in America* reads, "nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people." Impressed by the American example and the successive democratic revolutions in Europe at that time, de Tocqueville was tempted to succumb to the lure of historical teleology, stating: "The gradual development of the principle of equality is, therefore, a providential fact. It has 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." Happily, a few paragraphs later, he caught himself, turning from teleology to potentiality, speaking of a movement "already so strong that it cannot be stopped" but "not yet

so rapid that it cannot be guided." In fact, guidance or pedagogy was central to de Tocqueville's approach. He shunned the idea of people's "natural" (*a priori*) competence for self-rule. In many or most instances, he complained, democracy has actually been "abandoned to its wild instincts, and it has grown up like those children who have no parental guidance, who receive their education in the public streets, and who are acquainted only with the vices and wretchedness of society."[6]

During the nineteenth century, democracy in America grew by leaps and bounds, both in terms of geographical expansion and (more importantly) by deepening its "democratic" quality and removing some earlier autocratic or paternalistic restrictions. This growth of democracy reached important fruits in the domain of scientific and industrial "progress"; but it also led to a steady seasoning of American cultural self-understanding. Some of the important markers of this cultural maturation were Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), Edward Bellamy's *Locking Backward* (1888), and the so-called American "utopian" movement. However, the high point of cultural and political self-awareness came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the emergence of a broad intellectual movement called American "pragmatism." Among this group of gifted scholars and writers John Dewey stands out because of his sustained attention to democracy and democratic theory. In my view, Dewey is a crucial figure in this context because he raised democracy to the level of philosophical transparency (or else lifted philosophical reflection to the demands of modern democracy). Basically, Dewey not only broke with the traditional hierarchical worldview; he also boldly overturned the modern Cartesian or rationalistic metaphysics with its bifurcations of mind and matter, subject and object, thought and practice. Inspired in part by Leibniz's relationism and Hegel's striving for the reconciliation of opposites, Dewey formulated a powerful "holistic" pragmatism that can serve as a passkey to modern democratic politics no longer held hostage by Hobbesian social engineering.

In chapter 3, "Democratic Agency and Experience," I outline Dewey's main contributions in this field. As I show, Dewey in a way "democratized" philosophy by linking it closely with ordinary experience. In a nutshell, philosophizing for him did not mean the rehearsal of perennial ideas stored up in cerebral archives; nor does it permit retreat into the abstract (socially vacuous) realms of pure logic and epistemology—a retreat extremely prominent in modern Western thought. In order to remain humanly salient and fruitful, philosophizing has to remain open and alert to uncharted experiential encounters—without succumbing to the lure of partisan ideologies. In

addition to the stress on uncharted "inquiry," Dewey also democratized philosophy by placing it in the reach of ordinary people—although not as a ready-made endowment. His pragmatism was radically opposed to the modern infatuation with *a priori* essences or properties (properties given to people by "nature" or nature's God). Turning against this tenet of early liberalism, Dewey relied on educational nurturing—which turns liberty into a process of potential liberation and equality into a deepening "love of equality." His philosophy is frequently associated with a "progressive" style of education—but the linkage is often misconstrued. The point for him was not to put the student or pupil in the "driver's seat," undercutting the labor of learning—something that would have led back to an essentialist or *a priori* metaphysics. Rather, just like philosophical inquiry itself, pedagogical efforts have to register with the student's background and experiential capacity.

Probably the most important aspect in which Dewey overturned the Hobbesian model was his emphasis on democracy as an ethical fabric requiring cultivation. In contrast to the modern fascination with artifacts and procedures, Dewey sought to uncover the underlying dispositions and motivations, which alone render procedures viable. In this respect, he clearly followed in the footsteps of Montesquieu, and also of Hegel's teachings regarding "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*). His repeated statements on this issue are eloquent and justly famous. As he writes in his well-known study *Democracy and Education* (1916): "The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact"—but a fact not always fully understood and which needs to be traced to the character of the regime itself: "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience." To this may be added a passage penned in 1939, at the beginning of World War II.

> Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the "common man" is a familiar article of the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life.[7]

There is another issue where Dewey turned the tables on modern rationalism: the theory of action or agency. Here, in opposition to the engineering "cause-and-effect" model, Dewey proposed the idea of the "unity of the act"—meaning that the effect is not unilaterally produced but that agent and effect co-constitute each other so that (political) agency becomes a midpoint between acting and reacting, doing and suffering.

