

Democratic Openness as Orthodoxy:
Claude Lefort on History, Nature, and Convention After the Democratic Revolution
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*They are like travelers dispersed in a great forest in which all the paths
lead to the same point*

- Tocqueville

Part I: Democracy as Natural

The Democratic Third Republic

Conventional wisdom holds that from the end of Reconstruction to the start of the Great Depression a “laissez-faire orthodoxy” reigned in America.¹ More a way of life than merely an economic system, capitalism was taken as the animating and ordering principle of society. *Market-competition* and the *liberty of contract* constituted a symbolic order within which all spheres of life were represented and evaluated. The contract stood as “an all-purpose metaphor for proper social relationships” and no less than “the *embodiment* of free will and voluntary action.” Liberty of contract was elevated “from one element of freedom to its very essence,” while the “market, not democratic politics” was considered “the true realm of freedom.”² William Graham Sumner went so far as to claim that questioning the market order was tantamount to attacking “the foundations of civilization” - socialism in particular was “anti-social and anti-civilizing.”³ Conversely, the free-market was thought to bring with it most everything that is of value: freedom, justice, wealth, peace, progress. In sum: “Man became economic man, democracy was identified with capitalism, liberty with property and the use of it, equality with opportunity for gain, and progress with ... the accumulation of capital.”⁴

With its currency among the courts (most notoriously in the 1905 Supreme Court case of *Lochner v. New York*), this worldview was insinuated into the very constitution of the American polity. Today, “*Lochner*” symbolizes a national identity so distinct as to be considered its own “constitutional regime” - the “second republic” of “laissez-faire constitutionalism,” as Bruce Ackerman writes.⁵ And the collapse of this order with *West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish* (1937) is cast as a “paradigm shift ... of the most fundamental kind. In Robert Jackson’s words, it signified the disintegration of ‘(t)he older *world of laissez-faire*.’”⁶ A sort of national identity-crisis, what had been unquestionable became unconscionable.

This narrative helps us understand modern democracy, I suggest, although not in the ways usually supposed. Free-market orthodoxy is usually put forth as the antithesis of the characteristic “openness” of modern democracy. In this context, “laissez-faire” epitomizes the tendency to represent *a particular conventional settlement* as grounded in *the universal order* - as “social arrangements decreed by nature.”⁷ As Cass Sunstein puts it: “the Court took as natural and inviolate a system that was legally constructed.”⁸ Moreover, as this free-market second nature - guided by an “invisible hand” - was synthesized with Protestantism, nature was reaffirmed as Nature. “It must be born in mind that (this order) was a mixture of three intellectually powerful currents of Western thought: the Protestant ethic; classical laissez-faire economics; and the principle of natural selection.”⁹ Uniting religion with economics and science in a single normative/descriptive representation of the world, the “national creed” of laissez-faire stood under “a sort of cosmic seal of approval.”¹⁰

Just as laissez-faire was itself defined and defended against the paternalistic and putatively natural order of slavery, “democracy” is often formulated over against the tendency to

“naturalize” or “essentialize” our socially constructed world - to endow historically situated conventions with the character of universality. More than merely a form of government, “democracy” here represents an open way of life in which almost nothing is sacrosanct, taboo, repressed, or beyond contestation - everything is at least *in principle* questionable. Every convention and identity is recognized as a social construct, and every construct is subject to being deconstructed. Thus is Justice Holmes’ declaration that “The Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer’s Social Statics” celebrated today as a great debunking democratic dissent, exposing the truth of laissez-faire as mere opinion, rooted in the here and now.

Against this representation, I weigh the possibility that we tend today to think of democracy itself as natural; that modern democracy in America is in this sense more analogous than antithetical to the laissez-faire orthodoxy described above. Specifically, I argue that democratic *openness* is today what free-market *competition* once was: the simultaneously descriptive and normative fact/value of our way of life.¹¹ Democratic openness stands as the normative principle of the only social order we accept as good and legitimate: an open society wherein everything is potentially subject to *questioning*. At the same time, openness describes the modern condition of *uncertainty* we find ourselves born into. Consequently, the democratic social order seems inscribed in the order of the world - if not decreed by a now silent nature, than singularly in accordance with nature’s flow. Perhaps providentially, openness is both that which we willingly (even passionately) *affirm*, and that which we simply cannot *deny*.

If this analogy holds, democratic openness would serve today as an all-purpose metaphor for proper social relationships. Democracy would be taken as not one element of freedom but as its essence, and as the good from which most others (freedom, justice, wealth, peace, progress) follow. We would live in a time when man has become democratic man, capitalism is identified with democracy, liberty and equality with democratic openness, and progress with democratization.

What follows is an exploration of how democracy, through its association with the state of “openness,” might come to seem natural. To this end, I take up the work of Claude Lefort.¹² Perhaps beyond any other contemporary theorist of democracy, Lefort offers a way to conceptualize the inherently abstract idea of openness. He illuminates both the fundamental connection between modern democracy and the principle of openness, and how this *political* principle is constitutive more generally of a “form of society” and “style of existence.” As we shall see, Lefort fruitfully interprets the characteristic openness of modern democratic society by reconstituting its genesis in the democratic revolution, the original phenomenon of opening, which he describes as “the dissolution of the markers of certainty.” Through his work, I suggest, we are better able to see what Tocqueville at times misses: the advent of equality is inextricably intertwined with the collapse of hierarchy; the passion for equality is inseparable from the passion for revolution - that is, from freedom-as-openness.

At the same time, Tocqueville helps us see what Lefort at times misses: even as the principle of openness introduces an element of uncertainty and restlessness into our existence, it is affirmed in such a way as to shut down argument and contestation regarding certain democratic beliefs, practices, and conventions. Like the capitalist *economics* of laissez-faire before it, the democratic *culture* of openness is affirmed as second-nature. On Lefort’s account, after the democratic revolution our notions of both freedom and nature take on an open or “historical” quality - living necessarily in the unpredictable and open-ended flow of time, no body can legitimately claim to have the last word on matters of truth and right. Principled upon

openness, democratic society, which Lefort terms the “historical society par excellence,” seems both constitutively free and in a sense natural - inscribed not in immutable Nature but in the openness of history. No longer can anyone speak in the name of Nature, but to go against democracy would be to go against history. Through a critical interpretation of Lefort’s work, then, we shall see how the principle of democratic openness itself might constitute a sort of orthodoxy, although one without authoritative interpreters. In democratic society we are like Tocqueville’s travelers: unlead but nonetheless ending up at the same point.

I go on to argue that the consequence of this orthodoxy of openness is not the blatant injustices and inequities of the laissez-faire orthodoxy, absurdly encoded as natural and justified as good, given, and inevitable. Instead, I argue that whatsoever is perceived as belonging to the world of conventional norms and forms is not so much opened to questioning as undermined *as such*, without question (not unlike the political regulation of the free-market economy in the laissez-faire order). Meaning and authority, I conclude, settle precisely with the idea of that which cannot be enclosed and incorporated in particular, conventional norms and forms - with the idea of formlessness, or informality.

Before returning to Lefort in part II, I orient my interpretation of democratic society against the more common notion of “market society,” and then take up some recent works of democratic theory that help demonstrate the connections between “democracy” and “openness.”

Market Society or Democratic Society

Increasingly, conventional wisdom holds that we in America (and beyond) still live in a fundamentally “market society” - a neo-liberal, laissez-faire third republic. In our age of globalization, the “reigning economic faith ... is merely a souped-up version ... of the market-as-nature.”¹³ Moreover, this economic faith is supposedly taken as our faith as such (in the odd synthesis of “neo-liberal” capitalism and “neo-conservative” Christianity).¹⁴ We hear that the corporation, like “the Church, the Monarchy, and the Communist Party in other times and places, ... is today’s dominant institution.” CEO’s are taken as the “heroes” and “high priests” of our time.¹⁵ Nowadays, this analysis runs, “the status of the market is ... something close to a global theology. ... Market society is no longer simply a metaphor. ... It is a living reality.” Consumption “has become existential, the veritable badge of identity. As we consume so we are.”¹⁶ Even more strikingly: “Economics, as channeled by its popular avatars in the media and politics, is the cosmology and the theodicy of our contemporary culture. More than religion itself ... it is economics that offers the dominant creation narrative of our society, depicting the relation of each of us to the universe we inhabit (and) the relationship of human beings to God This understanding ... now serves as the unquestioned foundation of nearly all political and social debate.”¹⁷ In turn, “one cannot think of a single area of American life that does not define itself proudly and brazenly by the bottom line. Books are judged on sales; movies by the first weekend’s gross;”¹⁸ Beyond oligarchy (which is only one principle of rule among others), we live, Sheldon Wolin argues, in a wholly exclusive and all-embracing “economic polity.”¹⁹

Is this the case, though? Can we think of any contemporary representation of a CEO as a hero (much less a high priest)? Do we really *judge* books and movies by their sales (or, conversely, do we usually disdain the best-seller or blockbuster)? Do we *proudly* identify ourselves in terms of consumerism (or, conversely, do we assume that while we ourselves are not so shallow and materialistic, most others are)? Do we still represent our relationships with others via economic metaphors (for instance, marriage as a sort of business contract)? Do we take economics as our religion? I suggested previously that such ideas of meaning giving way to

materialism capture the imagination to such an extent today not as the world we actually experience, but rather as the world we most fear.

I offer an alternative interpretation of contemporary American society. Insofar as we can make such general claims about our “society,” “culture,” or “age,” I suggest that ours is rendered more fully intelligible as a “democratic society” - a democratic “social state,” to use Tocqueville’s phrase. We tend to represent and evaluate things in terms of democratic openness. What does this mean? As an admittedly trivial but I think wonderfully illustrative example, think of the 1998 movie “Pleasantville,” a strikingly overt allegory of openness. Over the course of the movie, the characters literally burst out of their closed, secure, domesticated, routine, black-and-white existence and into color as they come to question inhibiting social norms, express themselves authentically, and experience (even savor) the previously repressed uncertainties of life. By the end, every character inevitably awakens to the truth, the good, and the beauty of a colorful/open existence (even, at last, the politician). They learn to take the world as it really is deep down below what they are led to believe, and they are set free. The heroes are the artist and the outsider, self-expression is the veritable badge of identity, and the creation narrative is one of revolutionary rupture with paternalistic authority.

Now, any “interpretation of society” is justified only insofar as it resonates with the reader’s own experiences and observations. One sign of our “democratic society,” though, might be that *Lochner* no longer makes sense even while *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) still does. Another might lie, as we shall see, in the continuing appeal of and quest for the natural, understood as spontaneous, authentic, and undomesticated.²⁰ Yet another sign might lie in our very fascination with such general and abstract notions as “market society” and “democratic society,” as Tocqueville argued. Most significantly, with such an interpretation it becomes apparent that while we do indeed affirm the free-market as normative, even natural, we do so only insofar as it can be associated with the freedom of democratic openness. Capitalism is itself sold as democratic. (Think of the immensely popular works of Thomas Friedman. He cites a number of adds, including: “E*Trade. Now the power is in your hands;” and “Sooner or later, all tyrannies crumble. Those that keep putting their customers on hold tend to crumble sooner.”)²¹ At the same time, we are able to account for the other half of the picture: “economics” - insofar as signifying either the hierarchical closures of corporatism (Big Oil, Big Tobacco, etc.), or all that falls under “bourgeois materialism” - is hardly the “unquestioned foundation” of our society, much less our cosmology and theodicy. We cannot ignore the fact that “market society,” “consumerism,” and so forth are invoked precisely so as to question and condemn them rather than as legitimate or aspirational. Along these lines we can understand the full picture of our love/hate relationship with capitalism (and globalization) in democratic society.

Unpacking Democratic Openness: From the Rule of the People to the Death of God

Democracy has been associated with openness of one kind or another at least since the time of Pericles, whether in his Funeral Oration description of democratic Athens as a “city open to all,” or in the Corinthian description of the Athenian sea-power as “lover’s of innovation” and “never at home.” And of course there are senses of openness inherent in the very idea of democracy as the rule of the people: inclusive and open-government, transparent and accountable, operating out in public as opposed to behind closed doors. Increasingly, though, there is a tendency to take “democracy” as synonymous with “openness,” and to formulate openness in a particularly expansive or “radical” sense. Here, democratic freedom and equality

are combined within, conceptualized in terms of, and reduced to openness - democratic openness as the “liberty of the late moderns,” as it were. Tellingly, the top result of an April 2007 Google search for “democracy” was “Democracy: the free and open-source internet TV platform ... built on open-standards.” “There’s now an opportunity to create a television culture that is fluid, diverse, exciting, and beautiful,” as opposed to “the same narrow, top-down cultural stagnation that we see on traditional television.”²²

Following the characterizations of “lover’s of innovation” and “never at home,” radical openness is taken to mean a great many things (uncertainty, indeterminacy, contingency, open-endedness, fluidity, etc.); and to imply the possibility of a great many more (questioning, contestation, pluralism and diversity, integration and communication, radical action, spontaneity, unpredictability, the event of beginning, etc.). As Patchen Markell outlines it, radical openness takes shape within a matrix of oppositions between “rule,” “stability, order, closure, and continuity” and “freedom,” “change, interruption, ... and novelty.”²³ These oppositions are often reduced to “democracy” versus “totalitarianism” and “fundamentalism.” While this sense of openness is usually associated with one side of an academic discourse about democratic theory, and categorized as postmodern, post-structuralist, and/or agonistic, it is more prevalent than that. Hardly the voice of postmodernism, take Thomas Friedman’s characterization of the post Cold War order - radically disrupted and rendered fluid by “the democratization of technology,” “the democratization of finance,” and “the democratization of information” - as one where “walls fell all over the world,” and which “grows ... more open every day.”²⁴

In his valuable recent work, Alan Keenan further clarifies the affinities (and tensions) between radical openness and democracy as the rule of the people. He identifies two senses of openness right at the surface of “the logic of collective autonomy.” First, there is “the openness of *inclusion* and *generality*.” “for it to be the people who rule, rather than some faction or special class of the people, the process of making decisions must be open to all members of the community affected by them.” Second, democratic self-rule requires the openness of “debate, argumentation, questioning, and revisability;” it must be “the people ... of today who rule, not that of yesterday, or of tradition.” They “must be able to revise their decisions, institutions, and practices as they wish or need.”²⁵ Notice a tension: open *decision*-making necessarily limits the openness of *questioning* - potentially unfettered questioning is reduced to mere amendment. Every decision a closure, a limiting of the range of potentiality, deciding comes with a sort of democratic buyer’s remorse.

