

Introduction: Democracy as Self-Subverting

*Every government harbors within itself a natural flaw that seems
inextricably intertwined with the very principle of its existence*
- Tocqueville

Playing Politics

"Politics" has probably always been something of a dirty word. In America today it seems exclusively and irretrievably so. Over the past half century polling data has made clear the American people's increasing "dissatisfaction" with their politics and "distrust" of their government. Perhaps the most striking trend in more than three decades of the General Social Survey, for example, is the collapsing of "confidence" in political institutions and processes (even as opinions on a wide array of other issues have remained remarkably static).¹ When one considers this trend in conjunction with the long term decline in voting rates and other forms of political participation, a general contempt for contemporary politics is hard to deny; as the belief that America is "on the wrong track" grows more pronounced, the available practices of politics are rejected as a means to make things better. Indeed, beyond a failure to provide solutions, the condition of our politics is cited as a large part of the problem - as the very proof that America is on the wrong track. Politics is viewed, it seems, as a stage for us at our worst.²

More revealing even than the statistical representation of American's low opinion of politics, I suggest, is the rhetorical culture within which today's politics takes shape. Listening to the language citizens, politicians, and journalists use to persuade one another, we begin to understand the particular mode of American's contempt of politics; beyond the fact *that* Americans hate politics, an analysis of our political rhetoric helps us diagnose precisely *how* and *why* Americans hate politics. Consider what the following

phrases - and their pervasiveness - tell us about the specific character of American's attitudes and beliefs regarding politics. We hear political debate shot through with the ubiquitous bad-faith accusation of "playing politics."³ Elections, those most pivotal of liberal democratic moments, now comprise the "silly season" during which people say the most preposterous things to gain the least competitive advantage.⁴ And outside the electoral moment, "politics as usual" is cast as inane, at once a childish game divorced from reality and a fraud where opportunistic maneuvers are (barely) disguised as reasoned arguments.⁵ The alternative intentions of "playing" - of speaking in a political context - can only be to manipulate or to pander. Similarly, it seems unimaginable that political partisanship and disagreement can be anything but "petty" and "bickering," but also that political moderation, compromise, and changes of position represent anything but an unprincipled lack of "core conviction."⁶ The alternatives are the calculated obstructionism of "playing the blame game" and the calculated expediency of "flip-flopping."⁷ And even as the majority of Americans apparently consider it self-evident that their elected representatives are in the pockets of "special interests," the chronic complaint is that these degenerate characters "don't get anything done." The alternatives are corruption and gridlock.⁸ Surveying this dead-end rhetorical landscape, we might well conclude with one recent account that the world of politics has become an "unfit place for human habitation."⁹

Articulated in such language, the contemporary disenchantment with politics apparently follows from something other than rational apathy, and beyond the sense that political actors and institutions are usually corrupt. Rather, the practice of politics seems increasingly taken as *absurd* - as a sphere of human activity devoid of meaning and so

undeserving of respect. "Politics" is a game, both constituted and removed from reality by its idiosyncratic set of rules. It can be played more or less fairly, to be sure, and it can be more or less dramatic and entertaining, but ultimately politics is something that is played. And like any game it seems bizarre, pointless, and sort of silly to the outside observer, even (or especially) when played for the highest of stakes.

The conceptual metaphor of politics as a game frames a strikingly consistent rhetorical strategy of persuasion, evident in the above examples.¹⁰ One begins by invoking crisis or war-like conditions, or by asserting some truth obvious to plain common sense (or better, by combining the two in the obvious truth of crisis). In any case, its made clear that we need not meetings and talk and disputation, but decisive and immediate action (the telling assumptions being that speech and action are incompatible species, and that for "things to happen" or to "get something done" words must be set aside or risen above: "Stop Talking; Start Doing," as one recent advertising campaign puts it; "Rhetoric or Real?" as a common CNN story-bar asks).¹¹ In this sense, persuasion within the rhetorical culture of "playing politics" takes effect as an attack upon rhetoric - a sort of performative contradiction, words are used to reject the need or efficacy of words.¹² Further, insofar as the politics of democracy is premised upon the possibility of replacing force with persuasion - insofar as argument is the very medium of democratic politics - it is an anti-political rhetorical culture. To be sure, politics may proceed in economic terms, where language is used to signal self-interest and "argument" is reduced to bargaining and negotiation. But how absurd will this type of politics appear in times of pervasive and persistent crisis? When persuasion by means of giving reasons for one's position is taken as duplicitous, just an effort to mask self-interest (and so either