It is particularly in the latter respect that Dewey's pragmatism links up with European philosophical perspectives in the twentieth century, especially phenomenology and existentialism. As a student of Edmund Husserl (the founder of modern phenomenology), Martin Heidegger often is described as an existential or else "hermeneutical" phenomenologist (a description I accept here). Despite massive apprehensions or prejudices surrounding Heidegger's political engagements, I hold that aspects of his work are crucially important for the development of a viable democratic theory. The main aspect or feature that I highlight in chapter 4, "Agency and Letting-Be," is the notion of action or agency and its relation to experience. Like Dewey, Heidegger radically turned away from the Cartesian or rationalistic worldview. Instead of finding the linchpin of the universe in the *cogito*, the German philosopher inserts human beings into a primary relationship that he terms "being-in-the-world." Again as in the case of Dewey, this change has a profound effect on the conception of agency. Opposing the modern construal of action as the instrumental production of effects, Heidegger portrays the core of action as "fulfilling" (*vollbringen*). What is fulfilled or accomplished in the action is not so much the goal or effect but rather the human quality or humanity of the agent. What in particular discloses this quality is the degree of the agent's openness or receptivity to the claims of others, an openness that transforms action into the midpoint between doing and suffering—something Heidegger calls "letting-be" (*Seinlassen*) and that is far removed from both indifference and manipulative control. As can readily be seen, this kind of "letting-be"—Heidegger also calls it "primordial *praxis*"—is of crucial relevance for democracy provided the latter is seen as a relational practice and not a form of unilateral domination or subjugation. Inspired by "care" (*Sorge*), as I indicate, this primordial *praxis* also can be seen as cornerstone of a democratic *ethos*.

Like Dewey, Heidegger's work has greatly influenced a number of disciples and followers. Having to be very selective, chapter 5, "Action in the Public Realm," focuses on the work of political theorist

Hannah Arendt (who was at least in part Heidegger's student). The affinity with Dewey and Heidegger emerges right away in her approach to theorizing. Like the two philosophers, Arendt was always intent on keeping thought in close touch with experience, and theory with practice; in her own words, her endeavor was to "think what we are doing" or to focus thinking on "what is under foot." What was "under foot" during her lifetime was a series of momentous events: global war, the Holocaust, the Cold War, totalitarianism, the Vietnam war—events on which she commented with astuteness and deep insight. The central focus of her work, however, was on political action in the "public domain," that is, a space where individuals are linked through words and deeds transparent to all. In adopting this focus, Arendt rebelled in her own way against the Hobbesian artifact and against what she called the "central dilemmas facing modern man": the rise of bureaucratic or totalitarian structures, the "alienation" of human beings from the world and each other, and the atrophy of public agency in favor of fabrication.

While applauding the great merits of her work, chapter 5 also draws attention to some downsides, traceable in the main to the persistent influence of modern (Cartesian) metaphysics. Thus, in rigidly separating political action from other modes of activity, her writings obscured the importance of the so-called "social domain"—a domain akin to Hegel's "civil society" and increasingly important in our time of multiculturalism and globalization. Likewise, her portrayal of "action" as individual self-display fell short of the Deweyan "unity of the act" (as well as Heidegger's notion of "fulfillment"). Finally and most importantly, her stress on individual political "greatness" sidelined a crucial teaching of Montesquieu and Dewey: democracy as an ethical community.

Minimalism, Proceduralism, and Rational Choice

The sidelining of democratic ethos, to be sure, is not the result of a particular political theorist: broad intellectual movements during the twentieth century have conspired to render the idea apocryphal. Foremost among these trends is positivism, and especially the transformation of the study of politics into a "science" wedded to the canons of empiricist epistemology. From a positivist angle, politics is simply an empirical process whose various aspects or phases—like opinion data and voting ballots—are amenable to quantitative or statistical measurement. More specifically, in modern democratic systems, govern-

ments are seen as complex machines receiving pressures or "inputs" from society and eventually producing "outputs" or policies affecting social life. When approaching this empiricist account, it is good to remember Dewey's distinction between the "idea" and the existing mechanisms and procedures of democracy. As he observed at one point: It is important to "protest against the assumption that . . . the governmental practices which obtain in democratic states: general suffrage, elected representatives, majority rule, and so on are an adequate implementation of the idea or potential of democracy."[8]