At a deeper level, Keenan identifies a third kind of openness, beyond those of “the people’s” identity in *space* and over *time*: that of the grounds and standing of the identity of “the people.” This is “the openness of *incompletion* and *imperfection*” of “the democratic ‘we.’” To be *able* to either question or decide, “the people’ must take on an identity whose relative clarity and stability depend on particular foundations, traditions, and institutional forms that cannot be fully general or fully open to question.”²⁶ Yet, since there are “no external, nonpolitical, non-self-generated standards for judging the ‘correct’ vision of the people,” any institutionalization of “the people” is to some degree arbitrary, illegitimate, and undemocratic.²⁷ The “vicious circles” and “nonsimultaneity” of “the people’s self-foundation” - that the first cause of the people cannot be the people themselves; that they must perform a Munchausian bootstrapping of themselves into existence - embeds openness and uncertainty in the very definition of democracy as the rule of the people.²⁸

Keenan thus exposes openness along all three democratic axes - horizontal (generality), forward and back in time (revisability), and vertical (foundations); as well as at the core of both democratic action (to rule as both to decide and to question), and the democratic actor (the identity of “the people” who are to rule).

Even further, Keenan identifies “the form of openness that in some way lies behind all the other forms of democratic openness (This is) the constitutive, even ontological, openness and fluidity of democratic and political freedom.” Beyond “democratic politics in principle render(ing) everything provisional and open to question,” the “democratic spirit or imaginary is fundamentally one of questioning.”²⁹ This “most fundamental kind of democratic openness and uncertainty” lies behind “both the “‘positive’ openness of generality and revisability,” as well as the “‘negative’ openness of democratic . . . incompleteness.”³⁰ In other words, this “ontological” openness of freedom/uncertainty/questioning lies behind both the openness we affirm as the norm of democratic legitimacy, and the openness we simply cannot deny, which is a given of our late modern condition.³¹ Already we can begin to see how, via its association with “ontological” openness, the democratic social order might seem not only good and right but also given and inescapable, not unlike the old laissez-faire order of competition.

In a striking formulation of the connection between “ontological openness” and “democracy,” George Kateb writes: “the hidden source of modern democracy may always have been the death of God;” the “death of God was . . . slyly at work in the founding of modern democracy”³² For Kateb, modern democracy rests upon the “sense of inessentiality and indefiniteness” born of the death of Father and King - of the collapse of divine hierarchy, and so of the earthly warrant for command gained by participation in this hierarchy. Without appeal to some higher sovereignty, to the determinate guidance and guarantees of metaphysical absolutes, we are left on our own to order the frontier into which we are cast. For Kateb, democracy is a matter of both coping with and celebrating this necessary self-reliance. William Connolly concurs: democracy is “grounded in a matrix of uncertainty” - in the “modern pressures to problematize those final markers (God, natural law, the divine right of kings, the natural basis of traditional identities, a fictive contract) that might have governed” us in the past.³³ Our democratic way of life is essentially without final solutions or final destinations.

Along these lines, Wendy Brown describes democracy as “politics without banisters” - without the support of “convictions” or fixed certainties. “Conviction - as Truth or as principle - was never the right modality for belief within a democratic polity. A politics of Truth is inevitably totalitarian, and convictions in the sense of principle converges far too easily in liberal democracies with individualist strains of moral absolutism.”³⁴ To check the appeal of such absolutism, Bonnie Honig argues that we must resist the seductive longing for peace - for the reassurance and security of “the dream of a place called home,” “free of power, conflict, and struggle.”³⁵ We must foster, instead, a “democratic ethos,” - “an affirmative cultural/political response to the problematization of final markers that helps to define the late-modern condition.”³⁶ And this “culture of democratization,” Connolly writes, has “at its very center” the “periodic *denaturalization of settled identities and conventions*” and the “disturbance” of the “particular patterns” of “previous settlements.”³⁷ As Peter Euben puts it, democratization is about “naturalized conventions periodically confront(ing) their conventional status”³⁸ The problematization of final markers requires the problematization of conventional settlements - our proper posture amid uncertainty is one of restless questioning.

The political and social upshot of this “ontologically” open way of life is that no person or group can rule or speak in the name of God, Truth, Nature, History, Reason, Law or even the People. The properly democratic lexicon on this account replaces the hierarchy of the sanctified Capital Letter with the circularity of the self-hyphenation (self-reliance, self-rule, self-creation, self-foundation, self-determination, etc.). This is one of the most common formulations of democracy today. We hear, for instance, that “the NFL draft is great because it’s democratizing. No one has the slightest idea what will happen, so all opinions are *equally invalid*. ... And the fact The Experts [who try to predict which college players NFL teams will select] are constantly wrong is democratizing.”³⁹ Beyond Keenan’s notion of “revisability,” modern democracy here signifies the innate limitation of *any* claim to authority in a chastening uncertainty. No one can legitimately claim final answers because there are no final answers; certainty and conviction are never warranted. And it is within this context that equality (we are all ultimately unsure and insecure) and freedom (there is no basis for command, no unquestionable rule) take on their specifically modern democratic character and fuse into the principle of democratic openness.

But how open is this openness? On the above account, “democratic” describes a state of affairs in which social arrangements cannot be “massively affirmed” as deduced from nature. Grounded in our condition of *uncertainty*, democracy justifies *questioning* settled conventions and identities. Is there a sense, though, in which this uncertainty and questioning might come to be massively affirmed as natural? Notice that the “ontological” openness discussed above seems no less normative than descriptive - the death of God as both fact and value, true and good. We necessarily live under openness-as-uncertainty, the freedom and equality expressed in openness-as-questioning is embedded in this condition, hence we are necessarily free and equal. Given the “reality” of our experience of openness, the legitimacy of political and social openness seems simply self-evident - obvious in a way *laissez-faire* probably never was. Conversely, hierarchy and absolutism seem as much illusory as illegitimate.

Are there fixed norms of *identity* inherent in democratic openness that are taken for granted and closed off from questioning? For example, do the psychological and emotional capacities to cope with the anxiety and frustrations of uncertainty constitute a standard of democratic maturity, even courage, below which we sink in our childish dreaming of a place called home? Given uncertainty, does the “questioning self” stand as normative and natural? To cease questioning under conditions of ontological openness, it seems, would be akin to not believing under conditions of ontological closure (before God’s death), or to not competing under conditions of survival of the fittest. In this sense, perhaps we are less *permitted* than ethically *enjoined* to question ourselves, others, and the world we inhabit. In a world defined as without final answers, what choice do we have but to question things? Contestation becomes freedom’s imperative. The *liberty* of contract was once cast as an ethical measure in the *capacity* to contract (in the dichotomy of competition/paternalism). Is the freedom to question cast as the capacity to question today (in the dichotomy of question/paternalism)?

In this context, how are we likely to judge previously settled conventions that are “made to confront their conventional status?” The evidence for our evaluation seems contained within the proposition: we would judge them harshly, precisely because they are *previously settled*, closed conventions. Unconventional would be synonymous with good (think of the negative connotation of “conventional wisdom” as opposed to the positive connotation of “common sense”). In turn, there seems a certain superficiality to democratic contestation, a pre-ordained

quality wherein every choice is one of more or less of the same basic good - more or less openness.⁴⁰ While we are uniquely permitted to call the conventional world into question, it can only be according to the normative standard of openness. Questioning stands as an end in itself.

To advance this line of reasoning, I offer a critique of Claude Lefort's theory of democracy. Exploring his work in part II, we see more clearly than so far possible the origins and dimensions of "democratic openness." At the same time, I suggest in part III that through a close reading of Lefort's work we come to notice a self-subverting quality of democratic openness, wherein its full factual/normative gravity becomes apparent. In critique of Lefort's work, I argue that the order of openness (or, as we shall see, the rule of history) is no less determinate than the order of Nature.

Part II: The Revolutionary Phenomenon of Opening

The Theologico-Political Form of Society

"Democracy," Lefort writes, is fully apprehended only as a "regime" or "*politeia*" - the term signifies a "constitution" and "form of government," but also as a "style of existence" and "mode of life." These last two phrases should "evoke everything that is implied by an expression such as 'the American way of life,' namely, those mores and beliefs that testify to the existence of a set of implicit norms determining notions of just and unjust, good and evil, desirable and undesirable, noble and ignoble." As a "*form of society*," democracy thus generates certain notions of "proper relations between human beings."⁴¹ And this "*shaping*" of a people's "*manner of being in society*" defines the regime's "permanence in time, regardless of the various events that may affect it." The democratic form is united "as a recognizable whole despite its internal divisions" and differentiated "on a fundamental level from other forms of society" in that we can say there are characteristically democratic norms of justice, of the good and the right, of human association, and of a life well lived.⁴² We might take this as Lefort's revision and restatement of Tocqueville's notion of democracy as a "social state."

Lefort distinguishes this way of approaching social phenomena from more mainstream methods of the social sciences. He argues that we can neither understand nor evaluate our "form of society" analytically, by reducing it to its internal aspects (whether to its structural components like state and civil society; its "spheres" of economics, politics, law, science, religion, and so forth; or its various groups, classes, and interests). For example, there can be no adequate study of our beliefs and actions in terms of self-interest and rational choice independent of an interpretation of the unifying social-symbolic milieu within which we come to think of "the individual" in terms of a "self" who is normally and primarily "interested," and who has both the right and rational capacity to choose. To begin with the self-interested actor is to put the partial and derivative before the whole and generative, to explain by that which itself requires explanation. Nor can we approach human coexistence as the epiphenomenal consequence of either economic necessity or economic choice. Social relationships are not experienced solely as, and so cannot be understood solely as, material relationships. Rather than "following the money," as it were, we must follow the trail of that which is *publicly represented as meaningful* - as orienting and motivating, a right or a cause, a source of pride and dignity, and so forth.⁴³ In turn, the centrality of notions such as economic necessity and choice in our society would raise questions like: what form of society is prone to represent itself, its fears and aspirations, in terms of economic necessities and choices?

For Lefort, what is overlooked in any reduction of the overall schema of society to its empirical components is the religious dimensionality of society - the regime specific mode of

articulating the universal and particular. “Religion,” as Lefort employs the term, “is a mode of portraying or dramatizing” those relations people establish with something beyond empirical time and space, and by which they in turn recognize a principle of proper relations with one another.”⁴⁴ That the inhabitants of a social form identify that form as cohering over time and in space, as a recognizable and meaningful way of life, reveals the “religious sensibility” of the “beliefs, attitudes, and representations” that order the social, even if “the agents concerned do not relate them to any dogma,” even if “they do not imply any fidelity on their part to a church” and even if “they may, in certain cases, go hand in hand with militant atheism.”⁴⁵

Lefort goes on to argue that to interpret this quasi-religious articulation of the transcendent and the mundane we must look to the creation narrative, as it were, of the regime. The “space called society ... cannot in itself be conceived as a system of relations, no matter how complex we might imagine that system to be. On the contrary it is ... the *particular mode of its institution* that makes it possible to conceptualize ... the articulation of its dimensions, and the relations established within it between classes, groups and individuals, between practices, beliefs and representations. If we fail to grasp this *primordial reference* to the mode of the institution of the social, to the *generative principles* or to an overall schema governing both the temporal and the spatial configuration of society, we lapse into a positivist fiction.”⁴⁶

We can think of this coming into being of a coherent social form in terms of the “enigma” of a “division which institutes a common space,” of “a break which establishes relations.”⁴⁷ It is from the “primal division” between the here and now, on one hand, and the quasi-religious dramatization of something beyond the empirical that society takes meaningful shape. When we look at modern society, for instance, its characteristic divisions between state and society or public and private occur if, where, and how they do because of the particular way in which we envision this original division. The “fact that (social) space is organized as one despite ... its multiple divisions and that it is organized as the same in all its multiple dimensions implies a reference to a place from which it can be seen, read and named”⁴⁸ As we shall see, for Lefort we name ourselves democratic via a generative break that is largely Oedipal.⁴⁹ The particular mode of democratic society’s institution is the revolutionary beheading of the king.

But why think of our social Gestalt, with its particular founding mediation of the transcendent and the empirical, as essentially democratic? Why privilege the language of politics when thinking about the “religious dimension” and “mode of institution” of society? Why, for example, “democratic” rather than “market” or “Christian” society?

