



CONDITIONS OF A VIABLE DEMOCRACY

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When we published the above essay almost twenty-five years ago in the freshly founded journal *Transit – Europäische Revue*¹ the world had just entered a new era. The fall of the Iron Curtain marked the end of the Cold War order and seemed to open the way for liberal democracy to finally prevail. We shared the author's optimism that "a democratic régime will increasingly be considered a condition of belonging to the civilized world."

But what we learned from Taylor was that it is not to be taken for granted that the "inescapable aspiration" for democracy will result in its victory. Because democracy does not only rely on its institutions like parliament, elections, party pluralism, etc., but also, and essentially, on the "relations in which people stand when they are common citizens of a democratic régime."

The author's considerations originally concentrated on the challenges of another transition taking place around the same time from military dictatorships to democratic rule in Latin America. But they apply fully to the developments we have been observing on our continent since 1989.

Taylor warns against two popular approaches to democracy which neglect its very core. They both refer to legitimate features of democracy, but to equate these features with democracy would be "wrong and fatefully misleading".

According to the first approach, "economic theory," society consists of nothing but individuals with their respective goals. Democracy, the government, markets are just collective instruments to make individual goals converge into common goals. Such a polity minimizes participation and leaves political agency to institutions. "What this model leaves out ... is what has always been considered the virtues and dignity of citizenship, that people take an active part in their own government, that they ... rule themselves." As a result, we observe in the years since 1992 a growing alienation of citizens in most Western democracies. At the same time, the economic model has failed to do a fair and effective job, as the crisis of 2008 and growing inequality show.

The second approach is based on Rousseau's concept of a ge-

1 "Wieviel Gemeinschaft braucht die Demokratie?", in: *Transit* nr. 5 (*Gute Gesellschaft*), co-edited with Otto Kallscheuer, Winter 1992/93.

neral will. It offers a model of democracy that seems to accommodate self-rule neglected by the first. As history shows, however, it invites self-proclaimed leaders to usurp the general will in the name of its subject, the citizens. Taylor's example is Lenin who declared the Party to be the incarnation of the will of the proletariat as the universal historical subject. The resulting type of "people's democracies" has almost disappeared with the end of the Soviet empire, but what we witness today is the global rise of a new type of leadership which also refers to a general will: the populists. As Jan Werner Mueller has shown, populists claim that they and they alone represent "the people" and their true interests exclude all those not considered part of it.² Populism is anti-liberal, as it denounces any divergent interests as illegitimate if not immoral, and it is antidemocratic, as it tries to destroy all institutions that allow the irreducible plurality of interests in a society to be articulated and represented: "The Rousseauian model is ... a disaster if taken as a general guide for democratic society. For it delegitimizes difference, rivalry, inner struggle." The only way to deal with diversity is oppression, hence régimes based on the second model tend intrinsically to despotism.

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What has become of the optimism of 1989, shared by so many of us at the time, that democracy will finally prevail? What we have been observing in the last years is rather a worldwide rise of illiberalism which challenges the very foundations of a democratic polity.

And this has to do with the two tendencies Taylor warned against in an almost prophetic way. The two misconceptions of democracy he described in his essay have become guidelines for the politics which meanwhile has indeed put democracy on the defensive if not, in some countries, damaged it severely. Although Taylor does not make this connection, one could even claim that there is a vicious nexus between them as neoliberalism (based on the economic model) has prepared the ground for populism (based on the Rousseauian model). The former resulted in a deep mistrust in the elites and public institutions and in a feeling of deprivation and powerlessness on the side of the citizens,³ thus creating a vacuum which is now being filled by the latter promising to re-empower them.

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Taylor's considerations from the early 1990s have accompanied me ever since. I think they are worth rereading, especially in the current situation—for their clear-sightedness regarding the threats to our democracies, established or still in the making, and for the remedy the author recommends against the malaises of a misconceived democracy.

In the last part of his essay, Taylor sketches a third model inspired by ideas borrowed from Alexis de Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt. He reminds us of the core features any viable democracy must entail: first of all, equal dignity of all citizens of a given society; then a sense of belonging to one's polity, and of solidarity with ones compatriots—in other words, patriotism in the original sense; further, direct participation, accompanied by the decentralization of power; and finally, a sense of equal respect. None of these features is

2 Cf. Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press 2016.

3 Cf. Ivan Krastev, *In Mistrust We Trust*, TED Book 2013.

easy to attain, they all pose specific challenges to a democratic society. What Taylor envisions is a third model which would avoid the threats posed by corporate capitalism and its willing allies, and learn from the failure of communism. One could add that it might also help avoid the traps of contemporary populism.

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SOME CONDITIONS OF A VIABLE DEMOCRACY*

Charles Taylor

I.

I would like to open a discussion on the conditions of a viable democracy in our late twentieth century. And, through this discussion, raise the issue at the same time of exactly what we are looking for under the word 'democracy'.

But as a sort of introduction, I want to remark on the centrality of democracy for our age. I mean by this, that democracy is an inescapable aspiration, that there is a sort of pressure towards democratization in contemporary world civilization, even though this movement is blocked and even reversed in many parts of the world.