"petty and bickering" when transparent, or the soft force of manipulation when actually believed), or as a "fiddling" waste of time in the face of emergency (when persuasion must give way to the force of necessity), we are left with a politics of negotiation in times of necessity - drastic times met by trifling measures. Reduced to this, the democratic mode of politics cannot but seem incongruous and detached from reality.¹³

Today's alienation from politics is thus much more intractable than were apathy or corruption solely at its root. An apathetic people can always be "awakened" and a corrupt system can always be reformed (especially, it is often presumed, in times of crisis). But what is to be done when politics is experienced as nonsense - as quite literally a theater of the absurd, a "play where nothing happens"? When its practice becomes transparently vacuous and farcical - reduced to deploying trite slogans and repetitive gibberish ("talking points") to move demographic pieces into position at key places on the board ("battle-ground states") so as to put a mark in the win column for the red or the blue team, with the result of nothing much changing? When what was once considered the most human of activities is rendered as a "horse race"? Our options, it seems, are to step back and lampoon this political burlesque, with its ludicrous caricatures and clichés, or to suspend thought and reflection and throw ourselves in as fan(atic)s.

How have we ended up with such a no-way-out political vocabulary? How can we work our way out when words spoken in the context of politics are just assumed to be "spin" - when language is thought to conceal rather than convey meaning? How can we reform our politics when such reflexive, uncritical cynicism blocks reflection, argument, and action? One conclusion would appear warranted already: political reformation

(assuming these terms are not mutually exclusive) must come from outside democratic politics.¹⁴

Market Structures and Liberal Systems: Why is Democratic Politics Unpopular?

Given the long-term nature of the phenomenon, American's growing distaste for politics cannot be explained exclusively in terms of recent events (Vietnam, Watergate), prevailing conditions or the perceived performance of government (booming or busting economy, crime rates), or contemporary transformations (the post cold war phase of globalization, the rise of the new media of the internet, talk radio, business consolidation, and so forth).¹⁵ As important as these factors surely are in altering the style and substance of (along with even our perceptual modes of access to) today's political campaigns, for instance, to be of sufficient scope our analysis of political disaffection must consider more sustained conditions, relatively longstanding aspects of the American political system and American society, and even broader trends of which America is a part.

Theorizations of this sort typically revolve around the characterization of ours as a liberal democratic political system embedded in a "market society." To simplify, the reasoning here generally follows one of two paths. First, in our modern, middle-class, commercial republic people are otherwise occupied and so "rationally ignorant" of and uninterested in a political process that daily effects them little and over which they personally have no control.¹⁶ Political drama might attract attention, political issues and policies not so much. In turn, the running of government is willingly (and perhaps fortunately) entrusted to institutional mechanisms, elected representatives, and "experts"

(except perhaps during times of crisis). Second, with their desire for political power institutionally channeled into the merely symbolic act of voting in occasional elections, citizens are reduced to spectators of a political system dominated by organized “special interests” and oligarchic “elites.” Moreover, in our age of globalizing corporate capitalism politics becomes just economics by other means; money is power and the people’s putative authority amounts to sound without fury. In a sort of hostile takeover “democracy” is co-opted and reduced to an empty rhetoric, used by those in power to keep those out of power docile. In the first line of reasoning, the reigning popular sovereign happily *abdicates* direct rule, if not ultimate authority; in the second, a citizenry longing for more significant political power is institutionally and materially *locked out* of political space.¹⁷

Neither of these familiar views is wholly convincing, though. The first (wherein the liberal democratic political system makes possible the semi-public governance of an apolitical populace) predicts political *apathy*, but not the *contempt* so widely and vocally expressed today. However much we are disengaged from and uninterested in politics, the majority describes itself less as apolitical than as anti-political. How can we account for the widespread lack of respect for all-things political that accompanies our lack of interest? The second view (wherein the liberal democratic political system obstructs more direct and robust democratic participation) can surely make sense of this contempt. But it apparently misrepresents the expressed aspirations of the majority of Americans.