For Lefort, the key to the character of any society, to its characteristic norms of human relations, is the way in which power is represented as legitimate. The key to any social form is how power within that form is taken as potentially bridging the “primal division” between particularity and universal. Society, Lefort writes, is put into form by the specific way in which power “makes a gesture towards something *outside*” the material world, toward an “externality,” which, if “projected ... on to the real ... would no longer have any *meaning* for society.”⁵⁰ We glimpse our social form in those instances when power is represented as authority rather than experienced as force or “naked power;” the symbolic divulges more than the empirical.⁵¹ The “existence of a power capable of obtaining generalized obedience and allegiance” through such a gesture toward transcendence implies a certain type of social ... articulation, as well as a certain type of representation, to some extent explicit, to a larger extent implicit, concerning the legitimacy of the social order.”⁵² In this sense, Lefort concludes, it is “of the essence of power to present and make visible a model of social organization.”⁵³

When speaking of power in this symbolic register, we are dealing with what Lefort terms the “political form” of society, or simply “the political” (*le politique*). Lefort distinguishes this from “politics” (*la politique*), which is a matter of the “exercise” and “functioning” of power (as opposed to the prior matter of its representation). A regimes politics is revealed in the partisan struggles of competing interests or classes, and is analyzable in the terms of the social sciences. The political, on the other hand, is “revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of the institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) *becomes defined as particular*, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed”⁵⁴ Once enmeshed in the empirical and material practices of power, we lose sight of the principle by which such practices came into being.

We might say that “politics” refers us to an “economic” notion of power, and so to the divisions and conflicts internal to a social form, while “the political” conveys the “religious” dimension of power whereby power attains a principled status. The former refers to power as effective, the latter to power as meaningful and legitimate.⁵⁵ One cannot, as Lefort puts it, “separate the elaboration of a *political form* - by virtue of which the nature and representation of power and social division (divisions between classes and groups) can stabilize, and by virtue of which the various dimensions of the human experience of the world can simultaneously become organized - from the elaboration of a *religious form* - by virtue of which the realm of the visible can acquire death, and by virtue of which the living can name themselves with reference to the dead ...”⁵⁶ The connection here is such that Lefort terms society’s form fundamentally “theologico-political.”⁵⁷

By way of example, we can say that for Lefort (as for Tocqueville) revolutions are caused not exactly by misery or suffering, but by the collapse of the “constitutional” dimension of power, of the political form of society within which material misery and suffering might be symbolically encoded and endured.⁵⁸ More religious than economic, as it were, revolution “are not born of an internal conflict between the oppressed and their oppressors; they occur at the moment when the transcendence of power vanishes, and when its symbolic efficacy is destroyed.”⁵⁹ Revolutions occur when the “distinction between power as a symbolic agency and power as a real organ disappears,” and so when power proves “incapable of giving form and meaning to social division ...”⁶⁰

The Democratic Revolution as the Disembodiment of Power

What, then, characterizes our democratic theologico-political form of society? What characterizes its symbolic political milieu wherein power is represented as authority? What is the democratic mode of mediating the particular and the universal?

For Lefort, as we have seen, democratic society is like *any* society in that it can only be interpreted as taking shape within a theologico-political matrix. At the same time, Lefort argues that we must recognize the fundamental transformation of this matrix that occurs with the democratic revolution. In an oft-quoted passage, Lefort writes: “democracy is instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other, at every level of social life (at every level where division, and especially the division between those who held power and those who were subject

to them, could once be articulated as a result of a belief in the nature of things or in a supernatural principle).⁶¹

Lefort, we said earlier, concurs with Tocqueville that democracy should be understood capaciously, as an encompassing social state or form of society. Here we have Lefort's key departure from Tocqueville's theorization of democracy: the dissolution of the markers of certainty supplants the equality of conditions as the generative fact and generative principle of the democratic regime. The central question for Lefort is therefore: what "way of life" is instituted and sustained by this dissolution? What social form, with what principle of proper human relations, is generated by the experience of a "fundamental indeterminacy" precisely as to the basis of relations between human beings?

The first thing we can say is that we are tempted to misinterpret the revolutionary *transformation* of our theologico-political social form as its *collapse* into fragmentation - into a formless "economic" materialism and "scientific" empiricism. As we shall see, the incorporating form of modern democracy is elusive precisely because its inhabitants do not *see*, and so deny, it. Modern democracy, represented as assuming its openness with the death of God (the collapse of religious dimensionality), is taken as the society without form - a congregating multitude of individuals (usually represented as a market). This is not Lefort's interpretation, though. With the democratic revolution, the theologico-political form of society does not collapse, but instead takes on an unprecedented openness or formlessness of form. We might put it this way: for Lefort, the "hidden source of modern democracy" is not the death of God but the death of Christ - the worldly figure of the sovereign father. The disappearance of the corporeal *figure* or *form*, not the collapse of the *dimension*, of transcendence opens space and time to the democratic phenomenon.⁶² Lefort thus represent the democratic revolution as the dissolution of the material *markers* of authority, and so certainty.

On the one hand, then, the "essentials remain unchanged: the theologico-political is revealed in the deployment of a system of representations ... whose oppositional principle" "between the particular, which is ... organized spatially and temporally, and the universal, which is still related to the operation of transcendence" remains constant.⁶³ Yet, we should not let this obscure the radical nature of the dissolution of the markers of certainty.⁶⁴ For Lefort, as for Tocqueville, the democratic revolution is the singularly pivotal event of human history. It inaugurates modernity by rendering the articulation of the particular and the universal, the mortal and the divine, problematic. As with Tocqueville, for whom there are really only two basic regime-types (aristocracy and democracy), for Lefort, all pre-revolutionary social forms (from ancient Greece to the *ancien regime*) are fundamentally alike, as are all post-revolutionary forms (whether, as we shall see, democratic or totalitarian).

This pivotal quality becomes apparent when we look at the theologico-political form the revolution overturned. "Under the monarchy," Lefort writes, "power was embodied in the person of the prince. ... The prince was mediator between mortals and gods or ... the transcendental agencies represented by a sovereign Justice and a sovereign Reason."⁶⁵ The physical presence of the Christ-figure king made "visible both the union of natural and supernatural, and the division between them."⁶⁶ The king "condensed within his body, which was at once mortal and immortal, *the principle that generated the order of the kingdom*. His power pointed towards an unconditional, other-worldly pole, while at the same time he was, in his own person, the guarantor and representative of the unity of the kingdom. The kingdom itself was represented as a body, as a substantial unity."⁶⁷ Moreover, the properly *hierarchical* order

of the realm was instantiated in the head-body image. Society was a “great imaginary body” for which the king, as head, “provided the ... guarantee of its integrity.”⁶⁸ In this context, “the universal *speaks* for itself.”⁶⁹

Literally, then, the “democratic revolution, for so long subterranean, *burst out* when the body of the king was destroyed, when the body politic was decapitated and when, at the same time, the corporeality of the social was dissolved.”⁷⁰ The revolution signifies the “dissolution of the monarchical focus of legitimacy and the destruction of the architecture of bodies.”⁷¹ Democratic society, in turn, is “instituted as a society without a body;” it remains a recognizable whole, but without any determinate, visible representation of itself *as* a whole.⁷² Democracy is still a form of society, but a uniquely *abstract* one. Just as Tocqueville argues that democracy takes shape with the dissolution of the feudal principle of landedness (of authority incorporated in the land), Lefort argues that democracy is defined by the absence of physical, objective definition. After the revolution, the transcendent can no longer be made manifest, power can no longer be transubstantiated into sovereignty, and so society can no longer be put into form, via the Christian mode of *embodiment*. Henceforth, we search without precedent for a new way of articulating the religious dimension of social existence - of mediating the universal and the particular. Understood as such, the democratic revolution is “a political event” with no less than “a metaphysical significance: the collapse of an unconditional authority which, in one or another social context, someone could claim to embody.”⁷³

Emptiness, Openness, and the Rule of the People

This extraordinary phenomenon of disincorporation is, for Lefort, the instituting mode and moment of democracy. The democratic regime is given form precisely, if paradoxically, by the “indetermination that was *born from the loss* of the substance of the body politic.”⁷⁴ And herein lies the most basic sense of “democratic openness,” the generative opening of the democratic theologico-political. The democratic political form is *constitutively* open in that “the locus of power,” once occupied by the figure of the king, “becomes an *empty place*.” With the revolution, power cannot be transubstantiated into authority by means of symbolic incorporation; authority can no longer be present in the flesh, as it were. Sovereign power becomes, Lefort writes, “such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it;” the seat of power “cannot be occupied.”⁷⁵ The “people, the nation and the state take on the status of universal entities,” but none of these “represent substantial entities. Their representation is itself, in its dependence upon a political discourse, ... always bound up with ... debate.”⁷⁶ Consequently, no body can legitimately command or render judgment. The principle of hierarchy collapses with the “destruction of the architecture of bodies.” The claim to legitimate authority is thus conjoined to the legitimate questioning of authority. Today, power cannot simply proclaim its own legitimacy; instead it “must ... win its legitimacy without becoming divorced from competition between parties.”⁷⁷ In a “modern society, ... power may deny right, but it is incapable of depriving itself of its reference to it” without falling into a contemptible particularity.⁷⁸ Of “all the regimes of which we know,” Lefort concludes, modern democracy “is the only one to have represented power in such a way as to show that power is an *empty place* and to have thereby maintained a gap between the symbolic and the real. It does so by virtue of a discourse which reveals that ... those who exercise power do not possess it; that they do not, indeed, embody it.”⁷⁹ It is in this gap - this empty, open space - that the democratic way of life takes shape.

This is not to say that “the people” aren’t sovereign in democracy, but rather that “the people” cannot enact their sovereignty. Unlike the self-sufficient king, “the people” cannot speak and act on its own behalf. The abstraction of “the people” can never be unproblematically identified, and so they can never be present in such a way as to occupy the seat of power. In turn, there is always a gap between popular sovereignty and its representation - between symbolic and real; principle and practice. Even as “the people will be *said* to be sovereign,” then, their “identity will constantly be open to question, ... (and) will remain latent.”⁸⁰ This latency of sovereignty - this constitutive absence of the father-figure - is the beating heart of modern democracy for Lefort. It is, as we shall see, the meaning of freedom in democracy.

Following Lefort further, we can say that this relationship between sovereignty and absence is more than coincidental: the people will be said to be sovereign only *on condition of* their identity remaining latent. The sovereignty of the people is *absolute* precisely because it is *absent*. The people’s authority being made real would actually signify a diminution from potential universality to actual particularity. Lefort writes that by its very material manifestation in the here and now power would be “exposed to the threat of *falling into particularity*,” and so of arousing something “more dangerous than hatred, namely, contempt.”⁸¹ Any descent from universality and power “runs the risk of ... falling into collective representations at the level of the real, the contingent”⁸² At the moment power is wielded, by the very condition of its being taken up and exercised by “mere mortals,” as Lefort puts it, it is itself rendered merely mortal.⁸³ With the democratic revolution, the use of power is necessarily accompanied by a reduction of authority - effectiveness implies a certain level of illegitimacy.

Notice that democratic openness - the emptiness of the place of power - is actually maintained by the idea of the sovereign rule of the people. “The people” themselves cannot rule, and the thought of a sovereign “people” ensures that no one else can rule either. The sovereignty of the people, *absolute* but *abstract*, ensures that the seat of power can never be substantially occupied. Democracy, Lefort writes, “combines these two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other, it is *the power of nobody*. And democracy thrives on this contradiction;” whenever resolved, “democracy is either close to destruction or already destroyed.”⁸⁴ The rule of the people is thus quite literally the rule of no *body*, whether personal or institutional. When power belongs to the people, “no one can take the place of the supreme judge: ‘no one’ means no individual, not even an individual invested with a supreme authority, and no group, not even the majority.”⁸⁵ While “no artifice can prevent a majority from emerging *in the here and now* or from giving an answer which can stand in for the truth ... the fact (is) that every single individual has the right to denounce that answer as hollow or wrong”⁸⁶ Intrinsically unrealizable and unrepresentable, “the people” fall silent the moment some person, group, or institution presumes to speak in their name.⁸⁷ In its impossibly all-inclusive *generality* the popular sovereign cannot *will*. A sort of impotent Leviathan, with a power that is at once unconditional and immaterial, popular sovereignty cancels itself out - limitlessly legitimate but effectively powerless. As Lefort puts it, in democracy “the negative is effective” - a sort of white-noise, the silence of the voice of the people eventually drowns out any claim to authority.⁸⁸

For Lefort, then, the rule of the people seems ultimately less a matter of collective decision-making and self-government (which, in any case, presumes a non-existent collective self), than of exposing the particularity and so contestability of any decision made in the people’s name - democracy not as self-rule but as the rule of no body; the rule of the people as the operation of negativity. To “return power to the people” is not to empower the people but to

debase those who exercise power. The principle of democracy becomes a wholly critical standard. When the people reign, no one rules; therein lies the openness of democracy.

We might pause here to notice that the *democratic rule of the people* on Lefort's account actually serves many of the functions as the *liberal rule of law*. The *latency* of the people replaces the *immutability* of rights as a check upon the legitimate exercise of power. A constitutively *absent* sovereign replaces *higher* law as the repository of an authority beyond our grasp. The *generality* of "the people" replaces the *impartiality* of the law as a safeguard against tyranny. We shall consider the implications of this shift below.

The Regime of Revolution

For Lefort, as we have seen, the "position and representation of power, and the figuration of its locus" are "constitutive of the social space."⁸⁹ The political shapes the social. After the democratic revolution, the emptiness of our political form generates the openness of our social form. It is in this sense that our political/social form is characteristically democratic. Lefort describes this democratic political/social form in a key passage: "democracy invites us to replace the notion of a regime governed by laws, of a legitimate power, by the notion of a regime founded upon *the legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate* - a debate which is necessarily without any guarantor and without any end."⁹⁰ This open-ended debate, wherein no one can have the last word, is "the essence of democracy."⁹¹ Where the social order could once be articulated as a result of a belief in the settled nature of things, after the revolution a restless "process of questioning is implicit in social practices." In democracy, "no one has the answer to the questions that arise" and whatsoever "has been established never bears the seal of full legitimacy."⁹² The current wielders of power, "the people" themselves, even the concept of democracy itself, are all essentially contestable.