To be sure, empirically inclined political scientists have not abandoned the task of providing a theoretical account of democracy. However, seeking to reduce or eliminate qualitative criteria, they have tended to concentrate on observable procedures, bypassing questions of ethical significance. It is for this reason that one speaks in this context of a "minimalist" or "procedural" account of democracy—an account that, in many ways, was prefigured by James Madison with his stress on formal constitutional arrangements (in *Federalist Paper* No. 10). To a large extent, contemporary political science treatments are such a minimalist approach; for purposes here, I select a few examples to convey the flavor. One of the most famous texts spelling out, at least in part, a procedural approach is Robert Dahl's *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (first published in 1956). In the very introduction to his study, Dahl delineates two basic approaches in this field: a "maximizing" theory (either ethical or formally axiomatic) and a "descriptive" or purely "empirical" theory. Traditionally, he notes, the first approach has tended to rely on "internal checks" to restrain governments, such as conscience, attitudes, and ethical dispositions. Pre-revolutionary writers, in particular, had insisted on "moral virtue among citizens as a necessary condition for republican [or democratic] government," a condition that needed to be cultivated through "hortatory religion, sound education, and honest government." On this point, Dahl reminds us, Madison strenuously disagreed, thereby ignoring or playing down "what must have been a common assumption of his time." From Madison's perspective, he writes, "even if internal [ethical] checks might frequently inhibit impulses to tyranny, they may not always do so with all individuals likely to be in a position to tyrannize." Hence, "if tyranny is to be avoided, external [procedural] checks are required, and these checks must be constitutionally prescribed."[9]

Although seemingly Madisonian in outlook, the rest of the study dispels this impression by turning from formal constitutional procedures to social and economic considerations, that is, from constitutional "checks and balances" to the checks and balances operating in society

at large. "The Madisonian argument," Dahl states, "exaggerates the importance, in preventing tyranny, of specified checks to governmental officials by other specified governmental officials" and thus "underestimates the importance of the inherent social checks and balances existing in every pluralistic society." But without the latter checks, "it is doubtful that the intragovernmental checks on officials would in fact operate to prevent tyranny." It is at this point that Dahl's own alternative model to both Madisonian and "populist" democracy comes into view: the model of "polyarchy" that operates as an extended network of competing centers of will formation in modern society. In his words: "As distinguished from Madisonianism, the theory of polyarchy focuses primarily not on the constitutional prerequisites but on the social requisites for a democratic order." At this juncture, Dahl makes room for a dimension that presumably undergirds social (and not merely constitutional) checks and balances: the dimension of an "underlying consensus on policy." This consensus, existing "prior to politics, beneath it, enveloping it, restricting it, conditioning it," usually prevails (he says) in a society "among he predominant portion of the politically active members." With this admission, Dahl's polyarchy clearly moves beyond the level of a purely minimalist conception in the direction of a richer, ethical version (reminiscent of Montesquieu and Dewey). However, no indication is given as to how such an "underlying" fabric is to be cultivated and nurtured.[10]

Another prominent text—still more procedural and minimalist in orientation—is Giovanni Sartori's *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (1987), a sequel to his *Democratic Theory* (1962). Like Dahl's study, Sartori's book distinguishes at the outset between a "prescriptive" or "normative" conception and a "descriptive" or "empirical" conception—but the entire thrust of his argument goes in the empirical direction, confining "prescription" to an axiomatic set of instrumental rules. As he writes, democracy in his conception is basically a design or "project" reflecting an "ongoing human artifact that hinges on a set of ideas and ideals that make [or construct] it." Once that project is implemented, he adds, democracy is "in place" and we can have "an empirical theory of democracy"; but not before: "The artifact 'democracy' has to be conceived and constructed before being observed." As becomes clear in his subsequent reflections, Sartori is not so much opposed to norms or a normative dimension per se, but only to their wholesale infusion into democratic politics. His preference, in this respect, is more for Kantian "regulative" principles or else for Max Weber's "ethics of conscience" (*Gesinnungsethik*), which are restricted primarily to the "internal" or private-individual domain.