In part, this is a question of what will be accepted today in the way of political legitimation. The last regimes based on hierarchy, or on the notion of hereditary authority, have disappeared, and it is difficult even to remember what they were like. The recent wave of fascist and right-authoritarian regimes from before the Second World War, were the last actually to offer glory in an alternative ideology to democracy. Now all regimes have to justify themselves in its terms. Left-wing governments of the Leninist type claim to have a more radical democracy than their bourgeois counterparts. And the present stock of right-authoritarian regimes, like the one in this country, continue to claim that they will return their nations to democracy when they are „ready.“ In the present age, only popular sovereignty can ultimately confer legitimacy.

But I am talking about something more profound in speaking of the pressure towards democracy. The point I've just made is perhaps no more than a matter of what the obligatory forms of hypocrisy are. But there is something much more substantial.

We have to note, in order to understand this, that there really has come to be a close relation of mutual support between democracy and the major ideals of the liberal canon, I mean by these: personal liberty and the rule of law. Liberals have always held that these stand and fall together, but there was a time when this was far from evident. In the golden age of Enlightened despotism in the eighteenth century, there were regimes which respected law, and in which at least the leading classes enjoyed immunities under the rule of law, but where there was no hint of participatory government, even involving the leading classes.

* Published for the first time in English

But the possibility of this kind of regime has gone with the eroding of hierarchical concepts, and the corresponding clear limits which defined the status of different classes. No uncrossable barrier holds a despotic government back from the worst possible excesses in violations of human rights. The only safeguard for personal freedom and law is some form of popular rule, or at least the threat that it might be instituted in the near future. Reciprocally, personal freedom and the rule of law are clearly conditions of a genuine democracy, that is, a regime in which people can mobilize independently of power, in order to change it or determine its policies. These form a package.

Now, I believe that there is a certain pressure in the direction of the whole package in our age, which is due to the fact that personal freedom seems to provide the most hospitable conditions for technological and economic growth. This was not always so, and may cease to be so again sometime in the future. But at this moment, economic growth is highly dependent on scientific and technological dynamism, as well as entrepreneurial initiative. And both of these fare ill in despotisms. The pitiful economic situation of Leninist regimes, once the age of brute growth through primary industrialization is over, has often been remarked. The Soviet Union stands as a muscle-bound giant, incapable even of feeding its own population adequately. In addition, the importance to present technologies of the growth in communications and information-processing techniques creates a further difficulty for repressive regimes.

The existence of despotic capitalist regimes with a high growth rate—Taiwan, Korea, for instance—is not decisive evidence against the trend I am describing. My claim would be that the pressure is already on these to democratize, and will increase. The same will be experienced on this continent. And as the trend generalizes, a democratic regime will increasingly be considered a condition of belonging to the civilized world. The pressure will intensify further. If I'm right, this is a piece of good news in an otherwise dark picture.

II

This makes it if anything more important to clarify what a democratic regime is, and how it can be made viable. Of course, we can always define democracy in terms of certain institutional features: the existence of representative assemblies chosen by popular vote, the legally recognized existence of a plurality of parties, and the like. But quite apart from the possible disagreements which might arise about any such list of features, this kind of definition still misses something essential: what exactly is the nature of the relations in which people stand when they are common citizens of a democratic regime? What we want here is some understanding of the real political process which characterizes democracy, and the way it relates participants.

There are a number of theories which purport to give us a picture of this. I want to mention two here, which are very widespread and popular, but I think wrong and fatefully misleading. And then I want to offer a third. Of course, no one theory can exhaust a complex reality such as a democratic polity. Each theory, even the bad ones, will touch some aspect of reality. But some will involve a crucial distortion in taking this aspect for the essential feature, and that's what I mean by calling them wrong.

To speak of 'theories' here is an oversimplification. In fact, in each case I will be discussing a family of theories with similar basic concepts. But for simplicity, I will sometimes speak in the singular, as though there were a single view in each case.

1. The first erroneous theory is one which has been very popular in American political science. It has some of its immediate sources in the 'economic' theory of democracy that Schumpeter so well expounded,¹ and has ramified out into interest group theories,² and then into views which pictured the operation of a political system as a "conversion process".³ Its more remote roots are in the seventeenth-century theories of Locke and Hobbes, and the various elaborations of these in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

The crucial notions of this family of theories is that they conceive the political society as a common instrument set up to further the purposes of the individuals who constitute it (although these constitutive units can also be conceived as groups). Purposes and goals are conceived as being basically, on to logically, one might say, those of individuals. To speak of a group purpose is to speak of one on which individuals converge. The common end can always be analyzed into its individual components.

A democratic regime in this scheme is one that is responsive to the purposes and desires of its members. Its excellence lies in its responsiveness. But since any regime is responsive to *someone's* ends, be they only those of the despot, we could also phrase this virtue in terms of a notion of fairness: democratic regimes respond to everyone's purposes equally, or at least that is their ideal condition. Then we can add alongside this a second major virtue of these regimes, which is their ability to respond effectively, actually to meet people's needs and purposes. The demands of efficacy and fairness may run against each other.

The institutions we normally associate with democracy, regular elections to assemblies and governing positions, between a plurality of parties, are held to be the best method of achieving these virtues, and ensuring that government is responsive in this way.