Recall Lefort's claim that one must return to a regime's instituting mode and moment to uncover its generative principle. Democracy is unique in human history because it is instituted via not incorporation but *disincorporation* - via the dissolution of the markers of certainty. The founding representation of power is that of its beheading. Revolutionary opening - the contestation and potential overturning of established norms and forms - is itself the "mode of institution" of the "overall configuration of society." Perhaps paradoxically, democracy is *constituted via revolution*. And born of revolution, revolution is inscribed in democracy's genetic code, as it were. The negative remains effective, to the point where we experience what Keenan termed an "ontological openness."

In part III, I argue that Lefort's theory of democracy just outlined illuminates the constitutive nature of our restlessness - of our permanent passion for the phenomenon of revolutionary opening - that Tocqueville at times overlooks. At the same time, I argue that the "fundamental indeterminacy" of our democratic existence is perhaps more determinate than Lefort recognizes. Indeed, the democratic regime comes to seem as immutable and ordained as the regime it overturned. Democratic society seems to us tailor-made, as it were, for the mysterious and unpredictable movement of history (rather than for the divine hierarchy of Nature). I argue that the revolutionary *moment* - the historical *event* - rather than the *form* of the king stands as the mediating point of (re)articulation between the universal and the particular. The architecture of openness replaces that of the body. In turn, for instance, restlessness takes on normative weight as an ethical imperative and standard of judgment: if one is not in motion, one is neither free nor "fully alive;" the concept of energy replaces that of harmony in our idea of health; we come to define ourselves by the sum of our experiences, by our history rather than by

our place; change is seen as both inevitable and good; questioning supplants faith. Born of the loss of any embodying figure or form, we might say that democratic society is put into form precisely as a *formless form* of society. Formlessness itself becomes the unquestionably proper open-form of society, and informality the proper open-form of social relations. Democracy is regimented by its *original vital principle* of revolution.

Part III : Democracy as the Historical Society Par Excellence

The Democratic Adventure: Equality and Restlessness

Lefort writes that we “could not hope for a better description of the unique character” of the democratic regime than the one provided by Tocqueville. In Lefort’s eyes, Tocqueville’s most profound theorizations of democratic society point to its dynamic vigor and vitality, to the “‘superabundant force’ and ... ‘energy,’” at its heart.⁹³ Its “prime virtue,” Lefort paraphrases Tocqueville, “is its characteristic agitation,” its kinetic quality, “and not its potential ability ... to improve the government’s ability to conduct public affairs.”⁹⁴ In short, the prime virtue of the democratic way of life is its “‘all-pervading and restless activity.’”⁹⁵ Democracy is valuable as a form of government, to be sure, but above all it should be embraced as “an unprecedented historical adventure whose causes and effects cannot be localized within the sphere that is conventionally defined as that of government.”⁹⁶

But even Tocqueville, Lefort argues, misinterprets the basic nature, and so short-changes the extent, of this restless energy and activity. Tocqueville’s misdiagnosis follows from his theorization of the *equality of conditions* rather than the *dissolution of the markers of certainty* as generative of our democratic social state. “However important this phenomenon may be,” Lefort writes of equalization, “it ... leaves an essential mutation in the shadows ...”⁹⁷ Tocqueville “usually tries to uncover an inversion of meaning” in the rise of equality: “the new assertion of singularity fades in the face of the rule of anonymity; the assertion of difference (of belief, opinion or morals) fades in the face of the rule of uniformity ... and so on.” Consequently, his explorations are “restricted to ... the underside of the phenomena he believes to be characteristic of the new society (He) does not pursue his explorations by examining the underside of the underside.” While Tocqueville detects the “ambiguities of the democratic revolution in every domain,” he is “reluctant” to fully “confront the unknown element in democracy.”⁹⁸

Indeed, Lefort argues that when taking up this “unknown element” we cannot even “limit our explorations to the underside of the underside. One the contrary, we must recognize that, as long as the democratic adventure continues ... the meaning of what is coming into being remains in suspense.”⁹⁹ This is the meaning of democracy’s “fundamental indeterminacy,” and this suspense is another aspect of its openness. By his very attempt to decipher the ultimate meaning of the revolution, to predict the future of our “democratic adventure” (whether, via equality, toward freedom or despotism), Tocqueville necessarily misreads the revolution. He is blind to the ultimate blindness of our democratic condition - to its essentially open-ended and protean character.

For Lefort, then, the democratic revolution cannot be understood as giving rise to Tocqueville’s notion of a *determinative* equality. Instead, as we have seen, democracy takes shape from the “indetermination that was born from the loss of the substance of the body politic.”¹⁰⁰ Our *empty* political form leads primarily to an *open* social form, and only secondarily to equality. The revolution gives “birth to the unknown,” which renders even the equality of conditions provisional.¹⁰¹ A sort of fecund uncertainty generates our intrinsically restless way of life. Democratic society, Lefort concludes, is “*instituted* through a new awareness of what

cannot be known or mastered.”¹⁰² Consequently, “what is instituted is never established, the known remains undermined by the unknown, the present proves to be undefinable”¹⁰³ For Lefort, the meaning of the revolution is precisely that its course and meaning remain perpetually unknowable and uncontrollable.

Lefort sums this state of affairs by theorizing democracy as “the historical society *par excellence*, a society which, in its very form, welcomes and preserves indeterminacy.”¹⁰⁴ It is “historical” in that it is a social form “destined to undergo a process of continuous institutional upheaval, *destined* to give birth to new social forms and explicitly to *experience the real as history*.”¹⁰⁵ Democracy is “a truly historical adventure in the sense that *it can never end*, in that the *boundaries of the possible and the thinkable constantly recede*.”¹⁰⁶

I suggest that Tocqueville at time concurs with this description of democracy as the society in which the boundaries of the possible constantly recede, but he characterizes it as the *aspiration* rather than the *condition* of democracy. In what follows, I argue that Lefort characterizes it as both our aspiration and our condition - our good and our truth. “Historical” subsumes both the immutable fact of our modern democratic situation (indeterminacy and uncertainty), and the central value of democratic society (freedom and the right to question). In turn, our “historical” social form comes to seem inscribed in the “historical” adventure during which we necessarily live. Put differently, “history” is to the democratic order what “nature” was to the laissez-faire order: the venue of fact/value elision. Our democratic adventure stands as both that which we willingly *affirm* and that which we cannot *deny*.

Historical Freedom

Tocqueville argues that the social state of democracy harbors within it the potential for both a new type of freedom and a new type of despotism, whether of the tutelary state or of public opinion. For Lefort, democracy is not such a mixed bag. As we have seen, Lefort argues that Tocqueville misses the radical transformation of society inaugurated by the disembodiment of power and the dissolution of the markers of certainty. Consequently, Tocqueville underestimates how irreducibly restless and in flux the democratic social state truly is.

The implication of Lefort’s argument seems to be that the final form of democracy simply *cannot* be despotism simply because democracy *has* no final form, only an endless series of provisional reformulations. What has been opened can never be closed again: history never stops moving; the democratic revolution never relents; our historical society never settles down. Indeed, instituted through an awareness of what cannot be known or mastered, as Lefort puts it, democratic society is no less than *destined* to undergo a process of continuous institutional upheaval. Insofar as we understand freedom as the denaturing of any particular representation of power - as “the operation of negativity” - freedom itself appears as an innate characteristic of our democratic condition. The king’s head cannot be reattached to his body, and so we cannot but be free. We can never be certain again, and so questioning remains at least in principle perpetually possible. So long as we live in history, we ourselves cannot be known or mastered. We are, at bottom, restless and undomesticable. Freedom is woven into the vicissitudes of our historical adventure. We are necessarily free.

Recall Lefort’s claim that the “prime virtue” of democratic society is its “characteristic agitation.” On Lefort’s account, this agitation is equally characteristic of the condition into which we are born. In this sense, democracy’s prime virtue is inscribed in its very condition of existence, given and inevitable. We asked earlier whether competition was taken as the unavoidable truth of our way of life or as the central value of our way of life, - or providentially,

both - in our laissez-faire republic. We asked whether the so-called “death of God” was true or good or Kateb, Connolly, and others. Here we might ask whether the openness induced by the dissolution of the markers of certainty stands as a *description* of the unpredictable world we find ourselves stuck in, or as the *normative principle* of this social arrangements and relationships we affirm as good and right. Does “democratic” characterize the *reality* of our existence (as revealed to us by the revolutionary rupture) or the *proper* free-form of society? Does “historical” signify the *is* of indeterminacy and uncertainty or the *ought* of restlessness and questioning? For Lefort, it seems the openness of our democratic society is simply ingrained in the open-endedness of our historical condition.

This linkage of fact and value in freedom is apparent in Lefort’s notions of both “political freedom” (as against the domesticating tutelary state), and the “freedom of the individual” (as against domesticating public opinion).¹⁰⁷ Lefort writes, “the *operation of negativity* and the *institution* of political freedom are one and the same. And the fact is that political freedom survives so long as it is ... deemed impossible to occupy the locus of power.”¹⁰⁸ The “survival” of political freedom here is contingent only upon the perpetual emptiness of the place of power. Political freedom lasts as long as nothing established can bear the seal of full legitimacy. In turn, Lefort argues, we should temper our fears of the growth of the tutelary state within the political form of democracy. “What I have termed the operation of negativity,” Lefort writes, “is no less *constitutive* of the democratic space than the erection of the state into a tutelary power. The system thrives on this contradiction and, so long as the system is perpetuated, neither of its terms can lose its efficacy.”¹⁰⁹ “It is often said that the power of the state is increasing as a result of .. new demands” for state protection in the form of the extension of individual and group rights and welfare guarantees, “but the extent to which it is being challenged tends to be forgotten.”¹¹⁰ Far from occupying the seat of power, the democratic state holds only the modicum of authority proper to the material realm of everyday politics. Thus the state can never possess the tutelary authority of the father-figure; it is always subject to being contested. Indeed, the politics of democracy is no less than a “theatre of ... contestation.”¹¹¹

With a similar logic, Lefort argues that the denaturing, negating flow of history “counteracts the *petrification of social life*” Tocqueville fears will follow from conformity to majority opinion.¹¹² While “the legitimacy of the pole of opinion can be asserted to be unlimited,” we should again temper our fear because “opinion remains shapeless; it cannot be localized in a body and it cannot be reduced to a set of statements as it is constantly being created and re-created ... ”¹¹³ And the moment opinion is localized and given shape, it loses some of its limitless legitimacy. Public opinion must always be voiced by *somebody* (usually multiple and conflicting somebodies), and is thereby brought down to size as merely particular opinion. The power of majority opinion is limited by the fact that it is recognized *as* the opinion of some particular majority. The power of public opinion is undermined the moment it is polled - the moment it is given form in the here and now. Against petrification, then, democracy inaugurate “the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable” social life that is “constantly ... open to question.”¹¹⁴

Ultimately, Lefort concludes, we “have to reject the alternative formulated by Tocqueville ... (wherein) the individual either appears in the fullness of his self-affirmation, or disappears completely as a result of his weakness and isolation, and is swallowed up by opinion or by social power. ... (The individual’s) strength does not reside in his full positivity as a subject, and ... *any* attempt, no matter how refined, to enslave him will fail because there is

within him something that *escapes* objectification.” Here again we see freedom as escape, over against mastery. The individual escapes objectification when he “discovers that he is undefined, and has no contours,” that he is “*constituted* beneath the pole of a new indeterminacy ... which turns truth into a question to which there is no answer”¹¹⁵ For Lefort, the individual's own formless form assures his freedom. Democratic man is and cannot but be free precisely because he is an *historical being*, constitutively uncertain and opaque. Living in history, after the dissolution of the markers of certainty, we cannot know or master, but then nor can we *be* known or mastered. We cannot be shaped by power because we are inherently ungraspable. Free because fugitive, we less question power than are a question to it. With the disappearance of the father-figure, we cannot be domesticated because we cannot be named.

Contrary to Lefort's assertion, we actually do find this notion of freedom in Tocqueville's writings: “The men who live in the democratic ages upon which we are entering have naturally a taste for independence; they are naturally impatient of regulation, and they are wearied by the permanence even of the condition they themselves prefer. They ... easily elude (power's) grasp by their own mobility and insignificance.”¹¹⁶

The picture that emerges from Lefort's work thus seems to be one in which freedom is inherent in the uncertainty of our historical condition. As the restless “operation of negativity,” freedom is inscribed in life after the democratic revolution. With the denaturing of authority, freedom is as inescapable as change itself, as basic as natality and mortality.

Perhaps we can say that Lefort doesn't so much confront the perpetual underside of democracy as inverts Tocqueville's terms (although without Tocqueville's critique), theorizing a social state wherein freedom rather than equality is implicitly taken as natural, given and inevitable - a permanent feature of our unpredictable existence. Or if not exactly a quality of “nature,” Lefort's freedom is inseparable from our post-revolutionary social symbolic order, which governs our access to and experience of the real. Henceforth, as Lefort himself writes, we experience the real as history. If not quite “a truth inscribed in the real,” democratic freedom is constitutive of our “*new relation* to the real.”¹¹⁷ And in its bundle of associations with freedom and revolution and history, Lefort affirms the democratic order as both true and good. Tocqueville argues that authority can be displaced but never eradicated, it always settles somewhere. After the revolution, when no authority can be “massively affirmed,” the operation of negativity - freedom-as-revolutionary-opening - is itself massively affirmed.