Where he draws the line is vis-à-vis a stronger version of public eth-ics—as reflected in Hegel's "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*) and presumably in Dewey's notion of an ethical community. In his words: "To bring morality into politics is akin to playing with fire—as we have only too well rediscovered since Hegel theorized a 'political *ethos*,' or *Sit-tlichkeit*." Although acknowledging that there may be a "loss of ethics" in politics or a "present-day crisis of democracy," his recommendation is to employ more "minimalist" language and to leave phrases like "political morality, social morality, professional ethics" aside.[11]

What Sartori most strenuously objects to is any association of democracy with friendship or affection—what he derisively calls "demophily." As he asserts polemically: "There is an abyss between *democracy* and *demophily*. Since real-world democracy consists (this is what renders it real) of a democratic machinery, democracy can do without demophily." With this sharp demarcation, what is banished from sight is not only Aristotle's *philia* but also (and more importantly) Montesquieu's insight that democracy, to take hold or roots, has to be cultivated by a "love of democracy" which, in turn, is a "love of equality." For Sartori, this insistence is nothing more than a kind of sentimentalism, which is overcome by modern social engineering and especially by the construction of a "democratic machinery." To be more precise: affection is not entirely shunted aside but rather treated as a "fifth wheel" that does not do any work: "If [democracy] is imple-mented by demophily, by good motives, so much the better; but the machinery assures demo-benefits even if demo-love is absent—and this is the *security* that the democratic machinery provides, that gives real, not deceptive, existence to actual democracies." Taking his bearings not from Aristotle but rather from Machiavelli, Sartori locates the founda-tion of "real-life" democracy in "demo-power": "Democracy begins with demo-power and, on that beginning, does not require demophi-ly in order to produce demo-benefits. Demophily is, instead, a sheer possibility." A democratic theory built on political science, in Sartori's view, has to take its stand with actuality or probability rather than possibility. Whereas the connection between demo-power and demo-benefits is "a built-in, highly probable possibility," he concludes, the linkage between demophily and demo-benefits is a highly "improbable possibility," and perhaps even an improbable impossibility.[12]

Although reluctant to probe ethical questions, most procedural-ists are hesitant to dismiss public ethics, or the relevance of ethics for politics, altogether. This hesitation is no longer prevalent among devotees of another, increasingly influential perspective called "rational choice theory"—a framework which basically transfers neo-classical

economic assumptions to social and political life and, under the aegis of neo-liberalism, is fast emerging as the dominant global ideology. What this model jeopardizes, however, is not only public ethics, but also politics, particularly democratic politics, as such. For, even when seen as a minimally shared regime, democracy is bound to be a burden or hindrance for the ambitions of an a-social or anti-social individualism. No one has articulated this burden more forcefully than William Riker, one of the founders of the model, in his book *Liberalism Against Populism* (1982; where "populism" stands for a Jacobin mode of democracy). As he states at the very outset: "The theory of social choice is a theory about the way the tastes, preferences, or values of individual persons are amalgamated and summarized into the choice of a collective group or society." Because these preferences are not ethically ranked, the primary focus of the theory is on something measurable or quantifiable: the "theory of voting." Like Dahl, Riker distinguishes between a normative or ethical and an empirical or "analytical" conception, while sharpening their edges. "The ideal of democracy," he writes, "is set forth in a normative statement of what we want the natural world of human interaction to yield for us." By contrast, "the theory of social choice is an analytical theory about the way that natural world can [and does] work and what kinds of outputs that world can yield." Hence, "by means of this analytic theory, we can discover whether pursuit of the ideal is promising or futile."[13]

Again like Dahl, but with different consequences, Riker delineates two different genealogies of modern democracy: a "liberal or Madisonian" type and a "populist or Rousseauistic" type. In the liberal (or libertarian) view, he notes, "the function of voting is to control officials, and *nothing* else"—meaning by nothing else: no positive political agendas or programs promoting something like the common good. As he adds, this Madisonian definition "is *logically* complete, and there is nothing to add. Madison said nothing about the quality of popular decision, whether good or bad." By contrast, populists—following Rousseau—desire a more active, participatory role of the people and a politics that creates a "moral and collective body" endowed with "life and will," especially the famous "general will." At this point, Riker endorses whole-heartedly Isaiah Berlin's notion of "negative liberty" and his indictment that "positive liberty, which appears initially innocuous, is the root of tyranny." Riker also alludes to some ideological background—not entirely unaffected by the Cold War. "No government," he asserts, "that has eliminated economic freedom has been able to attain or keep democracy, probably because, when all economic life is absorbed into government, there