Now it is clear that this picture does correspond to some features of a modern, large-scale, industrial, bureaucratic polity. Indeed, many people feel when first presented with this theory among others that it best matches their experience. The experience it seems true to is that of the citizen of a large-scale, bureaucratically run society, who feels rather minimal identification with it, but has his own particular life-plan, and feels that he has the right to pursue it, and to be helped in this, or at least not hindered, as much as anyone else. What he asks of the government is that it act as an effective and fair collective instrument. The demands are not totally different from the one he might make of a firm with which he does business. Except that the analogy would be more apt with a group of firms in competition, where dissatisfaction with one allows him to switch to another. This is the analogy which Schumpeter drew on in his theory, where rival party leaderships are seen as in the position of firms bidding for 'consumers' in the form of voters.

What this model leaves out, of course, is what has always been considered the virtues and dignity of citizenship, that people take an active part in their own government, that they in some sense rule themselves. The economic view has not so much neglected participation as it has looked on it with suspicion. People need the degree and level of input which will insure that the system is responsive to them. This includes universal suffrage, and also the power to organize new parties or movements when some important goals are not being sufficiently defended or advocated by the existing

1 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism & Democracy*.

2 David Truman, *The Governmental Process*.

3 David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. Gabriel Almond and James Coleman, *The Politics of the Developing Areas*.

ones. But it doesn't at all demand that people be more active than this, and actually participate in the making of policy and the taking of decisions. It suffices that, through their power to dispose of their rulers, they exercise a credible threat to get rid of those who are not responsive to their needs.

A more intense participation than that would be counterproductive, if not positively dangerous. It would be counterproductive because government today requires the mastery or at least marshalling of considerable expertise, economic, scientific, technological, cultural, etc. And this is best done by specialists, or by people with special talent and experience in drawing on specialists, i.e., professional politicians. To get the masses mixed up in this could only lower the efficacy of government. This in turn might be dangerous, leading to frustration and a loss of legitimacy. Moreover, mobilizing the masses to make an impact on government can be dangerous in a more direct way. It could upset the delicate balance of responsiveness of government to a wide variety of interests in favour of those so mobilized, and this would endanger the democratic polity.

Now there are many possible lines of attack on this theory. One very popular one in American political science has been an attack on this as a portrait of American society. The responsiveness of the system was not as equal and all-around as the proponents seemed to be claiming, said the critics of the Left. In fact, it was not possible to mobilize all interests; some were systematically disfavoured, and found it hard to gain entry—consumers, for instance, or underprivileged racial and linguistic groups.

There is undoubtedly some truth in this attack, but it is not what concerns me here because I am exercised by something more fundamental, namely the basic assumptions about the nature of a democratic polity. Is it true that this would be an adequate democratic polity if it could be integrally realized? And it seems to me that it evidently wouldn't be. My plea is not simply that participation and the dignity accompanying it is an important human good. The economic theorists might just reply to this that they agree with me in principle, but that participation beyond a certain level is, alas, impractical for the reasons they outline.

My case is, however, more fundamental. What the economic theory neglects is what has been the central concern of the whole civic humanist tradition, viz., that any free (i.e., non-despotic) regime requires a strong sense of identification on the part of its citizens (what Montesquieu called *vertu*). These citizens have to accept the disciplines, and even sometimes make the sacrifices, required to maintain their polity, and defend it against its enemies. They have to pay taxes, abide by the laws, and rally around when their polity is threatened from within or without. If they are not to be coerced into this—in which case you cease to have a free regime—they have to want to do it, and this supposes that they have a strong sense that belonging to this polity, with its laws and ways, matters—in the extreme cases, that it is worth dying for. They must have what used to be called up to the eighteenth century 'patriotism'.

Seen in this light, the picture of democracy offered by the economic theory is crucially lacking. If people really did just conceive their goals as individual, if they really did just think of their polity as a common instrument, they would have the zero degree of patriotism or *vertu*, and the polity would be unable to resist the forces of external attack, internal subversion, or just erosion through uncivic behaviour. Massive cheating on the system would bring it to a halt, and force more despotic forms on the society.

In short, it isn't possible in a functioning democracy for all goals to be purely individual; or otherwise put, for common goals to be simply the convergence of individual

ones. There must be at least this one common good which is held in a strong sense: the existence of the polity itself and its laws has to be something which is cherished in common.

Seen in this light, the undoubted phenomenon of citizen alienation in large democracies, where many people do in fact define their goals purely individually, and see their relation to the society purely instrumentally, can be understood as in an important sense parasitic. It is possible for many people to live in their democratic society in this loose and distant way only because there is still a large fund of general identification with the society and its laws. If everyone were to become like this, the society would be under severe threat.

2. Over against the family of economic theories, and in a sense in polar opposition to it, is another family which descends from Rousseau—or at least one possible reading of Rousseau. This is very much a theory which claims to incorporate the tradition of civic humanism, which is concerned above all with what the economic theory leaves out, viz., citizen rule and the dignity attaching to it.

Following one persuasive reading of the *Contrat Social*, self-rule is thought of in terms of will. I am free, and rule myself, when I “obey only myself,”⁴ and am directed by my own will. But this can only be the basis for a *society*, if there can be such a thing as a common will, *une volonté générale*. If not, following the will of one will involve enslaving another. The possibility of democracy thus is coterminous with the possibility of a general will, in whose elaboration all participate, and with which all identify.