Democratic Man as a Rights-Declaring Animal

We enact this operation of negativity, Lefort explains, by declaring our rights. At times, rights have been formulated as an obstruction to democratic politics - whether as super-political “higher law” that closes off from debate certain untouchable absolutes, or as fostering possessive individualism and private self-interestedness. Whether by taking on the characteristics of a religion or by steering us into economics, rights obstruct and undermine democracy. Against both of these notions, Lefort democratizes the idea of rights. For Lefort, rights are the “generative principles of democracy.”¹¹⁸ “The singular thing about the freedoms proclaimed at the end of the eighteenth century [specifically in the 1791 French Declaration of the Rights of Man] is that they are in effect indissociable from the birth of the democratic debate. Indeed, they generate it. We therefore have to accept that whenever these freedoms are undermined, the entire democratic edifice is threatened with collapse ...”¹¹⁹ Like the liberty of contract in the

laissez-fair order, the right to debate - to associate and speak - is the central pillar of democratic civilization.

Why is this the case? With the democratic revolution, Lefort argues, rights are deprived of the fixed point of the monarchy and “a new point is fixed: man. ... But what kind of anchor point is this?” With a logic we have seen before, he states: “The rights of man reduce right to a basis which, despite its name, is without shape ... and, for this reason, eludes all power which would claim to take hold of it - whether religious or mythical, monarchical or popular. Consequently, these rights go beyond any particular formulation which has been given of them, and this means that *their formulation contains the demand for their reformulation* ... From the moment when the rights of man are posited as the ultimate reference, established right is open to question.”¹²⁰ An awareness of rights therefore “implies the institutionalization of conflict.”¹²¹ When the principle of right is recognized, no establishment - not even of rights themselves - can be taken as fixed and final; everything is open to question. In this sense, the rights of man “cannot be dissociated from the idea of the *indeterminable*.”¹²²

There are a number of key points here. First, notice that the abstraction “man” parallels that of “the people” discussed earlier. We saw how the sovereign rule of “the people” is itself materially undermined by the indeterminacy and absence of “the people” - the condition of full legitimacy itself checks the effective use of the people’s power. Here, the rights of man are similarly posited as an unconditional rule or “ultimate reference.” But because this rule is seated in the indeterminable idea of man or humanity, it eludes the grasp of the holders of power. The rights of “man” are the rights of no body (and as such never fall into a contemptible particularity). In turn, human rights less impose certain limits on the exercise of legitimate power than render uncertain power’s claim to speak in the name of right.

Second, notice that the general principle of human right goes “beyond any particular formulation.” Just as the sovereignty of the people can never be fully *represented*, the rights of man can never be fully *realized* in the here and now. It would be “misleading,” Lefort writes, “to declare simply: here, in our societies, (that) rights exist. ... (One) must refrain from granting them a *reality*.”¹²³ “Such principles do not exist in the same way as positive institutions, whose actual elements can be listed” We must thus recognize that “the *awareness* of right and its *institutionalization* are ambiguously related.”¹²⁴ Put differently, we must recognize the tension between the notion of enumerated rights, which are multiple, settled, and determinate, and the singular and open-ended “*right to have rights*,” as Lefort puts it, which gives “rise to an adventure whose outcome is unpredictable.”¹²⁵ The “symbolic dimension of right is manifested ... in the irreducibility of the awareness of right to all legal objectification, which would signify its *petrification* in a *corpus* of laws.”¹²⁶ For Lefort, the principle of right cannot be put into legal words or conventional forms; to give it form in the sphere of politics would be to devitalize it in the register of “the political.” Indeed, rights “cannot be immanent within the social order without the very idea of right being debased.”¹²⁷ The norm of restlessness is inscribed in the idea of rights: more verb than noun, rights “are not simply the object of a declaration, it is their essence to be declared.”¹²⁸

And third, Lefort goes further to write that any particular formulation of right contains the “*demand* for (its) reformulation.” With our awareness of the right to have rights, we recognize “the *universality of the principle* which *reduces right to the questioning of right*,” and also that “where right is in question, society - that is, the established order - is in question.”¹²⁹ It is not only that we might recognize the positive law establishment of rights as at times falling short of the principles on which they are based. Instead, insofar as we are to declare our rights,

we must question and reform the established order - disembodiment enjoins disestablishment. In this sense, democracy signifies not only the subversion of hierarchical conventions but of the conventional as such. We enact democracy by dissolving the markers of certainty - dis-placing authority becomes an end in itself in the democratic social state. Henceforth, social order rests upon the right of question rather than the right of command (or the right to contract); abdicating the right to question in democracy would be like abdicating the right to command in aristocracy. In a world defined as without final answers, the good of questioning of every decision seems simply self-evident. It is not that democracy is inherently anarchic or unruly, then, but that questioning itself stands as the ordering rule - the unquestioned creed - of our democratic way of life. More than effective, the negative is determinate: practice is necessarily subverted by principle; the universality of the principle of right is necessarily a critical standard. We arrive here at something of a definition of democracy for Lefort. Democracy is revolution: "the theatre of contestation" in which we, "on the basis of rights," "transgress ... boundaries" in a "history that remains open."¹³⁰

Lefort claims that, to understand our social form, we must return to its generative mode of institution. Democracy was instituted by the revolutionary moment; subversion is its original vital principle and essential gesture. The ideas of human rights and popular sovereignty ensure the reoccurrence of this founding moment in the perennial beheading of the father-figure, as it were - in the perpetual return to a state of openness. Democracy is enacted not by its (impossible) realization but by subversion, even self-subversion.

For Lefort, the democratic articulation of the universal and the particular is apparent in the moment one declares one's rights. This event supplants the body of the king in giving form to society, in establishing a norm of proper human association. "Far from having the function of masking a dissolution of social bonds which makes everyone a monad," Lefort argues, rights "both testify to the existence of a *new network of human relations* and bring it into existence."¹³¹ The recognition of rights does "not imply that the individual withdraws into the sphere of his own activities ... (but instead) gives full recognition to the ... freedom of *movement* ... (and) therefore facilitates the multiplication of human relations," which were previously "*frozen* in the relation of authority, or ... *confined* in privileged spaces."¹³² Rights create for the first time in human history a venue for the interaction of free and equal human beings, wherein man exercises his right "to step out of himself and to make contact with others."¹³³

Above all, then, it is the right to speak in association supplants that religious congregation, the aristocratic obligations of place, the economic contract, and so forth in shaping the social order. The "generalization of the right to speak ... is inseparable from the diffusion of the *meaning* of right throughout society."¹³⁴ Further, the "democratic apprehension of right implies the *affirmation* of speech."¹³⁵ With the creation of this novel public space of rights-relations, "a situation is constituted in which expression is *encouraged*" rather than merely permitted.¹³⁶ Self-expression supplants salvational creed and codes of etiquette and self-interest in representations of the meaningful. Expression supplants command and competition as the proper mode of human relations - from status to contract to speech; from paternalism to competition to recognition. And this "relational freedom" of rights ensures the openness of democratic society. "As everyone acquires the right to address others and to listen to them, a symbolic space is established; it has no *definite frontiers*, and no authority can claim to control it ... Speech as such and thought as such prove to exist independently of any given individual, and belong to no one."¹³⁷

We have seen thus far how, for Lefort, democracy is not one element of freedom but its essence, and the good from which most others follow. He goes on to conclude that, with the revolutionary declaration of rights, man recognizes himself as democratic man. Man is “the being whose essence it is to declare his rights.”¹³⁸ This is because, with the absence of the father-figure, we both can and must name ourselves - we signify that which we believe meaningful about ourselves - by declaring our rights. The “extraordinary event” of the revolution represents “a declaration which was in fact a *self-declaration*, that is, a declaration by which human beings ... revealed themselves to be both the subject and the object of the utterance in which they *named* the human elements in one another ...”¹³⁹ In the debate surrounding the meaning of right, humanity has “embarked upon a voyage of self-discovery.” Human beings “create themselves by discovering and instituting rights in the absence of any principle” that might settle the debate.¹⁴⁰ Naming himself, in a sense even creating himself, democratic man proves essentially free and undomesticable. In this context, the democratic expression of right itself “becomes *unconditional*; it is a human attribute, and it reveals the *vocation* of humanity.”¹⁴¹ Democracy is revealed as our calling.

Historical Nature

Democracy has taken on something of a religious status today. We hear that democracy is the endpoint of the providential progress of history, or conversely, that we have “lost faith” in democracy. Lefort, I argue, represents the democratic phenomenon as given and inevitable, but precisely because history has no endpoint. So long as we live in history, the operation of negativity endures and prevails. After the democratic revolution, the denaturing of authority itself seems natural - decreed by history. Put differently, when we experience the real as history, when our experience of nature is itself governed by the rule of history, the open-order of democracy seems imprinted in the open-order of nature. Democracy is assured not as the end of history, but by the endlessness of history.

Lefort theorizes the democratic revolution as in a sense democratizing our representation of nature itself. For Lefort, the flip-side of the denaturing of the social world is the desocializing of the natural world – removing the human fingerprints from nature. Through the revolution, we move from nature affirmed as higher Nature (as a hierarchical and eternal order within which the human world is embedded) to nature experienced as accessible to us only through the veil of history. We cannot but perceive nature as Bergsonian, as it were - as unpredictable and open-ended, fluid and in-flux, full of birth and death, mysterious and creative rather than cyclical or teleological or mechanical. As with freedom, nature is rendered “historical.” Or more precisely, history becomes the master term under which nature is subsumed and by which it is conditioned.¹⁴² We live life necessarily *in* history - in the course of history as in accordance with nature. While the revolutionary bursting forth of history liberates us from the *inhibiting* absolutes of closed Nature, we henceforth live with the *chastening* uncertainties of open history. We can no more argue with history than we could argue with Nature. “The rule is different, but there is a rule.”¹⁴³

A leading description of this democratized, historical nature is put forth by William Connolly. Drawing on the Nobel Prize winning chaos theory of Illya Prigogine, author of *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos and the New Laws of Nature*, Connolly writes of the insertion of “an irreversible historical trajectory into several (though not all) systems in nature,” which thereby challenges “the regulative ideal of a closed system of explanation that traditionally informed the natural sciences, at least outside of biology.”¹⁴⁴ Connolly contends that “nature

itself is populated more by ‘dissipative structures’ than by the timeless systems of Newtonian mechanics. A dissipative structure, exemplified by cells, whirlpools, biological evolution, aging, and the evolution of the universe, has self-productive capacities; it is marked by irreversible changes that give it a temporal or historical dimension; and it is susceptible to changes in the course of its development that are unpredictable.”¹⁴⁵

The dissolution of the markers of certainty is no less a natural than a social phenomenon; nature itself works according to the operation of negativity. Our democratic third republic still stands as inscribed evolutionary nature, with evolution a matter of “dissipative structures” rather than natural selection. The natural order, just like the democratic social order, is marked by unpredictable, irreversible changes, and even “self-productive” capacities. Revolution is the original vital principle of nature, just as with democracy. And insofar as nature challenges “the regulative ideal” of “closed” systems, it affirms our democratic aspirations.¹⁴⁶

Connolly calls upon us to give up our tendency toward an “ontological narcissism” in which we “demand dispensations from within the world to replace the loss of a personal, willful, and powerful God located above it.” We “domesticate” the “protean idea of contingency” by conceptualizing the world as either “plastic” and to be “mastered” or as “providential” and “designed” for our “fulfillment.” We insist that the “world ... must be for us in one way or another.” If our end is neither mastery nor harmony, though, but rather undomesticated freedom, one wonders whether Connolly’s description of nature’s openness is any less narcissistic - whether the world we are born into is any less providentially designed for the fulfillment of our “deepest purposes” when those purposes are democratic.¹⁴⁷

Interestingly, this nature has even been reaffirmed as Nature by some. Take, for example, the “Open Theism” movement. As a challenge to the regulative ideal of God as sovereign, all-knowing, and unchanging, this “free-will theology” democratizes God as “temporal.” “God, at least since Creation, experiences duration. God is everlasting through time rather than timelessly eternal.” On this view, “God decided to create beings with indeterministic freedom, which implies that God chose to create a universe in which the future is not entirely knowable, even for God.” Living under a chastening uncertainty, God “takes risks” and “makes mistakes” just like us.¹⁴⁸

Lefort argues along similar lines that the democratic revolution set free nature, just as it liberated society and the individual. Prior to the revolution nature was made to serve human purposes. It was assigned order in response to the needs and fears, the expectations and aspirations, of man. The unruliness of the world we actually experience was repressed by the fictive, superimposed identity of an orderly and meaningful “cosmos” or supernatural design. We might say that the world was reduced to black-and-white so as to better accommodate us. But with the severing of the king’s head from his body - the severing of Nature from nature - there burst forth the recognition of the actual fluidity and spontaneity of corporeal space and time - of the unfathomable *depth* of nature in the ungraspable *flow* of history. Of course, Lefort notes, even today we often dehistoricize the world in order “to assure ourselves of a truth which is already given and which will not betray us, in order to *conjure away*, in sum, the indeterminacy which constantly re-emerges in the history that we live.”¹⁴⁹ Nonetheless, with the revolution we at least in principle leave behind the comforting but confining illusion of certainty and security (the idea of nature rendered as our home), and live life in open and untamed historical nature.

The revolution thus disentangles the social world and the natural world, liberating each from the other by revealing *both* to be open; both are ultimately undomesticable, unknowable

and unmasterable. Henceforth we have two distinct worlds following a single indeterminate orbit, two separate worlds represented as “historical”/“democratic.”