Recent research has called into serious question the extent to which people desire or would affirm their own increased participation in politics. For instance, combining national survey data with an analysis of what people (reconstructed into “focus groups”)

actually said, the important work of John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse finds that "The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making process."¹⁸ Why is this? Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that our aversion to taking part in the politics of democracy is not primarily a response to the particular defects, inequities, or ugliness of our political system. It is not, for example, the perception that politics is dominated by special interests and self-serving politicians that turns us off to the whole endeavor. Indeed, they suggest that citizens are motivated to participate in politics to the extent that they are largely by fear of "being played for a sucker" by those in power.¹⁹ "People are amazingly attuned, hypersensitive even, to the possibility that decision makers will attempt to improve themselves at the expense of everyone else."²⁰ Along deeply Tocquevillian lines, as we shall see, people seem willing (even eager) to embrace political powerlessness, but resent the slightest abuse (or perhaps even sign) of privilege - in this case, those in power taking advantage of their privileged position to take advantage of us. And it is this possibility that forces citizens to intervene in the political process.

Even as people assume selfishness in their elected officials and corruption in their governing institutions, they apparently do not want to "return power to the people." The people, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse find, are not populists. The majority wants "to weaken the power of institutions but not strengthen the power of ordinary people."²¹ They identify three primary reasons for why people turn down political power. First, not surprisingly people say they have neither the time nor the interest, and don't want the

burdens of responsibility. Second, in their political roles and capacities people apparently have no more faith in each other, or even in themselves, than in their elected representatives. We don't trust politicians, but nor do we trust ourselves as citizens. "People overwhelmingly admit that they and the American people generally are largely uninformed about political matters. They also have reservations about the trustworthiness of the American people, with half of the people not trusting their fellow citizens."²² Finally, people seem to have an abiding aversion to the very stuff of democratic politics - to addressing collective issues, goals, and conflicts by means of arguing together. Two primary reasons are offered. First, the majority thinks Americans are basically unified rather than factious. "The people believe that Americans generally agree on overall societal goals," and that "the common good is not debatable."²³ The common good is a matter of common sense, and so disagreement does not seem reasonable; conflict becomes a sign that there is something wrong with us and our government. Insofar as politics is a stage for conflict, it puts on display us at our worst. Second, and closely related, people think arguing both should be unnecessary and is inefficacious. The majority considers arguing to be "a complete waste of time," a matter of "bickering, ... pointless conflict."²⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, the public overwhelmingly supported (86 percent) the proposition: "Elected officials should stop talking and take action."²⁵ As useless as it is ugly, the politics of argument is as such rejected; to this mode of politics the good citizen conscientiously objects.

Weighing against the notion that political disenchantment is rooted in the American people's experience of being institutionally and materially locked-out of a distant political system, then, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write: "Participation in politics

is low because people do not like politics even in the best circumstances; in other words, they simply do not like the process of openly arriving at a decision in the face of diverse opinions. They do not like politics when they view it from afar and they certainly do not like politics when they participate in it themselves."²⁶ Simply, Americans "yearn for 'the end of politics.'"²⁷ This leads people, the authors write, to a dilemma: "People want to turn political matters over to somebody else because they do not want to be involved themselves, but they do not want to turn decision making over to someone who is likely to act in selfish, rather than other-regarding, manner."²⁸ The people desire neither to command nor be oppressed, as it were. The way out of this dilemma is to, in a manner of speaking, place power in the hands of virtue. Today, the relevant virtues are formulated as the *selflessness* and problem-solving *competence* - above the world of self-interest and partisanship, people seek in their representatives not so much responsiveness to their policy preferences as part Burkean disinterested trustee of the common good and part Clintonian feeler of my pain.²⁹ At the same time, given the desire for quite decisiveness in decision-making, people tend to favor government (administration) by "business leaders" and "nonelected, independent experts" - politics reduced to a business or a science, wherein things get done efficiently and progress toward our shared goals is measurable.³⁰

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse dub this the politics "stealth democracy" - "government by autopilot" that renders power's operation unseen and unheard (like a stealth bomber, dropping from on high).³¹ In the people's ideal form of democratic politics, decisions are made "efficiently, objectively, and without commotion or disagreement," and decision-makers display only the personable selflessness of empathy

and/or the impersonal selflessness of impartiality.³² To introduce an idea we shall return to in considering Claude Lefort's theory of democracy, what we want on this account is the providential power of nobody - power that is effective but evidently unheld. A human agent might be thought to approximate this combination: the super-hero Cincinnatus figure who rises above the paradox of republican politics, wherein the pursuit of power (political office) demonstrates an absence of the very virtues that qualify one to hold power. An institutional agency might be thought to approximate this combination: the military, today's last bastion of power in the hands of (martial) virtue; the Supreme Court, with its impersonal body of impartial experts (as opposed to the "activist judges" of a "politicized" Court). Perhaps this helps explain why the military receives a great and growing vote of confidence from the American people even as confidence in most every other institution crumbles, and why the least democratic branch of the American government is by far the most popular.³³ And the very realization of this combination would be the seating of power in some perfectly virtuous (empathetic and impartial, efficient and effective) super-human agency.