There are no direct followers of Rousseau today, but this master idea of the general will does animate a number of views about democracy which are very alive in our day. Certain of the notions of radical participation, which inspired the various rebellions and contestations of the late '60s in Northern societies, were of this stamp. The underlying assumption was that, if the influence and power of certain undemocratic interests, or the hold of repressive forms of life, could be broken, an underlying unanimity would emerge, in which each would acquiesce in the common conditions for the full development of all.

But beyond this, the most influential heir of Rousseau in this sense is Marxism, and in particular its Leninist variant. There is an assumption deep in Marxism that conflictual opposition comes from class society, that once this is overcome, an underlying harmony of purpose emerges, in which “the free development of each become the condition for the free development of all.”⁵ There is therefore something like a general will of the proletariat, which carries it through the revolution against capitalist society and into the building of a new society, which will ultimately be anarchist. Leninism inherited this notion, and annexed to it the fateful idea of the role of the vanguard party. Leninist parties and governments always talk in the name of the working class, as though this entity had a single purpose which they can read and put into effect. *La volonté générale* marches forward in the late twentieth century in the guise of these regimes of mass mobilization, which have systematized oppression on a truly gigantic scale. Jean-Jacques would shudder to witness what has been done with his idea.

Like the economic theory, this notion of the general will does touch a real experience. It is the very opposite of the earlier one. It is the experience of people who,

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Du Contrat Social*. I.6.

5 Karl Marx: *The Communist Manifesto*, Chapter II. pf. 72

against a climate of alienation, or even repression, manage to mobilize a movement which gives them a say in weighty matters that affect them. As trade unionists organize to combat repression, as residents organize to stop the demolition of their homes for a freeway, as citizens organize against an oppressive dictatorship, as is now the case in Chile, the participants can experience a strong sense of their common purpose, of their common efficacy in striving for this goal, and of their common dignity in taking a hand together in their fate. In this predicament of combat, the Rousseauian idea becomes real. Beyond their other differences, participants are aware above all of the importance of their common purpose, and feel quite rightly that achieving it will be a victory for self-rule. To come together in such a common purpose can be exhilarating. This is an important part of the experience of democracy.

But as a central theory of democracy, as a picture of the process of self-rule and the relations people stand to each other in it, this is crucially lacking. It cannot take account of the way in which people and groups stand to a great degree at cross purposes to each other, as adversaries or rivals, with different and incompatible goals, and divergent views of the common good. A democratic regime has to be one in which these differences and rivalries are fought out in a certain fashion, not one in which they are somehow avoided, or sublated. Rare are the moments when the whole society can share the euphoria of a common will. And these are often the most tragic moments, generated by external conflict. The general will experienced by partial groups, like the examples above, is part of the ongoing process of struggle over ends, not a substitute for it.

The Rousseauian model is thus a disaster if taken as a general guide for democratic society. For it delegitimizes difference, rivalry, inner struggle. But the only way in which these can be done away with is through repression. And hence the regimes which are based on this model are universally despotisms.

3. While I think there is some truth in each of these two models, I want to introduce a third, which I think better portrays the essential nature of a viable democratic society. This draws heavily on the civic humanist tradition, but differently from Rousseau. It is a view which allows for the central place of rivalry and struggle in a free society—in this unlike the general will theory—but also sees the members as united around a central pole of identification—in this unlike the economic theory. The sources for this theory can be found, for instance, in Tocqueville,⁶ and in our day, to some degree, in the writings of Hannah Arendt.⁷

The central pole of identity is what used to be called “the laws,” that is, the central institutions and practices of the political system. And this is seen and cherished as a common good, because it is seen as the common repository and bulwark of the dignity of all the participants. It is taken for granted that these will frequently be rivals, that they will be in disagreement about public policy and who should occupy positions of rule, but an important dignity is thought to attach to being able to participate as an equal in these struggles, and the laws which safeguard this ability for all are understood to reflect a common will to mutual recognition of this ability, and hence an invaluable common good.

This is of course an idealization, or perhaps better an ideal type, similar in this to the sketches I offered of the other theories. In the real world of democracy, to borrow

6 Alexis de Tocqueville: *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, and *L'Ancien régime et la Revolution*.

7 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*.

a famous title,⁸ the active participants who assume leadership roles in the struggles of public life are a minority. There are in fact a number of levels of participation, and a number of avenues, of unequal weight and significance, all the way from top political leadership, to grassroots party members, to those who work in organizations and movements which have an impact on the political process. Perhaps all these together constitute a minority.

Moreover, in this real world, the other theories capture an important part of people's experience, as I said above. Many non-participants may feel as though the economic theory fits the facts; and some of those who organize movements of protest may find the general will theory more immediately relevant. But with all these reservations, it may nevertheless be true that the laws and institutions of a democratic society are generally recognized as some kind of common expression and defense of a citizen dignity, in principle available to all. And this will be of crucial significance.