If not exactly “decreed by nature,” then, the modern democratic social form stands in Lefort’s theory as uniquely suited to accommodate and function in accordance with our historical nature. Democracy alone abides by the rule of history. Democratic openness is the response, both necessary and proper, to our democratic condition of uncertainty (just as competition was the necessary and proper response to the market condition of “the survival of the fittest”). If not standing under a “cosmic seal of approval,” democracy seems self-evident - simply obvious, without viable alternatives, in little need of argument. Indeed, as we shall see, denying the decisive political and social relevance of our historical condition is for Lefort a matter of willful ignorance or wishful thinking. Not accommodating oneself to the dissolution of the markers of uncertainty in one’s social arrangements and relationships is at best a sort of childishness, and possible much worse.

Despite his critique of Tocqueville’s theory of democracy and the revolution, then, we can take Lefort’s theory as implicitly confirming one of Tocqueville’s central insights. Tocqueville writes that democracy, for better and for worse, is experienced by its inhabitants as coming naturally, as in line with the plain truth and justice of equality, and so as a spontaneous and authentic manner of being in society. Democracy is the social state of nature into which we feel ourselves born without labor, in which we believe ourselves to live informally and without artifice. Democracy is the regime wherein the need for regimentation, for education or habituation into its form, is denied; taken as normal, the democratic way of life does not require normalization. Lefort, I argue, offers just such a picture of democracy. As the social form that does not stand under the pressures of a prohibited and repressed uncertainty, democracy does indeed appear in Lefort’s work as spontaneous and self-evident - that which springs up when obstructions and usurpations have been cleared away. To live in historical society, with its historical freedom, is to live in the social state of historical nature.

The Totalitarian Illusion: A Society Without History

Tocqueville argues that democracy might be just a middle-stage between aristocracy and socialism. His work can be read as an ongoing effort to alloy democracy with certain vestigial elements of aristocracy to prevent democracy’s slide into socialism. Lefort too represents democracy as a middle point, between the Christian embodiment and the totalitarian logic of oneness. While Tocqueville fears the permanent loss of freedom to the extreme equality of socialism, I argue that on Lefort’s account freedom cannot in the long run be lost to totalitarianism. In history, there is always a return of the repressed. Totalitarianism is an illusion; democracy is inevitable.

For Lefort, totalitarianism is a product of the dissolution of the markers of certainty just like democracy. Like democracy, totalitarianism is made possible by the collapse of Christian embodiment as the mode of representing the theologico-political matrix of society. But while totalitarianism “is engendered in ‘historical society’” its “phantasy is to abolish the historical in History; ... to identify the instituting moment with the instituted; to deny the unpredictable, the unknowable”¹⁵⁰ Born of the revolution, totalitarianism “designates itself as *a society without history*.”¹⁵¹

To understand this quest to abolish history we must recognize the down side of freedom – the experience of openness less as *freedom* than as *insecurity*. We might experience our historical condition of uncertainty as a sort of Edvard Munchian “vertigo in the face of the void

created by an indeterminate society.”¹⁵² Within the horizons of democracy, the individual is “dispossessed of his assurance as to his identity” - he is “doomed to be tormented by a secret uncertainty.”¹⁵³ Moreover, “men are haunted by the idea of the break-up of the social,” which “democracy threatens ... to bring ... about.” When “both the principle and the heart of civilization are contingent,” we recoil at the “barbarism” and “darkness” experienced as potentially overtaking us.¹⁵⁴ Democracy is therefore “constantly threatened by the resistance it provokes.” We are tempted to “surrender to the attractions of a renewed certainty” - a return to black-and-white.¹⁵⁵ The appeal of totalitarianism lies in “a nostalgia for the image of society which is at one with itself and which has mastered its history.”¹⁵⁶

This temptation is strongest when society is experienced as having sunk into pure “economics” - when “the reference to an empty place gives way to the unbearable image of a real vacuum.”¹⁵⁷ At this point, conflict seems both prevalent and meaningless. The “mode of the establishment of power and the nature of its exercise or, more generally, political competition, proves incapable of giving form and meaning to social division;” “the symbolic efficacy of the democratic system is destroyed” and “power appears to have sunk to the level of reality ... (as) no more than an instrument for the promotion of ... interests.” The “authority of those who make public decisions ... vanishes, leaving only the spectacle of individuals or clans whose one concern is to satisfy their appetite for power.”¹⁵⁸

Society here is “put to the test of the collapse of legitimacy ... by all the signs of the fragmentation of the social space, of heterogeneity. In these extreme situations, representations which can supply an index of social unity and identity become invested with a fantastic power, and the totalitarian adventure is under way.”¹⁵⁹ Reacting against the experience of pure, meaningless materialism, we might give ourselves over to a renewed “religious” certainty and unity and meaningfulness. But crucially, this religious longing is itself radically transformed by the revolution. Totalitarianism, like democracy, is a re-articulation of the particular and the universal, but it is carried forth in denial of the transcendence of the religious universal. Totalitarianism is “the quest for a mystical union” in disavowal of “the religious ... in so far as it indicates an *other* place.”¹⁶⁰ Totalitarianism is the attempt to fully *realize* the primal unity of society while wholly rejecting the primal division.¹⁶¹ In the totalitarian matrix of thought, it “is denied that division is constitutive of society.” Here “the body is ... revitalized. But .. what is revitalized is quite different from what was once torn apart.”¹⁶² The body is no longer the point of mediation between mortal and immortal, mundane and divine, but rather the point of their collapse into singularity. With totalitarianism, an “impossible swallowing up of the body in the head begins to take place, as does an impossible swallowing up of the head in the body.”¹⁶³ In its anti-democratic logic of oneness, totalitarianism strives to eradicate pluralism at every level - between state and society, individual and society, public and private, particular and universal.¹⁶⁴

At the same time, Lefort writes that totalitarianism inverts the meaning of democracy in the name of democracy itself. Totalitarianism is a *reaction* against history carried out in terms of the *realization* of democracy. Totalitarianism “overturns the democratic transformation ... while at the same time taking over some of its features and extending them at the level of phantasy.”¹⁶⁵ It is “a response to the questions raised by democracy, ... an attempt to resolve its paradoxes, ... (and) to banish the indetermination that haunts the democratic experience. But this attempt ... itself draws on a democratic source”¹⁶⁶ Rather than living with “a constant displacement of the ‘solution’” to these paradoxes, totalitarianism strives for “the image of the people actualized.”¹⁶⁷ The inherently latent quality of the sovereign people is effaced in “the fantasy of the People-as-One, ... (with) a substantial identity, ... free from division.”¹⁶⁸ Power “ceases to

designate an empty place: it is materialized in an organ (or, in extreme cases, an individual) which is supposed to be capable of concentrating in itself all the forces of society.”¹⁶⁹

Against the vertigo of uncertainty, a sense of potency is supported by “the image of a fixed history,” a history both known and mastered. There is a “prodigious refusal of any innovation that might transgress the limit of an already known future, a reality that in principle is already mastered.” In this “phantasmagoria of the Plan” the “unknown, the unpredictable, the indeterminable” are rendered as “avatars of the enemy,” whether barbaric or parasitic.¹⁷⁰ In the attempted reconstitution of the markers of certainty, totalitarianism represents a “retreat towards a point of certainty where the necessity to speak is cancelled out.”¹⁷¹ The negation of the democratic adventure’s characteristic restlessness and activity and agitation, totalitarianism operates in silence, with a “certainty that *can do without words*.”¹⁷²

Lefort leaves us with the picture of democracy as potentially too demanding, and so as perpetually threatened by the temptation to surrender to a renewed sense of certainty and peace, identity and purpose. We might recoil before democracy’s “ordeal of ... indetermination” in our longing for home.¹⁷³ Far from inevitable, democracy seems perpetually under siege. I want to suggest, to the contrary, three ways in which Lefort’s analysis of totalitarianism actually demonstrates the hegemonic and unquestionable status of democracy.

First, totalitarianism is an illusion. “More than any other system,” Lefort argues, totalitarianism “is contradicted by experience.”¹⁷⁴ We “would be victims of the *phantasy* which inhabits this system ... if we imagined that it actually realized itself, *that it could ever succeed in realizing itself*, even in the heyday of Stalinism. We would be forgetting that social division is only *masked* We would be forgetting ... that the symbolic reference points of law, of knowledge and of reality may well have been *denied*, but not abolished” Totalitarian ideology therefore always “runs the risk of being seen” and “exposed;” it is always subject to “the threat of a violent return of all the signs of division and otherness.”¹⁷⁵ “The reappearance of a divide ... between the *discourse* of power and people’s *experience* of their situation indicates the *impossibility* of ... materializing power in the persons of those vested with it, of representing society as a body without supplying it with an external guarantor of its organization and limits, and of abolishing social division.”¹⁷⁶ Totalizing power thus “proves to be unexpectedly fragile when, by taking on the visible shape of an organ of men, it reveals itself to be divorced from, and therefore external to ... the people. ... (It) is always threatened with having to reveal that it is particular and not universal.”¹⁷⁷ Totalitarianism cannot, over time, sustain the “*fantastic* attempt to compress space and time into the limits of the social body,” and so it eventually collapses in the “return of democratic aspirations.”¹⁷⁸

For Lefort, the anti-democratic counter-revolution simply cannot succeed given our experience of the real as history. The validity of the “democratic” representation of our situation as unpredictable and indeterminate is constantly reaffirmed by our experience of the events of the world. Even when democracy is momentarily “lost,” even when we occasionally strain and struggle against the uncertainty of our democratic condition, the return of our historical social form is inevitable. We simply cannot, in the long run, deny democratic openness. Like a repressed Freudian desire, democracy always returns, indeed bursts forth. Whether experienced as liberating or as an ordeal, the revolutionary flow of history eventually undermines every ordering absolute imposed upon the world. History is on the side of democracy.

There is already in Tocqueville the sense that with the advent of openness we have reached a sort of end of history - a condition taken as universal, immortal, and characterized by

the absence of great revolutions (if not of disturbances and violence). Democracy is the final regime, and the democratic revolution the final great event. At the same time, Tocqueville fears democracy might collapse into its extreme expression as socialism. The passion for equality might destroy freedom. For Lefort, there seems no such threat to freedom. The longing for certainty cannot destroy freedom, understood as the operation of negativity, the denaturing of authority, and the return to a state of openness. Freedom is true; certainty is a lie. Outside of the realm of illusion - or better, delusion - there is no long-term alternative to the democratic theologico-political matrix.

Second, against totalitarianism, democracy stands as singularly civilizational. Recall William Graham Sumner view that an attack upon capitalism was an attack upon “the foundations of civilization.” For Lefort, democracy enjoys a similar standing. The fundamental opposition running throughout his work is “between a totalitarian model of society (whatever its many variants may be, Stalinist or neo-Stalinist, Maoist or neo-Maoist) and a model which implies the recognition of rights.”¹⁷⁹ There is a borderline, black-and-white, all-or-nothing logic of this formulation. The opposition is between democracy, with its characteristic vitality and restlessness and activity, and totalitarianism, which amounts to silence/stillness/death. Tocqueville’s formulation of democracy, aristocracy, and socialism dictates a sort of Aristotelean mode of striking the mean between the excesses and defects of democratic equality. Formulated in terms of openness, there is no sense of balancing or moderating democracy for Lefort, only the logic of threat and self-preservation. And even if the outcome is in a sense pre-determined, the apparent stakes could not be higher in the existential struggle between democratic freedom and totalitarian anti-freedom - the great enemy or other of democracy. With such a dichotomous worldview, the internal indeterminacy and uncertainty of our democratic way of life stands sharply juxtaposed to the unconditional good of our democratic way of life. What would it mean to question democratic values and beliefs in this context? What are the alternatives? Moreover (and again we can make the comparison to Tocqueville’s analysis of the modern usefulness of aristocratic norms and forms), the logic of Lefort’s dichotomy dictates that all that is socially and politically good simply must fall within the infinitely complex form of democracy. There is no good that is not at the same time democratic, nothing democratic that is not at the same time good. Democracy, principled upon freedom-as-openness, seems unquestionably true and unquestionably good.

And third, even while we cannot deny the uncertainty inherent in our democratic situation (any more than we could competition in a market situation), the *capacity to cope with uncertainty* (as with the capacity to cope with competition) constitutes an ethical measure of self and society, below which we sink in our totalitarian longings. Lefort depicts totalitarianism as a sort of childishness, a wishful surrender to the illusion of a security and certainty. Against this picture, the ability to live life in history - unblinking in the face of uncertainty, tolerating a world of questions with no answers - constitutes a norm of democratic maturity. Rather than obstinately standing arms-crossed and eyes-shut against the true complexity and unpredictability of life after the revolution, we are challenged to bear up under the anxiety, vertigo, and frustration of our existential insecurity – our self-reliant but not self-sufficient existence. Without father-figure or fatherland, democracy demands of us the psychological and emotional strength and flexibility to take responsibility for, rather than repress, the ordeal of freedom. We are measured and judged today by our capacity to affirm the freedom we in any case cannot deny.

Conclusion: A Democratic Religious Articulation, between Capitalism and Christianity

I suggested above that ours is rendered more fully intelligible as a “democratic society” rather than as a “market society.” Lefort affirms this interpretation: to reduce the social world to economic concepts and categories is to succumb to an “illusory realism.” Our social form is not staged as a market; meaning is not assigned in terms of economic value. The corporation is *not at all* like the Church before it; CEO’s are *not at all* our high priests. Such an interpretation confuses power in the symbolic register of “the political” with the empirical exercise of power. On Lefort’s account, we are prone to succumb precisely to this confusion in democratic society. The collapse into materialism is the original fear of democratic society (thus the totalitarian temptation). At the same time, the democratic revolution marks the collapse of the Christian mode of *mediating* the universal and the particular. We do not live in a capitalist society, but nor do we live in a Christian society. Our lives are not without meaning, but nor is the meaning of our lives settled and assured.