is no conceivable financial base for opposition." On the other hand, "economic liberty is also an end in itself because capitalism is the driving force for the increased efficiency and technological innovation that has produced in two centuries both a vast increase in the wealth of capitalist nations and a doubling of the average life span of their citizens." Although acknowledging that some may view it as "minimalist," Riker concludes, liberal or Madisonian democracy is "the only kind of democracy actually attainable" and in any case the democracy "we still have in the United States."[14]

Modernity and Postmodernism

As can readily be seen, and as has frequently been noted, extreme *laissez-faire* liberalism is at odds with democracy—even a moderate, constitutionally regulated democracy oriented somehow toward the common good. In line with rational choice assumptions, opposition to democracy is interest-based: the people most vehemently averse to democratic equality are usually those who benefit most directly from minimalist government, that is, people reaping privileges from the prevailing status quo. In common parlance, people of this kind are usually associated with the political "Right." Curiously, however, minimalism is sometimes also favored by people on the opposite side of the spectrum, people with radically "progressive" leanings commonly ranked with the political "Left." Seeing their enemy not only in established elites but in political establishments of any kind—including established democracies—"radicals" of this kind tend to veer toward minimalism as the absolute antidote to public authority. Strongly critical of Rousseau (and sometimes of Hegel as well), the goal favored by such minimalists is not democratic unity or holism, and certainly not a "general will," but rather thorough-going fragmentation or dispersal of interests—to the point that isolated individualism rubs elbows with autocratic elitism. Among recent intellectual trends, the closest affinity with this radical minimalism can be found in versions (but only some versions) of a movement that goes by the summary label of "postmodernism."

Taken literally, the term *postmodernism* seems to denote an outlook that seeks to grapple with and perhaps remedy some of the defects of modernity or the modern age. As previously noted, some leading modern Western thinkers—from Montesquieu to Hegel and Dewey—have charged modernity with harboring some deep rifts or "diremptions" that need to be remedied before their effects become

incurably destructive. Thus, in lieu of the isolated Cartesian ego these thinkers have struggled to formulate the notion of a concretely situated self, of a "being-in-the-world"; in place of the separation of thought and action, they have advanced the idea of a practically and experientially nurtured mode of thinking and doing where action is no longer a unilateral project but a complex interaction performed in the "middle voice"; finally, in lieu of the human mastery over nature (rooted in the mind–matter bifurcation), efforts have been made to envisage a subdued, ecologically sane human role in nature. All these and related initiatives might with good reason be termed *postmodern* (which is not the same as anti-modern). Unfortunately, this promising and beneficial kind of postmodernism has from the beginning been contested by another version that does not so much remedy as exacerbate the dilemmas of modernity and, for this reason, might preferably be called "hypermodernism." In this version, the tension between private and public, between internal and external domains becomes rigidified into a hyper-individualism, carrying with it the corollary of a steadily deepening "world-alienation" (Arendt) or "disenchantment" (Weber). In the same manner, the always-difficult relation between self and other selves is twisted into the impossible relation (or nonrelation) between self and absolutely incommensurable others beyond the reach of communication and practical interaction.

As it happens, the intellectual who first popularized the term *postmodern* also was the one who saddled the notion with many of the connotations of "hypermodernism." In his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard zeroed in on certain features that, in his view, characterized the "modern age"—features like universalism, essentialism, holism (or totalism), and historical teleology (captured in "grand narratives")—and then proceeded to demolish them by means of a radical reversal. The upshot was a privileging of particularism, anti-essentialism (or relativism), fragmentation, and local uniqueness. As Lyotard observed in his introduction, the term *modern* is commonly applied to an age where metaphysics and science legitimate themselves through reference to a universal "metadiscourse"; likewise, modern humanities appeal to "some grand narrative such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." By contrast, the term *postmodern* means to convey an opposite outlook: a basic skepsis or "incredulity toward metanarratives." What happens as a result of this skepsis, according to Lyotard, is the dismantling of comprehensive knowledge systems and their dispersal into "heterogeneous" discourses or "clouds of narrative language elements." In

lieu of holistic schemes, postmodernism tolerates only a "pragmatics of language particles" arranged in many diverse "language games"—a pragmatics giving rise to political institutionalization (if at all) only "in patches—local determinism." Generally speaking, he concludes, postmodern life experience "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."[15]