To illustrate this, we can take a recent bit of United States history. With all the imperfections of this polity as a democracy, with all the gigantic corporate and public bureaucracies which have usurped power, with all the citizen alienation and sense of helplessness, nevertheless at the time of the Watergate events, the sense was so strong that a violation of trust and an abuse of power of this kind could not be tolerated, that the President was forced out of office. Here we have a classic case of the operation of the common belief that the laws are a common repository of the dignity of the citizens, and that their violation cannot be tolerated. The world can be grateful that this reflex is still strong in the American public. Dangerous as American policy may have been these past years, the world has undoubtedly been spared some terrible horrors because Americans still believe in their republican institutions.

It should now be clear why I prefer this model of democracy over the others. Not because it alone matches some experience; they all do that. But because the other two are crucially inadequate as a model of the whole process, and the relations we stand to each other in it. We are also users of a common political instrument; and we are at times united in a common will. But if either of these constitute the central fact of our political life, we will not long enjoy a democratic polity. The only enduring basis for this is where we see this polity and its laws as the common safeguard of citizen dignity.

III

What then are the conditions which make this kind of polity possible or viable? Straight off, we can see some conditions which rule it out. A conception of the equal dignity of all participants is at the core of democratic life as conceived on my third view, since the polity is meant to be valued as the common repository of citizen dignity. This was recognized by the earliest democracies in Greek times, who sometimes referred to their citizens as "the Equals."⁹ But in these societies, not all the inhabitants belonged to the citizen class. It was possible for these societies to contain the most unequal relations, including slavery, by excluding the dominated from participation in the state, which thus remained the defender of the equal status of all citizens.

⁸ Brough Macpherson: *The Real World of Democracy*.

⁹ As was the case with Sparta, for instance.

Our modern sense of 'democracy' is different. Now it has to include everyone. No one considers present-day South Africa as a democracy, beyond the apologists for this regime itself. Consequently, a democratic regime is incompatible with the existence of relations, be they cultural or economic, which make it impossible for people to see each other as equals. In a culture, still impregnated with a sense of hierarchy, that places different strata in clearly different ranks, this kind of polity can't exist. And similarly, where economic power is highly concentrated, where latifundistas face a landless peasantry, for instance, a similar disability exists.

This raises the whole issue of the compatibility of democracy with different economic regimes, socialist and capitalist. I want to return to this later. But in order to prepare the ground, I want to look at some other conditions.

1. One is a condition of unity. It is essential to this kind of government, according to the third view above that I am defending, that the participants see themselves as being involved in a common enterprise of safeguarding their citizen right. This means not just that they approve this kind of regime in general, but that they feel themselves bound very particularly to their compatriots in a common defense of these rights. When some crime occurs against democracy and the rule of law, as in the September 1973 coup in Chile, particularly when it is accompanied by wholesale killings, opinion in the civilized world is deeply shocked. Many people would like to help. That is because they have a commitment in principle to democracy as a political form. But this, as we know, can unfortunately remain at the level of good intentions, soon driven out of the mind by other events which claim international attention. The impetus that a citizen feels to defend his own constitution, the solidarity with those compatriots whose rights are being violated has to be stronger than this, if it is to be truly effective. The extra strength must come from a sense of solidarity, which more than just a general commitment to democracy, binds me with these other particular people, my compatriots.

This sense of solidarity is part of the original meaning of 'patriotism', which I mentioned above. Nowadays, the word has changed its meaning, at least in English and French. It has veered towards a sense closer to 'nationalist', which was not at all what it meant, say, in the American and French Revolutions.

But this change is not altogether without significance. Because the sense of citizen solidarity is largely carried in our day by nationalist sentiment. I don't know of any case in the contemporary world where this sense is strong, where it is not at least partly grounded on nationalism. Perhaps one of the difficulties experienced by certain Latin American societies—I am thinking in this connection of Argentina, for example—stems from their having relatively little national cohesion throughout much of their post-independence history. The sense that the boundaries were arbitrary, that the state could just as well have included more of the old Vice-Royalty, as well as the lack of unity of the constituent provinces, coupled perhaps with the high rate of immigration later, all contributed to a relatively weak sense that all holders of Argentine citizenship belonged together in a common enterprise of free self-rule. I put forward this example with diffidence, because I am not as familiar as I ought to be with the politics of this continent. If I am right, though, and if the best crucible of a common purpose is some common democratic achievements, then the recent self-liberation of Argentina may have great long-term significance.

The reliance on national identity can, however, be a source of weakness. National identity is often based on language, or on culture, and is constituted by a certain

sense of the history and genesis of the cultural group—some of which may be fictitious. National consciousness heavily depends on a certain kind of narrative, which generates a sense of where we come from and where we're going. But this privileged narrative may have nothing to do with our being united in the enterprise of self-rule. It may even incorporate something incompatible with this. Throughout the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, a large section of the French population was susceptible to a story of French national greatness which was hostile to its republican institutions. For these people, nationalism was working against democracy, in the name of alternative regimes, usually royalist in stamp. All this came to a sordid end in Vichy. Rather, Vichy was the final negative experience; de Gaulle provided the positive leadership for a transition, as a Catholic, nationalist officer, who nevertheless rose to the defense of Republican France.

The long-term stable democracies have been generally those in which the national identity is woven into the institutions and practices of self-rule. They have been those where the national narrative, whether mythical or veridical, has taken the growth of democratic institutions as one of its main themes, where belonging to the nation is partly defined in terms of allegiance to these institutions.