In our “historical society,” the normative dimension of universality persists but takes on a purely critical function: the rule of the people as the rule of no body; freedom as the denaturing operation of negativity; the declaration of rights as the expression of revolution. The democratic way of life is given form and animated by its original vital principle of revolution. It is in the unsettling act of question - in the revolutionary movement away from home - that we put the democratic principle into practice.

In this symbolic milieu, freedom takes shape over against domestication: in Lefort’s terms, we are free because no present power has the authority to name us. Equality takes shape not as dull uniformity but as formlessness, as the absence of hierarchical regimentation, and so as co-extensive with freedom. Openness describes the conjoined equality and freedom of life without a father-figure - a radicalization of the anti-paternalism of laissez-faire competition and social contract liberalism. And life is lived from moment to moment, in the unpredictable, suspenseful, exciting free-flow of history. A life *well* lived is a life *fully* lived. Surely we recognize ourselves - often with regret - as consumers, pleasure-seekers, self-interested choosers, and the like. But insofar as we are to speak of “existential badges of identity,” I suggest that we would more fully recognize ourselves in historical rather than economic terms. We identify ourselves by our *experience of events* - birth and death, epochal innovations, the coming of what’s next, being present at the creation or the collapse, on the day everything changed.¹⁸⁰ We are not what we consume, but rather the sum of our experiences. Life’s drama is meaningful to us insofar as it is dramatic. Thus, for instance, trans-formative rupture effaces continuity in the identity of the American polity, which is defined by the conversion narrative of being born again out of the laissez-faire second republic. In its very absurdity, the following illuminates what captures the imagination along these lines in democratic society: “The iPod arrived in October 2001, ... to a world in transformation from its *comforting* analog roots to a *disruptive* digital future;” today we must contemplate “the ways that the iPod changed the world” into “Planet iPod.”¹⁸¹

Extending this speculative sketch of what it would mean to live in a democratic society: far from inaugurating a “bourgeois” celebration of the here and now, the democratic revolution degrades the status of the present, material, embodied world. The death of the Christ-figure signifies not the dissolution of meaning, but its displacement to whatsoever is taken to be wholly immaterial and transcendent - the purely spiritual.¹⁸² Pierre Manent captures this perfectly in his interpretation of Lefort: “To understand the specificity of the present situation, one ought to reconstitute its genesis, so that we understand that our democracy seeks to institute a political

and thus human order that is free of all ‘incorporation,’ as Claude Lefort says, a political and human order that is purely ‘spiritual.’ This idea conflicts with appearances: doesn’t our society give a large place to the body and hardly any place to the soul? In reality, our society is the one in Western history that most systematically reduces the role of the body.”¹⁸³

The dissolution of Christian embodiment leads, then, not to something like Heidegger’s flat and empty existence, characterized by the cold ascendancy of the will, and a debased self and society subject to economic calculation and scientific prediction. Democratic existence is not reduced to calculation but opened to uncertainty; rendered not predictable but questionable. With our opening onto history, we experience the world as neither *occult* nor *transparent*, but as *opaque*.¹⁸⁴ The previously *mystical* religious dimensionality of society is not lost to *mechanical* materialism, but nor does it remain enclosed in the *organic* symbol of the body. Instead it is rendered *mysterious*, displaced to the register of the phenomenal - of restless revolutionary/creative becoming. The religious dimension of democratic society is the *depth* of history. “History” - between “economic shallowness” and “religious foundationalism” - is characterized by neither an adrift weightlessness wherein all that is solid melts into air, nor by a secure groundedness or sense of place, but by their amalgam in an *oceanic* sense of depth and fluidity - the openness of the fecund ocean rather than the barren desert, the wilderness rather than the wasteland.

The consequence of our post-revolutionary historical situation, I have argued, is the reflexive devaluation of conventional norms and forms. In times past, human convention was represented as an establishment - if an imperfect, partial, diminished one - of a higher nature or Nature. Where legitimate, the world of human artifice instituted the natural world, positive law instituted natural law, the terrestrial kingdom instituted the divine kingdom, and so forth. Temporal authority was both derived from and limited by one or another notion of transcendent authority. With the revolutionary rupture the hierarchical chain is broken: temporal authority is debased by the void of transcendent authority. Meaning and authority settle exclusively with those vast abstractions that seem to escape embodiment in particular conventional or institutional form: humanity, rights, the biological/economic market, history, self-expression and human relations and unmediated modes of experience that cannot be captured in ordinary language. If totalitarianism is the attempt to *do without words*, democracy is the search for something that *cannot be put into words*.

The authority of the divine, we might say, can no longer be made manifest in the world, but then that which cannot be made manifest gains a sort of divine authority. Take, for instance, the history of religious practices in America, with its ongoing cycle of more secular and liberal “mainline” religions - as they “compromise their ‘errand in the wilderness’” - being replaced by “less worldly,” more radical and demanding “outsider” or “upstart sects.”¹⁸⁵ The purity of the spirituality that seizes the democratic imagination is experienced as devitalized (rather than realized, if only partially) by being housed in institutional form. The rejection of “mainstream institutions” itself becomes mainstream as democracy’s original rupture is perennially reenacted. In this sense, I have suggested that democratic society takes shape in the self-radicalizing striving for a world before or beyond convention.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show, through a critique of Lefort’s normative/descriptive bundle of associations (revolution/history/freedom, etc.) how democratic openness is “massively affirmed” as both true and good. We necessarily, inescapably live in our

post-revolutionary state of openness. At the same time, we embrace this openness as constitutive of freedom. Democracy comes to seem providentially inscribed not in the *eternal order* of nature but in the *immortal movement* of history.

In the next chapter, I turn to Sheldon Wolin's theory of "fugitive democracy." Far from inevitable, Wolin characterizes the political practice democracy as all-but-lost to us, overwhelmed by political/economic power formations that border on totalitarian. Democracy can be said to exist today only sporadically, in those transgressive events wherein the demos momentarily rouses itself to resist its oppression and domestication. Even as Wolin regrets this momentary quality, though, he also derives an idealized notion of democracy from it. Democracy is limited to the moment, but within the moment democracy is realized in pure form, as an almost unlimited revolutionary eruption. I argue that this association of robust democracy with the phenomenon of revolution, the roots of which we have analyzed in this chapter, is itself a leading cause of the near-demise of the political practice of democracy. The idealization of the revolutionary moment goes hand in hand with the devaluation of the everyday political practice of democracy. Or to put it in Lefort's terms, the sphere of democratic "politics" is *a priori* devalued within "the political" form of modern democracy. In our state of openness, democracy comes to seem at once inevitable, impossible, and impotent.

NOTES

¹ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998), 127 and 157.

² Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 120-122 (my emphasis).

³ Quoted in James P. Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1996), 131.

⁴ John M. Blum, quoted in Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 72.

⁵ Bruce Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 63.

⁶ Bruce Ackerman, *We the People: Transformations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 401.

⁷ Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 122.

⁸ Cass R. Sunstein, *The Partial Constitution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 61.

⁹ Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, 134.

¹⁰ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 194.

¹¹ I suggest that we can extend this analogy and say that *self-expression*, with its concomitants of *privacy* and *recognition*, has come to replace liberty of contract in our social-symbolic order. Specifically, expression serves the role of social-integrator, against the otherwise potentially disintegrating effect of openness, just as with the relationship of contract/competition.

¹² One of the most influential living French political philosophers, Lefort is frequently cited as among the central contemporary theorists of democratic openness. See, for example, Alan Keenan, *Democracy in Question: Democratic Openness in a Time of Political Closure* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5-7; Patchen Markell, "The Rule of The People: Arendt, Arche, and Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 1 (2006): 3, 5; Seyla Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 8. Nevertheless, he is little discussed in the English-speaking

world. The only book-length study of Lefort to appear in English is Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005). A student with the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, one of Sartre's strongest critics, and among the first to break with Marxism in France, Lefort situates his own study of the democratic "regime" and the democratic revolution in relation to Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt. See Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 2-6. He is, in turn, one of those rare contemporary writers taken seriously by both "Straussians" and postmodernists/post-structuralists.

¹³ Thomas Frank, "A Distant Mirror," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2006. Frank continues: "Again Americans thrill to the exploits of the great tycoons"

¹⁴ For explanations of this synthesis of neo-liberal "globalization" and neo-conservative "fundamentalism," see, for example, Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006); William E. Connolly, "The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine," *Political Theory* 33, no. 6 (2005); Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions that Matter in Right-Wing America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ March Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, *The Corporation*, 2004.

¹⁶ Claude Ake, "Dangerous Liaisons: The Interface of Globalization and Democracy," in *Democracy's Victory and Crisis*, ed. Axel Hadenius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 287.

¹⁷ Gordon Bigelow, "Let There be Markets: The Evangelical Roots of Economics," *Harper's Magazine* 310, no. 1860 (2005): 33.

¹⁸ Roger Rosenblatt, *The Newshour*, Originally Aired: July 10, 2006 (available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec06/rosenblatt_07-10.html).

¹⁹ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 41-42, 143. Taken as "the 'real' constitution of society," this notion of economy functions as the "first principle of a comprehensive scheme of social hermeneutics" and "an interpretive category of virtually universal application. It is used to understand personal life and public life, to make judgments about them, and to define the nature of their problems. It supplies categories of analysis and decision by which public policies are formulated, and it is applied to cultural domains such as education, the arts, and scientific research." Wolin, *Presence of the Past*, 42, 147.

²⁰ In a single twenty minute bus-ride through Boston I was told to "Be Authentic" by a cigarette billboard add and to "Choose Authenticity" by a beer add, while a coffee proclaimed itself simply "Authentic."

²¹ Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 72-73, Chapter 4.

²² Available at <http://www.getdemocracy.com/>; and <http://participatoryculture.org/>.

²³ Markell, "The Rule of The People: Arendt, Arche, and Democracy," 2-3.

²⁴ Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 45-46, Chapter 4.

²⁵ Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 9-10.

²⁶ Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 10-11.

²⁷ Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 12-13.

²⁸ Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 14, 17.

²⁹ Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 10.

³⁰ Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 19.

³¹ Stephen White offers what Keenan refers to as “democratic openness” as one (or depending on how you look at it, two) of his four “weak ontological” universals: natality and mortality, along with language and “the articulation of ‘sources of the self.’” Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9.

³² George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 157, 171. Kateb writes: “If democratic equality owes much (though not everything) to Christian equality, it is probably the case that a break with Christianity was necessary to release the full social power of the ideal of equality.” *The Inner Ocean*, 156-157.

³³ William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 153-155. As we shall see, Connolly adapts this notion of the “problematization of final markers” from Lefort’s description of “the dissolution of the markers of certainty.”

³⁴ Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 93. Here, Brown follows Arendt’s notion of “thinking without banisters.”

³⁵ Bonnie Honig, “Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home,” in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 258. Chantal Mouffe confirms that only with “the critique of essentialism” and of the “rationalistic and universalistic perspective” is it “possible to formulate the aims of a radical democratic politics ...” Only when we resist “the desire to reach a final destination” can we “guarantee that the dynamic of the democratic process will be kept alive.” Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy, Power, and the ‘Political,’” in *Democracy and Difference*, 245, 255.

³⁶ Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 153-155.

³⁷ Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 153-154.

³⁸ J. Peter Euben, “The Polis, Globalization, and the Politics of Place,” in *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*, eds. Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 259.

³⁹ Gregg Easterbrook, “Messing Up Your Daggone Top 10,” *Page 2*, May 2, 2006 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰ It is telling, I think, that in every work of democratic theory the tension, paradox, or opposition that is identified and wrestled with is within democracy itself (an inner tension, as for example between liberty and equality) rather than as the conflict between external and irreducible goods (as, for example, Aristotle and Tocqueville present between the goods of different regimes or social states, unequal though they ultimately might be). Democracy is apparently the most “unmixed” regime history has ever witnessed, with no value or good left outside its limits. This gives democracy the quality of seeming at once infinitely capacious and complex, as well as infinitely simple and singular.

⁴¹ Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (hereafter *DPT*), 2-3.

⁴² Lefort, *DPT*, 216-217.

⁴³ Lefort specifies that “giving form (*mise en forme*)” to the “dimensions of social space ... implies both giving them meaning (*mise en sens*) and staging them (*mise en scene*).” Lefort, *DPT*, 11-12.

⁴⁴ Lefort, *DPT*, 223.

⁴⁵ Lefort *DPT*, 216.

⁴⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 218.

⁴⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 223.

⁴⁸ Lefort, *DPT*, 225.

⁴⁹ Lefort writes: "Some readers will no doubt suspect that my reflections are nourished by psychoanalysis. That is indeed the case. But this connection is meaningful only if one asks oneself at which hearth Freud's thought was lit." Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, Ed. John B. Thompson (hereafter *PFMS*) (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 306.

⁵⁰ Lefort, *DPT*, 225 (my emphasis).

⁵¹ Lefort writes: "I am not even content to say that there is no power that does not require procedures of legitimation, for that would create the illusion of a naked power that would have to produce images or ideas capable of concealing it and of making it seem necessary and desirable. This work of legitimation does take place ... (but) before assessing it, one must decipher the conditions that made it possible; one must ask oneself, in each given case, What change in the principles of legitimacy, what reshaping of the system of beliefs, in the way of apprehending reality, enabled such a representation of power to emerge?" Lefort, *PFMS*, 281-282.

⁵² Lefort, *PFMS*, 281-282. Thus, for example, in explaining the formation of the totalitarian state in the USSR, Lefort argues that it is certainly necessary to examine the "political events" that surround it, and the "strategy" of the Bolshevik Party in "taking" power. "But these phenomena ... do not convey the full meaning of the situation. What we must understand is that (the Bolshevik Party's) force of attraction bore little relation to its real force. What ... explains its success was its ability to identify with the Revolution as an irreversible movement ...; its ability to conceive of itself and to appear as the depository of socialist legitimacy and truth." Lefort, *PFMS*, 283.