Expressing an almost equally low regard for direct democratic participation and popular power as for liberal democratic institutions and procedures, American's aversion to politics runs deep, below the liberal political system and to the practice of democratic politics as such.³⁴ This picture is complicated, though, by the possibility that we have been seduced into such beliefs, and so into political powerlessness. To simplify for the time being, the common course of this argument holds that we have in some way been led or induced or subconsciously reconstructed to imagine human association as at

bottom a market and human beings as at bottom bourgeois beings. In turn, we buy into "purchasing power" and the need-satisfaction of "consumerism" as the essence of freedom, reject equality as incompatible with individual opportunity and collective prosperity, embrace governance according to hierarchical business models and "market forces" as necessary and proper in a world of competition and complexity, accept decision-making as the work of a technocracy, and so on. Today, the argument extends, the market-order is taken as no less than natural: given, spontaneous, inevitable, even coded into our biology. Moreover, market orders are taken as Natural, endowed as our faith with a sort of religious moral significance.³⁵ Consequently, politics (along with everything else) is perceived as an essentially economic activity, conceptualized in the language of competitive self-interest and judged by the logic of efficiency. A robustly democratic politics is dismissed by the people themselves as "unrealistic" on both counts. Citizens believe themselves to lack not only the time and expertise but also the requisite public spiritedness to practice democratic politics; in the "modern world" we simply can't afford the luxury of democracy.

There is much to recommend this interpretation. That "education policy" is almost always and without dissent framed by the necessity of "not falling behind in global competition" stands as only one (if perhaps the most dispiriting) example of our tendency to appraise the human world in economic terms.³⁶ Yet, the notion of market society as Platonic cave is not wholly convincing. The very fact that "market society," "consumer culture," and so on, are invoked almost exclusively so as to condemn them, never as legitimate or aspirational, undermines the analysis of markets society as "totalizing."³⁷ Far from being indoctrinated into an unquestioned capitalist

consciousness, the costs of capitalism are constantly questioned and regretted. Every word of praise for the efficiency, prosperity, and freedom of the unplanned and unregulated open-market is accompanied by scorn for “a culture of fast-food homogenization,” hierarchical corporatism (“Big Oil,” “Big Tobacco”), the “Almighty Dollar,” “affluenza,” self-indulgent luxury and “conspicuous consumption,” ubiquitous advertising, “selling out,” inauthenticity, shallowness, greed, vanity.³⁸ If Americans are materialistic consumers, it would seem they are self-loathing materialistic consumers.

The widespread argument that we exist in the cave of consumer culture undermines itself: if we lived in the cave we would not know it, much less be prone to decry it. More than any reality it represents, I shall suggest, “market society” captures our imagination to such an extent today for two main reasons. First, various ingredients of open-market economics are easily translated into goods we do passionately affirm. Second, as a reductive exaggeration of elements of society that are present, consumer society preys upon our insecurities as precisely the mode of human association's corruption we fear possible. Indeed, the fear of a creeping, tempting, infecting, colonizing bourgeois ethos is constitutive of our social form; it is how we imagine dehumanization. A robust interpretation of American society would recognize, for instance, that we *transform* consumerism by representing it in terms of self-expressive freedom and personal empowerment even as we dread the descent of modern life into a homogenized and stultifying consumer culture devoid of anything lofty. We *elevate* greed by making the effort to philosophize it as good (the spur to individual striving, and so to human progress and prosperity), and we anxiously await the dissolution of society into a base and degrading greediness. We love opportunity and hate opportunism. Any

plausible critique of our social form must account for this dualism, and so must look toward the wider frame of reference by which we judge the market elements of our society.

The Anti-Politics of Democratic Openness: Cynicism and Idealism

In response to the shortcomings of the views outlined above, my argument runs in two parts. First, insofar as one can make such general claims about a “society,” “culture,” “zeitgeist,” or “age,” ours is rendered more fully intelligible as a democratic society rather than as a market society. Second, a society so-constituted fosters the particular type of the contempt of politics so widespread today, the *blind cynicism* we might juxtapose to healthy skepticism and vigilant distrust.³⁹ Building in part upon the works of Alexis de Tocqueville, I argue that the democratic “social state” tends to be taken by its inhabitants as natural, and even as a quasi-sanctified order of human association; and that both the liberal democratic form of government *and* the direct democratic practice of politics are devalued and deemed absurd within the way of life sustained by democratic “mores.” There is an *anti-political prejudice* inscribed in the democratic way of imagining, understanding, and evaluating the world.