The Anglo-Saxon democracies have generally been fortunate in this regard. The British case is particularly instructive. Because in fact, a democratic polity is threatened not only by a weak sense of unity, but even more by strong internal divisions. Unless these are compensated by a stronger sense of national solidarity, the institutions of self-rule can be swept away in civil strife, and replaced by a despotic form. Now the interesting feature of British politics in this century has been the strong class polarization that has characterized it. The working class movement developed in a rich and varied institutional structure, trade unions, co-operatives, the Labour Party; and it in fact held the allegiance of a great majority of the workers up till recently. It became in a sense a political subculture of its own. But central to this subculture was the commitment to Parliamentary government. Until recently, then, the polarization of British politics actually strengthened the democratic regime. That this may not be so in the future is the result of certain blind excesses of the British right, which I would like to deal with below.

2. The second condition I want to look at is that of participation. The besetting danger of large-scale late 20th century democracies is the atrophy of participation. In face of government which functions more and more bureaucratically, and must itself negotiate with and maintain itself among other large-scale bureaucracies, mostly corporate; whose decisions have ramifying effects which no-one fully oversees; which functions on the scale of a whole society and complex economy of many millions of people—in face of all this, many citizens feel their growing helplessness and tend to withdraw. This creates the climate in which the economic theory comes to seem the most appropriate. Indeed, its mechanisms seem to offer the last, best hope for democracy in a bureaucratic age.

But it is also clear that this atrophy of participation must undermine the sense of being engaged in a common enterprise of self-rule. Democracy, understood in my third sense, can't survive too much of this. More specifically, in a largely quiescent, bureaucratized society, in which the only act of participation was the vote cast once every four years, the sense of citizen dignity would be hard to sustain; and hence the sense that the laws and institutions are a common repository of this dignity would weaken, perhaps to the point of disappearing altogether.

Democracy thus lives by direct participation. By this I mean movements in which citizens organize themselves to make an impact on the political process, to alter public opinion, to put pressure on government, to get certain people elected, or occasionally to do something themselves which government will not do.

These movements generate a sense of citizen power, and also a sense of common purpose, which I spoke of above as the experiential core which keeps alive the Rousseauian image of the general will. In addition, they often find themselves in an adversarial relation to big, bureaucratic government and corporations. Hence the idea easily arises of building a polity which would somehow consist entirely of direct participation. This was one of the ideas behind the formula of a government by Soviets, taken over from the revolutionary experience of soldiers' and workers' councils, and supposedly made part of the normal operation of the state in the earlier post-Revolutionary constitutions.

This word is now a sad mockery. Not every such attempt need go that way. But nevertheless, there is something crucially faulty in this formula. The assumption that government can be by general will is unworkable, as I argued earlier. But even where direct participation doesn't generate this illusion, even where a healthy regard remains for the existence of disagreement and rivalry, government by direct participation would have to produce a rule by activist minorities. It might be asked, what is so wrong with this? Since today we are so often ruled by hidden minorities: bureaucrats, both public and corporate. But the point about the regime of the mass vote is that it can offer some countervailing power to these minorities. That is the kernel of important truth in the economic theory. The mass vote, where all the non-participants have their four-yearly say, may not amount to very much in relation to the demands of citizen dignity. But it is an essential safeguard of their rights, and hence a bulwark against their being deprived of this dignity altogether.

A viable democracy must march on two legs: a central authority which is responsible to the mass electorate, however disappointing the process is as an exercise in genuine self-rule; and widespread and varied forms of direct participation. The issue is how these can be combined; whether they will be simply adversaries, where the participatory action largely takes the form of a kind of democratic guerilla warfare, trying to stop government from doing things which disrupt and endanger people's lives: like dumping toxic wastes in their area, or building freeways through their neighbourhoods; or where it takes the form of a series of single-issue campaigns, for or against killing seals, or acid rain, where the participants abandon all responsibility for the over-all effect of government action, and concentrate simply on their favoured outcome.

Adversarial relations to power and single-issue campaigns are of course an essential dimension of participatory action. But the question is how to avoid their becoming the whole of it. The major alternative form consists of participation in party activity, or direct action which itself effects something—this latter virtually necessarily will be on a local scale. This points to what seems like a crucial condition for this kind of 'positive' participation: some meaningful decentralization of power in the society. Where everything of importance in the public domain is decided by the central authority, which inevitably operates on a large scale, and at several removes from the communities in which people live their lives, the party organizations themselves can become opaque and resistant to grassroots action; and direct action becomes virtually impossible.

Decentralization of power thus becomes of great importance. This can be territorial; or it can be within institutions. Schemes of workers' control of public industries are an example of the latter. But—and here we recur to the first condition I was discussing above—decentralization can't just be decreed. It doesn't suffice just to carve up the nation into a number of different territorial units, or declare that workers will elect a shop committee. These units have to correspond to viable communities of identification. The same thing holds on a lesser scale here as on the level of the whole society. Unless people identify with these units, feel a real sense of common fate and common enterprise with those who share it with them, the participation will remain a pious wish. We see this now with the municipal elections in certain countries, where the turnout is extremely low, much lower than in national elections. The conditions of a viable direct participation in a democratic polity can't just be willed into existence.