⁵³ Lefort, *PFMS*, 282. Lefort associates this approach to the one employed by Francois Furet's in his history of the French Revolution. Lefort writes, "if power seems to (Furet) to be the central object of any reflection on politics, it is not because he regards as decisive the relations established between actors whose aim it is to win or keep power It is because the position and representation of power, and the figuration of its locus are, in his view, constitutive of the social space, of its form and of its stage. In other words, he recognizes that, quite apart from its real functions ... power has a symbolic status." Thus "socio-economic oppositions are not fully significant at their own level. Social actors do not see their behavior as being strictly determined ... by material conditions They decipher their condition and relationships in the context of the common situation imposed upon them by the fact of belonging to the same society, and that situation itself cannot be disassociated from a general system of representation." Lefort, *DPT*, 91.

⁵⁴ Lefort, *DPT*, 11 (my emphasis). This description of the political applies in its entirety only to society after the democratic revolution. In pre-revolutionary society, as we shall see, there is no concealment of the principle that generates the overall configuration of society. Before the revolution there is visibility, not obscurity.

⁵⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 217. Or, as Fred Dallmayr puts it, the distinction here is between "polity" and "policy." Dallmayr, *The Other Heidegger* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 78.

⁵⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 221-222 (my emphasis).

⁵⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 213-256.

⁵⁸ Thus did Job not rebel against God

⁵⁹ Lefort continues, "When, therefore, it becomes generalized, opposition to power is not directed solely against those who control the decision-making and coercive apparatus, who are an obstacle to the destruction of certain hierarchies and who defend the interests of dominant

groups. It is directed against the *reality principle* and the *legitimacy principle* which support the established order. It is not political authority which is shaken; it is the validity of conditions of existence, and the modes of behavior, beliefs and norms which affect every detail of social life.”

Lefort, *DPT*, 92 (my emphasis).

⁶⁰ Lefort, *DPT*, 233.

⁶¹ Lefort, *DPT*, 19.

⁶² Lefort, *PFMS*, 229.

⁶³ Lefort, *DPT*, 251.

⁶⁴ Lefort, *PFMS*, 302.

⁶⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 16-17.

⁶⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 252.

⁶⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 16-17. Lefort writes, the “image of the king’s body as a double body, both mortal and immortal, individual and collective, was initially underpinned by the body of Christ.” Lefort, *PFMS*, 302.

⁶⁸ Lefort, *PFMS*, 303; *DPT*, 253. While Lefort himself has never mentioned it, Hobbes’ own front-piece image of the Leviathan seems to capture this pre-revolutionary mode of the social, wherein the societal multitude has an image of itself, united and ordered as one body, under the head of the king.

⁶⁹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 205 (my emphasis).

⁷⁰ Lefort, *PFMS*, 303 (my emphasis).

⁷¹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 304.

⁷² Lefort, *DPT*, 18.

⁷³ Lefort, *DPT*, 178.

⁷⁴ Lefort, *PFMS*, 306 (my emphasis).

⁷⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 17.

⁷⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 18.

⁷⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 34.

⁷⁸ Lefort, *PFMS*, 260.

⁷⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 225. Lefort writes that the democratic idea that “power belongs to no one” is not to be confused with the *modern* democratic idea power “designates an empty place. . . . The first formulation in fact implies that actors’ self-representation, as they deny one another the right to take power. The old Greek formula to the effect that power is in the middle . . . still indicates the presence of a group which has an image of itself, of its space and of its bounds. The reference to an empty place, by contrast, *eludes speech* insofar as it does not presuppose the existence of a community whose members discover themselves to be subjects by the very fact of their being members. The formula ‘power belongs to no one can also be translated into the formula ‘power belongs to none of us’ The reference to an empty place, on the other hand, implies a reference to a society without any positive determination, which cannot be represented by the figure of a community.” In this crucial sense, then, ancient democracy is closer to Christianity than to modern democracy. Lefort, *DPT*, 225-226, (my emphasis).

⁸⁰ Lefort, *PFMS*, 304 (my emphasis). Whenever “the people are embodied in power, and whenever an organ is created and claims to have been entrusted with the will of the people, or even simply to be exercising it, it becomes obvious that there is a discrepancy . . . between the institution and the institutor.” By the very act of speaking in the name of the people, the “visible

shape of the organ” of the people “is threatened with having to reveal that it is particular and not universal.” Lefort, *DPT*, 108.

⁸¹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 303.

⁸² Lefort, *PFMS*, 305.

⁸³ Lefort, *PFMS*, 303.

⁸⁴ Lefort, *PFMS*, 279 (my emphasis). “Nothing,” Lefort writes, “makes the paradox of democracy more palpable than the institution of universal suffrage. It is at the very moment when popular sovereignty is assumed to manifest itself,” that citizens “becomes a mere statistic. Number replaces substance.” Lefort, *DPT*, 18-19.

⁸⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 41.

⁸⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 41.

⁸⁷ Dallmayr calls this the “absent presence” of the people. Fred Dallmayr, *The Other Heidegger* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1993), 91.

⁸⁸ Lefort, *DPT*, 41.

⁸⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 91.

⁹⁰ Lefort, *DPT*, 39.

⁹¹ Lefort, *DPT*, 39. Recall the SDS poster from the mid 1960’s declaring: “Freedom is an endless meeting.” See James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987), 215.

⁹² Lefort, *DPT*, 19.

⁹³ Quoted in Lefort, *DPT*, 168-169.

⁹⁴ Lefort, *DPT*, 168.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Lefort, *DPT*, 168-9 (my emphasis).

⁹⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 24, 168.

⁹⁷ Lefort, *PFMS*, 302.

⁹⁸ Lefort, *DPT*, 14-16.

⁹⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 14-16.

¹⁰⁰ Lefort, *DPT*, 276, 306 (my emphasis).

¹⁰¹ Lefort, *DPT*, 176.

¹⁰² Lefort, *DPT*, 176 (my emphasis).

¹⁰³ Lefort, *PFMS*, 305.

¹⁰⁴ Lefort, *DPT*, 16. Even if democracy cannot be understood as the secularization of Christianity, Lefort argues that it can to some extent be understood as the radicalization of the “historical dimension of the divine,” a dimension manifest, for example, in that “the event of (Christ’s) birth took place at a specific time and in a specific place” Lefort, *DPT*, 236.

¹⁰⁵ Lefort, *PFMS*, 185.

¹⁰⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 179 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁷ Democracy, Lefort writes, “preserves the double idea of political freedom and the freedom of the individual.” Lefort, *DPT*, 181 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁸ Lefort, *DPT*, 27 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 28 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁰ Lefort, *DPT*, 43. “Reason of state,” Lefort writes, with its “characteristic impersonality,” as the guarantor of rights and the public space, “threatens to subdue all social activities and relations to its interests, and even to foster the illusion that it is a great individual, and that everyone has to recognize its will as its own But it is equally certain that this tendency is held

in check because the political competition and social conflict mobilized by the democratic process of contesting the exercise of power led to an indefinite transformation of right ... and the public space.” Lefort, *DPT*, 231.

¹¹¹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 258. The “fact that there is no master means that there is a gap, which is deemed to be intangible, between administrative power and political authority.” Lefort, *DPT*, 29.

¹¹² Lefort, *DPT*, 15-16 (my emphasis).

¹¹³ Lefort, *DPT*, 111. Lefort writes, “opinion is a substitute for the people, for the current reality of the people is never what it should be. This is not to say that it provides a fully determined representation of the people; in order to exercise its function, it must, like the people, escape all given definitions, for if it *were to be defined, it would cease to appear to be a source of meaning and value.*” Lefort, *DPT*, 110 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁴ Lefort, *DPT*, 110.

¹¹⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 181 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 208.

¹¹⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 18, 179 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁸ Lefort, *PFMS*, 260.

¹¹⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 39.

¹²⁰ Lefort, *PFMS*, 256-258 (my emphasis).

¹²¹ Lefort, *DPT*, 17.

¹²² Lefort, *PFMS*, 256-258 (my emphasis).

¹²³ Lefort, *PFMS*, 259-60.

¹²⁴ Lefort, *PFMS*, 260.

¹²⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 37. Lefort gives as an example of this right to declare rights the militants of Polish Solidarity, who, in not settling for the various concessions offered by the communist government, “expect not only those measures which would satisfy their demands: they are also giving themselves an unlimited capacity to take initiatives. Their demand is not only for a specific object, but also for the right to make demands.” Lefort, *PFMS*, 310.

¹²⁶ Lefort, *PFMS*, 260 (my emphasis).

¹²⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 41.

¹²⁸ Lefort, *PFMS*, 257.

¹²⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 38; *PFMS*, 258.

¹³⁰ Lefort, *PFMS*, 258.

¹³¹ Lefort, *DPT*, 32-33 (my emphasis).

¹³² Lefort, *DPT*, 32-33 (my emphasis); *PFMS*, 257 (my emphasis).

¹³³ Lefort, *PFMS*, 250-251 (my emphasis).

¹³⁴ Lefort, *DPT*, 42.

¹³⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 37 (my emphasis).

¹³⁶ Lefort, *PFMS*, 257 (my emphasis).

¹³⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 32-33 (my emphasis).

¹³⁸ Lefort, *PFMS*, 257.

¹³⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 37-8 (my emphasis).

¹⁴⁰ Lefort, *DPT*, 21 (my emphasis)

¹⁴¹ Lefort, *DPT*, 170 (my emphasis).

¹⁴² Conversely, the classical notion of time as cyclical can be thought of as circumscribing the flow of history in the order of nature.

¹⁴³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Trans. Arthur Gold Hammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 676.

¹⁴⁴ William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 83-84.

¹⁴⁵ William E. Connolly, "Politics and Vision," in *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*, eds. Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

¹⁴⁶ William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 83-84.

¹⁴⁷ William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 83-84.

¹⁴⁸ Quotes from "What is Open Theism?," Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry (available at: <http://www.carm.org>) and "What is Openness Theology?," Open Theism Information Site (available at: <http://opentheism.info>). For a popularization of this movement, see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (InterVarsity Press, 1998).

¹⁴⁹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 124 (my emphasis).

¹⁵⁰ Lefort, *PFMS*, 222.

¹⁵¹ Lefort, *DPT*, 16.

¹⁵² Lefort, *PFMS*, 304.

¹⁵³ Lefort, *DPT*, 180; *PFMS*, 214.

¹⁵⁴ Lefort, *DPT*, 275.

¹⁵⁵ Lefort, *DPT*, 179, 234.

¹⁵⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 233. Here the experience truly is of the death of God, of a society that recognizes no primal division and so is without any primal unity.

¹⁵⁸ Lefort, *DPT*, 233, 19-20.

¹⁵⁹ Lefort, *DPT*, 233.

¹⁶⁰ Lefort, *DPT*, 234.

¹⁶¹ This differentiates totalitarianism from previous notions of tyranny, despotism, and absolutism, and from the notion of a general accumulation of power (regardless of extent) in the state, a majority, a class, and so forth.

¹⁶² Lefort, *PFMS*, 305-306.

¹⁶³ Lefort, *PFMS*, 305-306.

¹⁶⁴ In this sense, even though totalitarianism and democracy are both born of the revolution, Lefort writes that the notion of "totalitarian democracy" is "*a palpable absurdity*;" totalitarianism "inverts (democracy's) meaning." Lefort, *DPT*, 28.

¹⁶⁵ Lefort, *PFMS*, 301-302.

¹⁶⁶ Lefort, *PFMS*, 305.

¹⁶⁷ Lefort, *PFMS*, 217, 279.

¹⁶⁸ Lefort, *DPT*, 20.

¹⁶⁹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 285.

¹⁷⁰ Lefort, *PFMS*, 288.

¹⁷¹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 211.

¹⁷² Lefort, *DPT*, 72.

¹⁷³ Lefort, *PFMS*, 306.

¹⁷⁴ Lefort, *PFMS*, 291.

¹⁷⁵ Lefort, *PFMS*, 316 (my emphasis).

¹⁷⁶ Lefort, *DPT*, 234-5 (my emphasis).

¹⁷⁷ Lefort, *DPT*, 108.

¹⁷⁸ Lefort, *DPT*, 234-5 (my emphasis).

¹⁷⁹ Lefort, *PFMS*, 242.

¹⁸⁰ Indeed, what we consume is sold to us in these terms. Most every television show is advertised as the “can’t miss event of the season,” while we must see each new movie to “experience the event.”

¹⁸¹ Steven Levy, *Newsweek*, “The Power of iPod,” October 23, 2006, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 17, 72 (my emphasis).

¹⁸² A recent *Newsweek* piece about the “depth and dimensions of pleasure” reads: “for many Americans, sex is not just ... physical or emotional - it’s spiritual.” For many, “sexuality is emerging from the realm of guilt and sin and becoming instead a divine blessing and a way to reach new, transcendent heights.” Holly Lebowitz Rossi, *Newsweek*, “Periscope,” October 2, 2006, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 14, 9.

¹⁸³ Pierre Manent, *A World beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation-State* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 134-5.

¹⁸⁴ Power migrates “from the fixed, determinate but occult place it occupied under the monarchy to a place” that is “unstable and indeterminate.” Lefort, *DPT*, 110. But we do not arrive at an “unlimited transparency,” an “all-visible, all-manipulable, all-explorable world.” Lefort, *PFMS*, 235.

¹⁸⁵ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 236. See in particular Chapters 3 and 7. Interestingly, adopting a method that belies their findings, Stark and Fink use a self-consciously provocative “market terminology” of “religious firms” competing for their “market share,” of members under conditions of cost-benefit analysis.