Once universalism is replaced by particularism and interaction by incommensurability, postmodernism can without great difficulty be accommodated to minimalism, including a minimalist conception of democracy. This lure of adjustment was particularly strong in the American context—already saturated with hyper-individualist tendencies. As a result, the meaning of "postmodernism" became highly ambivalent. This ambivalence is particularly evident in the field of political theory or philosophy, most relevant to the issue of democracy. In his *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (1991), political theorist Stephen White distinguishes broadly between "oppositional" and "nonoppositional" strands of postmodernism vis-à-vis "modern" metaphysics, with the oppositional strand largely coinciding with the insistence on rupture or radical reversal. White also notes two prominent questions confronting both strands: what he calls the "responsibility to act" and the "responsibility to otherness." It is precisely with regard to the second question that radical postmodernism can come to grief (or land in "hypermodernism") despite its initial dismissal of modern notions of "subject" or "subjectivity." As he writes: "An *over*emphasis on disruption and impertinence creates for postmodern thinking a momentum that threatens to enervate the sense of responsibility to otherness, by subtly substituting for it an implicit celebration of the impertinent subject who shows his or her virtuosity in deconstructing whatever unity comes along." The result, White adds, is "an ironic one for postmodernism's own self-understanding"—ironic because a movement starting from the deconstruction of the modern subject or agent finds itself suddenly in the throes of an incommensurable, perhaps transcendentally grounded singularity.[16]

Most commonly, derailments of postmodernism are due to intellectual shortcuts: the proclivity to substitute binary reversals for the labor of thinking anew (or "thinking the unthought" of the past). Some of the relevant binaries have been mentioned above: universalism versus particularism, essentialism versus constructivism, measurable versus incommensurable. To these some other binaries need to be added because of their political salience: public–private, positive–negative, presence–absence. The dangers involved in opposing public (or positive) and private (or negative) liberty in a binary fashion have

already been alluded to and must always be kept in sight. Equally important, however, is the ontological opposition between positivity and negativity, presence and absence. In an age dominated by positivist science, it is certainly important to remember negativity as the intimate corollary of every positivity, and absence as the corollary of every presence. In his famous lecture, "What is Metaphysics?" (1929), attended by some of the leading German scientists of the time, Heidegger pointed to the dimension of nothingness (*das Nichts*) as the domain modern science does not and cannot know. But of course, for Heidegger, nothingness was not just an empty foil or binary opposition but rather an unmanageable resource able to unleash a stream of possibilities or potentialities.[17]

This view has been applied fruitfully to democratic politics by a number of recent thinkers, most notably the French philosopher Claude Lefort. Positivist accounts of democracy tend to focus (as indicated) on the observable machinery of government together with input and output circuits—all of which are statistically measurable. Without denying the importance of these processes, Lefort juxtaposes two equally important domains: the dimension of overt political behavior, called "politics," and the dimension of the underlying framework or staging site (*mise-en-scène*), termed "polity" or "the political." Concentration on the latter as the constitutive matrix of politics draws attention to trans-empirical aspects: not only the distinction between right and wrong or just and unjust, but (more importantly) between the visible and the invisible, between presence and absence, being and nonbeing. While in traditional political regimes, the constitutive matrix tended to be monopolized by overt rulers or elites, this is no longer possible in modern democracy where the "polity" becomes fluid, elusive, and no longer amenable to static control. In Lefort's words: "Of all the regimes we know, [modern democracy] is the only one to have represented [supreme] power in such a way as to show that power is an *empty place* and to have maintained a gap between the symbolic [or constitutive] and the real." The danger is that, in democracy, the "empty space" is re-occupied by a spurious type of unity called "the nation" or "the People-as-One."[18]