My analysis of the sources and modes of political cynicism focuses on what we might call *democratic openness*. Modern democratic society, I shall argue, is significantly principled upon openness - that is, upon the freedom that becomes imaginable only in the context of democratic equality. This is the freedom that follows from the collapse of hierarchy as the ordering principle of nature, society, and self. It is the freedom of revolutionary, creative possibility (of what Tocqueville captures in the

paradox of “indefinite perfectibility”). It is the freedom of opportunity, of the American Dream, and of the American Nightmare.

As I explain below, by its very nature the principle of openness is as expansive in its legitimacy as it is impossible to put into practice - or more precisely, its expansive legitimacy is premised upon the transcendence of political (and indeed all conventional) practice. The result is what I describe as the characteristically democratic *dialectic of idealism and cynicism*. In times of democratic openness all barriers to progress and perfectibility are understood as contingent and arbitrary, and as contingent these barriers are experienced as increasingly irksome (“if we can put a man on the moon ... ”). At the same time, the very condition that enables us to imagine infinite perfection enables us to imagine infinite imperfection; there are two directions to limitless possibility. And as an indefinite ideal, openness cannot be made manifest in the here and now; such freedom can be imagined, even experienced momentarily, but never realized. Democracy, as has been observed, is in the dreaming - “always to come.” In turn, any attempt to represent, establish, or institute openness can only be met with a sort of buyer’s remorse of spent potential - defining and thereby diminishing the indefinite. Just as the purity of religious faith is thought to be preserved by its transcending temporality, conventionality, materiality, particularity, and the partisan striving for power, democracy maintains its near-universal moral authority by remaining a world apart from the ways and means of political power; its authority lies in its powerlessness. Our great faith in the democratic principle is conditioned upon its impossibility. Our great cynicism regarding the political practice of democracy lies in the ever growing distance between the world of our idealizing imagination and “the real world;” even progress is experienced as regression as

infinite possibility intertwines with an infinite contempt of the present. Relative to the sublime freedom of openness, for example, the participatory “political freedom”

Tocqueville cherished appears banal and even oxymoronic.

Taking both lines of my argument together, I conclude that today’s often remarked upon simultaneous triumph of democratic *principles* and absence of democratic political *practices* is no coincidence. A recent UNESCO report, for example, strikingly declares that “basic democratic principles” constitute no less than “a fundamental source of common values that can be described as the common heritage of humankind.”⁴⁰ Even with the status of universality accorded democracy, with its standing as sort of moral Esperanto even its enemies cannot due without, not only is popular disdain for political representatives and institutions growing, but basic participation in questioning and deciding things in common is almost nowhere to be found. Everywhere preached but nowhere practiced, it is apparently the best of times and the worst of times for democracy. I argue that these two phenomena are intrinsically intertwined, rooted in the same source. Democracy is not in crisis despite the fact that democratic principles are hegemonic, but precisely because democratic principles are hegemonic. By virtue of its openness, the democratic principle enjoys an historically unprecedented monopoly of legitimacy even as it harbors a widespread cynicism regarding the political practice of democracy. This schism of principle and practice is constitutive of the modern democratic regime. There is, in turn, a Pyrrhic quality to what Tocqueville terms the “rising empire” of democracy.⁴¹

The Market Element of Democratic Society

To explicate the notion of “democratic society” put forward in the first line of my thesis, I argue (incorporating the terminology, if not the sense of rupture, of Bruce Ackerman’s schema of America’s political development) that we live in a democratic “third republic,” analogous to the laissez-faire “second republic.” Where market competition was (perhaps) once “massively affirmed” as both a fact of the world in which we live and the principle of a free and rightly-ordered society, today democratic openness stands as a similarly unquestionable fact/value. It is taken as at once natural (as we experience it in time, the world is intrinsically contingent, in-flux and free-flowing, uncertain and unpredictable, mysterious and open-ended), and normative (society ought to be similarly free of settled absolutes and barriers, inclusive and pluralistic, open to question and change, inhabited with open minds and open hearts). And where the contract once served as a general metaphor for social integration amid competition, today communication serves such a function amid openness. Thus, for example, rights are conceptualized not around the freedom of contract, but around the freedom of self-expression (with its component parts of privacy and recognition). Progress is understood as toward democratic “humanity” (an all-inclusive diversity of free and equal individuals), rather than toward bourgeois “civilization.” And the elision of fact and value under the umbrella of openness fosters the belief that democracy will spontaneously bloom the world-over once obstructions of whatever sort are removed. Telling in this context is the phrase “democratic spring,” with its attendant assumptions and associations.