The case of the United States may be instructive here. Here is a society which has tended to be highly centralized. Where in spite of the regional nature of the society, and the federal structure of government, the central power has become immensely strong, and local authorities have been drained. This has meant a certain threat to participatory activity. In spite of the tremendous depth and strength of the participatory tradition in US political culture, this threatens to become more and more purely adversarial and single-issue oriented. And yet it is not easy to see what one can do about it. The loss of significance of state governments also has something to do with the American national consciousness. It is not just a matter of institutional change, though this has exacerbated it.

The American case is also interesting in another respect. As direct participation takes on less of the weight of maintaining a sense of citizen dignity, something else has compensated. This is the American tradition of judicially recoverable rights. To a great degree, the redress of grievances which in other societies has to be effected by legislation, is fought in the United States through the courts. The equality of electoral districts, non-discriminatory hiring policies in business, and admission policies in schools, have been brought about through court action. Americans are an immensely litigious people. They seem always to be taking each other to court for every conceivable kind of redress; and so it fits with their culture.

But it has also come, I believe, to play a crucial role in their polity. Citizen dignity reposes on a sense of efficacy. One can get this from being able to participate effectively. But where this is not so, one can also get it from the sense that, whatever the outcome of the legislative process which one barely controls, one can recover one's rights through the courts in virtue of entrenched provisions in the constitution. The sense that, whatever is decided in the name of the majority, I can nevertheless act to recover my basic rights, is an important component of the American sense of dignity.

This throws some interesting light on the Watergate events. What greatly exercised the American public on this occasion was not really an attack on the participatory process (this certainly was an aspect of Watergate: the original break-in was meant to damage the Democratic Party. But this was not what drew all the attention). It was the flagrant disregard of the rule of law. This is what called down on the unfortunate Nixon the opprobrium which forced him out.

By contrast, Canada has a rather different political culture, in which citizen dignity still is mainly tied to the participatory process. Some rather hair-raising revelations were made about the illegal actions of our federal police at about this time. And the public response was minimal, Canadians on the other hand are exercised about the

breach of conflict-of-interest norms by ministers and legislators which might be considered rather picayune south of the border, where American legislators are virtually bought by special interests.

3. The third set of conditions I want to consider are those for a sense of equal respect. Obviously this is central to a democratic polity as I define it. Without this, there could be no understanding that the polity involves a truly *common* defense of citizen right. Thus if any group of citizens, defined by region, or culture, or race, or class, or whatever, comes to believe that it is being neglected or discriminated against, the democratic polity is *pro tanto* undermined.

If we leave aside the important issues of race and sex discrimination, the crucial achievement of modern democracies whereby some sense of equal respect has been attained—or at least gross breaches in it forestalled—has been the building of the welfare state. The US pattern has been slightly different from that of the other ‘Atlantic’ democracies, in that its welfare state is less developed. Parallel to its relying more on rights recovery than participation is its reliance on a myth of individual self-help (which obviously is sometimes also a reality), rather than on public provision. But even in the US, such things as Social Security are of major importance. It is not easy to cut back on them, even for a supposedly dedicated cost-cutting President, as Reagan found.

This is the danger implicit in the present wave of the radical right in the great Anglo-Saxon democracies. They dream of a restored idyll (did it ever exist?) in which equal citizen respect would repose on a common plight of self-reliant, entrepreneurial agents, controlling each the conditions of their own lives. This is ludicrously out of phase with our late twentieth-century world of vast bureaucracies. But in the process of chasing this dream, and cutting back on public spending, these ideologues could undermine the real-life conditions of the sense of equal treatment, and hence deal a severe blow to political life. The Thatcher government in England may perhaps end up producing catastrophic results of this kind.

But this brings us to one of the deep underlying strains of modern democracy. The welfare state may be expensive, and highly problematic. The level of provision that people expect, coupled with the bureaucratic methods of management, may impose an economic burden which is hard to bear. Democratic society may thus find itself thrust onto the horns of a dilemma.

This can pose one of the most difficult challenges for a democratic society; one which it is easier to evade than to face. Runaway inflation can be one of the signs that it is being evaded. Instead of facing the issue of the incompatibility of all the demands being made on the system, this is allowed to work itself out through the price system, which involves a kind of invisible tax on real incomes. British politics in the last decade provides a good example. After the Callaghan government was defeated in 1979, mainly because of the spectacular refusal of the trades unions to participate further in the Labour government’s wages plan, the rate of inflation rose rapidly. Real wages were after all restricted, through the price system. Then the Thatcher government reduced inflation by the good old, crude method of massive deflation and a threefold rise in unemployment.

It is this kind of dilemma which has provided the pretext for military interventions in a number of countries, including on this continent. Some of the earlier Argentine coups are a case in point. Military dictatorship is supposed to take over from a failing democratic system which lacks the will to cope with the pressing problems of the society. The military, uncorrupted by partisanship, and not needing to curry favour with the electors,

claims to be able to bring the society through the difficult pass in a triumph of will over circumstances, and then deliver back a purged society to a new civilian regime.