In Lefort's work, an important feature of modern democracy is clearly pinpointed: the fact that nobody in democracy can claim to be the definitive or "essential" embodiment of the regime and that the "polity" hence always exceeds the confines of "politics." Notwithstanding the importance of this insight, the differentiation between the two domains, or between presence and absence, has a tendency to occlude the equally crucial aspect of political agency; in

a way, the latter tends to disappear in the "gap" between observable action and constitutive nonaction, or between activity and passivity. A similar deficit of meaningful public action prevails also in the theory of "hegemony" as articulated by political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In chapter 6, "Postmodernism and Radical Democracy," I examine some of their salient arguments, by focusing chiefly on their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). Over long stretches, their study is a critique of traditional Marxism and its "essentializing" treatment of central categories like "class," "class struggle," and "revolution." Adopting a still more radical (loosely postmodern) perspective, the authors proceed to call into question all kinds of sociopolitical essentialism as well as economic determinism, a step that brings into view a welter of antagonisms that cannot be fixed or permanently stabilized.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, "antagonism"—seen as the counterpoint to hegemony—involves not only the conflict between different empirical groups or structures, but also (and more importantly) the tensional relation between presence and absence, between empirical positivity and destabilizing negativity. As in the case of Lefort's "excessive" polity, antagonism here means that, in democracy, a set of rulers cannot erect itself into a permanent regime and that "hegemony" can never be solidified into a closed, fully integrated system. Given this embroilment with negativity, the authors assert, society can never attain "the status of transparency, of full presence," with the result that the "impossible relation" between presence and absence must be seen as "constitutive of the social itself."[19] While applauding the verve and trans-empirical élan of this approach, I conclude my chapter by raising again the Deweyan question of practice or agency (as well as a possible "holistic" bridging of presence and absence).

Without doubt, the most prominent postmodern Continental philosopher is Jacques Derrida. By comparison with both Lefort and Laclau/Mouffe, Derrida has not written extensively on social and political issues; but he has by no means been silent in that field. In chapter 7, "Jacques Derrida's Legacy," I discuss some of Derrida's later texts, which introduced the intriguing or provocative notion of a "democracy to come." I start out by drawing attention to the relation between Derrida and Heidegger. Despite the close affinity between the two thinkers, Derrida's endeavor from the beginning has been to transgress Heidegger's more "holistic" perspective in the direction of a radical trans-empiricism and transcendentalism. Commonly known under the label of "deconstruction," this transgression has tended to transform "being-with-others" into a "nonrelation" with

incommensurable "otherness." A corollary of deconstruction is the progressive replacement of (ontological) possibility or potentiality with the notion of an "impossible possibility" or "possible impossibility"—a move prompted by the desire to avoid any kind of teleology or continuity.

As in the case of Lefort's "gap," the move tends to open up an hiatus between "the symbolic and the real" or (here) between ordinary politics and the envisaged "democracy to come"—where the latter refers to an absolute "heterogeneity" and to an "interminable adjournment."[20] Once again—and now with particular urgency—the question emerges how a hiatus which is meant to be utterly unbridgeable can prevent human despair or a slide into a Manichean "two-world" theory. Granted: the envisaged democracy cannot be simply constructed or socially engineered; but, at the same time, it cannot or will not just "come" without further ado. Here the need for a transformative democratic agency emerges, an agency that is as far removed from anthropocentric activism as from pliant passivity. As previously indicated, this agency has to operate in the active–passive or "middle voice" and resemble in some fashion the "primordial *praxis*" of "letting-be" that sustains without appropriation.

Humanism and the Global Promise of Democracy

Having surveyed prominent recent approaches to democracy, I turn to broader themes in an effort to reconnect some of the strands of the preceding discussion. In the course of that discussion, I repeatedly alluded to the possibility of a more "holistic" or holistic–pragmatic perspective as an alternative to minimalist fragmentation. I have also referred to a transformative agency that would bypass the pitfalls of both manipulation or social engineering and passive withdrawal. Clearly, this outlook implies a certain kind of philosophical anthropology, more specifically a conception of humanity or being "human" which shuns both rampant self-aggrandizement or egocentric autonomy and radical self-erasure or surrender to heteronomy. Chapter 8, "Who Are We Now?" reviews a number of alternative construals of "humanism" or what it means to be human, focusing mainly on intellectual developments during the last century. Whereas the first section of the chapter profiles the contours of a basically "subject"-centered or anthropocentric humanism—as upheld by such diverse thinkers as Ernst Cassirer and Jean-Paul Sartre—the second part explores countermoves to this self-confident outlook by recalling the radical