I argue further that while the free-market and consumer capitalism are at times affirmed as natural and normative, they are so-affirmed only insofar as they can be

portrayed as aspects of democratic openness. The "free enterprise system" trades on its share of revolutionary dynamism introduced into the world as democratic. Looking at the content of advertising, beyond the fact of its pervasiveness, its apparent that consumerism is itself "branded" and sold as democratic.⁴² Any "ethos of consumer infantilization" is less a product of "global marketers ... explicitly infantilizing adults" (as if people were just raw material to be manipulated) than of the norm of uninhibited openness, expressed in terms of youthful vitality and childlike spontaneity.⁴³ And if many have more faith in "market forces" (or in the basically Malthusian economics of Darwinian biology) than in democratic institutions and practices, it is because these constructs seem more in accord with an open world and an open society, unencumbered by arbitrary conventional forms. Along these lines, the full picture of the love/hate relationship with capitalism (and globalization) in democratic society becomes intelligible.

Nature, Convention, and the Passion for Revolution

Developing the second line of my argument, I show how the ongoing democratization of society, for all its good and beauty, goes hand-in-hand with the depoliticization of society. As democratic openness is taken as both the defining attribute of our modern condition and the sole principle of proper social arrangements and relationships, the political element of human association is undermined and devalued. Within the democratic dialectic of idealism and cynicism the thought takes shape that we are both *incapable of* and *better off without* the practice of politics. Recall Aristotle's famous claim that "the man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no

part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.”⁴⁴ I argue that within democratic society we consider ourselves at once unable to participate in *and* in need of nothing from political association. Democratic man does not consider himself a political animal - a citizen capable of and in need of persuading and being persuaded in turn.

The key here is that the democratic revolution in the principle of authority subverts not only hierarchical conventions, but whatsoever is perceived as conventional - in politics, and also in the family, religion, economics, law, morality, and so forth. After the revolution, nature is no longer thought to be potentially representable in the conventional social order (for example, natural law as manifest in positive law, or divinity incorporated in the body of the king). The conventional world is “denatured.” Further, the world of human contrivance is taken as the very antithesis of untouched nature, as its negation or suppression (for example, Aristotelian habituation is represented as Freudian repression). Nature and convention henceforth appear mutually exclusive and without possible mediation. At the same time, though, nature’s self-evidence - successively iterated in terms of equality, competition, and openness - remains the standard of judgment for social arrangements and relationships. The truth and goodness of nature is hardly more questioned after the democratic revolution than before; the appeal of the “all-natural” or “organic” or “green” is hardly diminished. But “natural” comes to mean “spontaneous,” “authentic,” “raw,” “primal,” “pure,” and so forth. In its openness - conceived of in terms of its vital energy rather than its harmonious order, in the language of power rather than of peace - nature is precisely that which cannot be *embodied* in conventional form. Nature is disenchanting but hardly degraded while conventionality is as such debased.⁴⁵

The democratic revolution, I go on to argue, launches an unrealizable, self-radicalizing quest for what we might call a *social state of nature* - civilization without the discontents, human association unfettered by conventional artifice, expression deeper than words permit, relationships beyond the need for mediating institutions, the immediate experience of the events of the world. All that is meaningful (whether good, true, or beautiful) is rendered as hidden or distant, before or after, above or below the surface of the present world - as primitive or postmodern. The revolution in turn gives birth to an ongoing passion for revolution, for overturning conventional norms and forms in the liberating event of opening. This takes shape in terms of originalism (the present-transcending, revolutionary return to fundamentals, untouched conscience, archaic traditions), and originality (the present-transcending, revolutionary re-invention or innovation unto a brand-new and novel future) - purity or freshness.

In the context of this social state of openness, freedom is rendered as being “undomesticated.” More specifically, freedom amounts to *mastery* or *escape* - power over others, or a power-free zone where one is by oneself or in intimate union with others. The former is the limitless independence of autocratic control, the latter the liberation from all limits and even a this-worldly transcendence of material power and necessity. This, as we shall see, is what Tocqueville describes as the freedom of the savage, as opposed to the artfully staged freedom of democratic political association. It is the value of this political freedom - power both moderated *and* made effective in association with equal others - that freedom-as-openness undermines. Along these lines, Tocqueville identifies the common source of both the restless activity *and* the flight into passive isolation characteristic of those in democratic society.