Repeated experience ought to have exploded this tawdry myth. Unless one remains in a despotic regime forever—and quite apart from any other objections, this will have impoverishing consequences in the long run, for reasons I indicated in my opening remarks—the society has sooner or later to face the issue of how to combine the different pressures on it. The military regime may gain the elbow room to apply an extreme economic policy, as Chile became the hunting ground of Chicago ideologues in the late '70s. But no economic policy by itself can produce growth in the long run, since with a changing conjuncture this policy itself would require change, and this generally requires some degree of consensus to be effective. Chile and Poland provide examples today of societies stuck in economic stagnation, where the only way out involves the re-creation of some political consensus, which the regimes are debarred from seeking because of their terror of snaring power—fuelled partly in each case by their sense of the retribution their past crimes would call for.

After the binge of despotism, the society just has to pick up again where it left off, seeking ways of resolving its dilemmas by its own consensual processes. The military interlude has generally a weakening effect, by undermining democratic confidence, and partially destroying the networks of democratic self-rule. The only partial effect in the other direction arises from the horror it may have inspired among the citizens, whose determination may be increased not to allow it to happen again, as seems to be the case today in Argentina. But this is as nothing compared to the strength a democracy gains from the successful resolution of its dilemma by its own resources.

4. I want to come now to the issue I raised earlier, which is about the significance for democracy of the different economic regimes, capitalism and socialism. Of course, both of these are under-defined terms; they carry a multitude of meanings. And the answer to this question will be different for different senses of each. I won't try to define them at the beginning, even though this might be the wisest course. In the short space left to me, I can only make a few rather general remarks, and I would prefer to remain close to the present historical situation, rather than proffering a general theory.

I want to approach this question by saying what each economic regime has in it which is threatening to democracy, and then move from there to some tentative sense of possible future directions.

Capitalism at first posed an obvious danger to democracy, and since in some cases it arrived on the scene earlier, it threatened to forestall it altogether. The threat came from the unequal relations between employer and workers. This danger was effectively met in what have become today's democracies by the development of popular movements, most significantly trade unions, which could offset this power. Their political weight has in fact transformed these societies, and created some of the conditions for a sense of equal respect, including the welfare state that I mentioned above.

Present-day capitalism poses a threat of a different order, in some ways more insidious. We can see this on two levels. First, large-scale corporate capitalism, often transnational in scope, importantly affects the conditions of people's lives, effectively draining the power of participatory institutions, and transferring it to irresponsible bureaucratic organizations. On a second level, and here is the insidious part, the whole ideology of consumerism it supports tends to induce us to acquiesce in this abdication of responsibility, in return for the promised continuing rise in individual living standards. To the extent we go along with this, the economic theory of democracy seems

not only more realistic, but its mode of operation more desirable. Participatory action is bled of its significance, seems rather a menace to the smooth running of the system; and democracy as the common repository of citizen dignity is in danger. Which means, if I am right, that in the long run the democratic polity itself is in danger.¹⁰

On the other side, socialism in its Leninist form has been an unmitigated disaster for democracy. The mobilization of society by a vanguard, in its intentions all-embracing, has destroyed the various loci of self-management, subjected all potentially independent movements to a party which is in total symbiosis with the state—the fate of the trade unions has been particularly significant in this regard—and prevented any new foyers of self-rule from developing. The result in the long run has been profoundly debilitating. If the Soviet case can be taken as representative, the result is cultural and economic stagnation of massive proportions, coupled with a crippling regression in the society's capacities for self-management and self-organization. The frightening thought is that in the long run despotism can make itself indispensable because people lose the ability to manage their affairs without it.

Two lessons seem to emerge from the sorry history of twentieth-century socialism. The first is that democratic socialists urgently need to put behind them the Rousseauian-Marxist-Leninist illusions of the general will as a basis for a democratic society: that our model of socialism has to incorporate rivalry and conflict.

The second lesson is more particular. There doesn't seem to be a viable way of managing a modern economy for growth which doesn't accord a large place to the market. The whole Marxian model of socialism as based on an abolition of the market has to be scrapped.

Between the threats posed by corporate capitalism, and its annihilation under Leninist socialism, democracy has to find its way. Some despair altogether of finding such a way. I prefer to remain optimistic. If there is a path, one can trace its general direction. It would have to be a society in which the power of large private corporations was at least offset, if not altogether overcome by a regime of public ownership. But the large private bureaucracies would have to be replaced by something else than massive public counterparts. The economy would have to be mixed, in the sense of giving an important role to the market while also being to some extent directed by planning. And it would have to have a substantial degree of decentralized power, allowing meaningful decisions to be taken close to the communities they affect.

If one could somehow resolve the dilemmas implicit in the above, the ideal democratic society would perhaps enjoy an as-yet untried economic regime: one in which a lot of small-scale private entrepreneurs would coexist with large-scale public corporations, themselves under some system of workers' self-management; the whole co-ordinated by a market which would be managed according to planning guidelines by a state which would itself be federal in structure. Will this ever exist? Perhaps not. I offer it only as concentrating in a single portrait (parodying Plato¹¹) the directions in which we may have to move in order to preserve a viable form of democracy in the twenty-first century.

10 I have discussed this interrelation of capitalism, consumerism, and democracy at greater length in my "Legitimation Crisis?", in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge 1985.

11 Plato: *Republic*, 592B.