The upshot of the longing for a social state of nature vis-à-vis the utterly artificial politics of liberal democracy is clear. The contempt for mainstream, scripted, suit-and-tie politics itself becomes mainstream.⁴⁶ Appraised within the context of natural openness/conventional closure, a political system so heavily reliant upon representations, institutional mechanisms, and procedural routines can only seem an absurd obstacle to the return to “plain common sense” and “just getting things done.” Where democracy housed in constitutional form might once have been regarded as an elevated form of democracy, nowadays it is considered even by many of its advocates as less fully democratic, defensible only insofar as regrettably necessary in the real world.⁴⁷ And judged by the norms of informality and intimacy - by “who would I rather have a beer with?” - politicians playing politics within the system can only seem ridiculous and fake, especially when they try to act authentic.

John Edwards, former U.S. senator from North Carolina and at the time potential candidate for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, expressed this sort of contempt for mainstream politics well: “My own view is the next president of the United States, or certainly the one after, is likely to be the single candidate who doesn't sound like a politician. I want to tell you on a personal level, I'm trying every way I know how not to (sound like a politician). . . . The problem is that we're so trained and so conditioned over a long period of time that being normal and real and authentic requires you to shed that conditioning.”⁴⁸ Speech that seems scripted is as such devalued, and so demonstrable informality and intimacy via personal confession are to be the technique of the successful (anti-)politician. More generally, “political correctness” - the self-censoring politeness we are forced to cover-up with in public (what might once have been

called "civility"), as opposed to the self-expressive and hard honesty of "just telling it like it is" - stands as the hallmark of our domesticated present. Today, the reflexive suspicion of such hypocrisy passes for wisdom.

Fueled in part by an aversion to the overt phoniness of the liberal political game, proponents of a more radical democracy suggest that "democracy" should be understood not as a political system or form of government, but as the resistance to domination.

Genuine democratic freedom and equality are not about collective self-rule, with its need for stable institutions and settled routines and procedures. Rather, they are about unruly action that challenges authority of every sort, even of "the people." Protest, not self-government, is the beating heart of democracy, which thrives insofar as every decision and closure is subject to open-ended questioning and "transgression." I argue that such dissident democracy is no less subverted by the belief in and commitment to democratic openness than are more liberal formulations. Once a political *movement* to disrupt authority is perceived as a political *organization*, once it seems more systematic than spontaneous, it ceases to be experienced as authentically radical; the democratic authority of the grass-roots movement turns into the political power of the "special interest" group. The conditions of political action's effectiveness and sustainability would seem to bring about a sense of devitalization and freedom's domestication.⁴⁹

Sheldon Wolin, today's leading theorist of radical democracy, thus argues that a vital politics of popular power both *can only be* and *ought to be* limited to fleeting, eruptive moments in time. Democracy is at once regrettably *and* ideally "fugitive."⁵⁰ Wolin argues that fugitive democratic association and action can only be episodic, can only be motivated by the oppression of an enemy (usually impersonal and structural, on

Wolin's account), and should be an epic event of creation/destruction. Fugitive democracy, in short, is synonymous with revolution. Attempting to cordon-off the "transgressive" spirit of the democratic "mode of being" from the rationalizing imperatives of the material realm (where democracy is "domesticated" or "managed" by constitutional forms and the economic system), Wolin proposes "accepting the familiar charges that democracy is ... inclined toward anarchy" and "rational disorganization."⁵¹ But what then of everyday organization at the level of popular association and action? Democracy as resistance to domination requires sustained civic organization, one imagines, but such organization would seem to signify the loss of democratic openness. What begins as a theorization of participatory power against systemic power results in the retreat into a sort of pure, pristine powerlessness. Striving for unconstrained power, the demos turns to fugitive escape.

I suggest that, with its passion for revolution, ours is as it were a "culture of radical democracy," that our politics barely meets even the most minimal and formal standards of liberal democracy, and that the simultaneity of these conditions is no coincidence.

Political Power and Political Freedom

Offering a distinct theory of robust (if not radical) democracy, I argue that the everyday practice of democratic politics - what Wolin himself at times seems to pursue, though increasingly laments as impossible - still has a place in the modern world. But it requires thinking beyond the confines of the norm of openness, and the consequent tendency to formulate associative action as enabled by and confined to extraordinary

moments of heroic struggle. The idea of democratic politics should be able to accommodate the common action of ordinary people. When it comes to what counts as “the practice of democratic politics” I take an ecumenical view. Voting, deliberative decision-making both in and out of institutional settings, protest in the streets, interest group organization and community organization: all of these and more are practices wherein people come together as citizens, arguing about common problems and purposes, and exercising the authority thereby generated (whether within or against the established system). Now, this legitimate power can obviously be employed to more or less legitimate ends. Popular power is only one element of a healthy democratic regime, but it is of primary concern to me here. As Tocqueville came to recognize, the central threats to the well-being of democratic society follow not from a tyrannically overactive majority but from a politically inactive citizenry.

Following Tocqueville, I take public association, argument, and action - the production and use of democratic political power - as a necessary means to the experience of a more than symbolic but less than transcendent freedom. This intermediate freedom is manifest in acting in the world with equal others rather than in the dream of standing over or being away from others. It is an effective but limited freedom - effective because limited. As Tocqueville writes, the practice of democratic politics teaches us how to be free by teaching us “to be independent without arrogance and obedient without baseness.”⁵² One of my central aims in what follows is to identify ways in which we might give political form to freedom in democratic society.

Fundamentalism, Globalization, and Democratic Modernity

Situating this argument within the academic literature, much of my project constitutes a sympathetic critique of “postmodern,” “post-structuralist,” or “agonistic” theorizations of radical democracy (such as appear in the works of Wolin, William Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, and Wendy Brown, among others). I view many aspects of the engaged political action described by these writers as possible, inspiring, and indeed essential to our social well-being today. Yet, I question their diagnosis of the reasons behind the infirmity of, and in turn their civic and institutional prescriptions for, the practice of democratic politics.

For instance, Brown argues that the central threats to democracy in America are what she stylizes as neo-conservative fundamentalism and neo-liberal globalization. Today, the citizen “produced” by these frameworks for understanding and evaluating the world embraces moralistic intolerance, the supposedly unerring imperatives of the global market, and even the synthesis of self-righteous religiosity and self-righteous economics largely to the end of projecting undemocratic state power at home and abroad. The political sphere comes to be organized around these religious and economic models - mirroring the church and/or the business corporation - as citizens not only concede but actually affirm “de-democratization.” Democratic politics and political culture are “hollowed out” by the cancerous overgrowth of prophetic and profit motives, and public decision-making is ceded to a pious adherence to the mystical inerrancy of the Bible or the Market.⁵³

I reverse the explanatory arrow here and ask the overlooked Tocquevillian question of how our democratic regime, with its characteristic principle of authority, shapes a common ethos regarding politics, economics, and religion. I argue that the

evangelical, expansive rationalities of fundamentalism and globalization actually draw strength from the democratic way of life within which they are embedded. Far from being outside threats to democracy, they are in part representations of the idea of democratic openness - of the quest for the pre/post-conventional, a world before or beyond social, political, economic, and religious forms. Such logics of extremism - whether of extreme materialism or extreme spiritualism - are iterations of the same passion for revolutionary rupture that lies at the heart of democratic modernity. The radicalization of democracy, in other words, goes hand-in-hand with the radicalization of religion and economics.

It is in this sense that democracy is *self-subverting*: the democratic way of life, principled upon the freedom-in-equality of openness as against hierarchical paternalism and absolutism, is both a precondition of and a threat to the political practice of democracy. The types of human association affirmed as meaningful within the democratic social state of openness are those that seem natural, informal, given, spontaneous, “born into” - whether of the pre-conventional family (the “tribe,” “community,” “nation,” or “culture”), or of post-conventional humanity (the “global village,” “world wide web,” and so forth). The types of freedom affirmed are those of total control and of being by oneself or in intimate union with others. Such norms simply cannot find expression in democratic political association and action. The consequence, I argue, is not Brown’s “production of the undemocratic citizen ... who loves and wants neither freedom nor equality, even of a liberal sort,” but rather the existence of the anti-political citizen who loves and wants freedom and equality of a characteristically democratic sort.⁵⁴

Chapters

Four chapters follow. Building upon Tocqueville's interpretation of democratic society, the first chapter takes up democratic education or character-formation in the broadest sense, exploring how living in a democratic regime shapes what we experience as meaningful - whether good, beautiful, or true. The key to this analysis is the contradictions Tocqueville identifies within the democratic social state. Those in democracy are at once the most materialistic and most spiritualistic, the most practical and abstract-minded, the most restless and docile, the most prideful and neediest, and so on. I show that for Tocqueville neither extreme is more characteristic of the democratic way of life. Nor are democratic flights of spiritualism, for instance, simply an epiphenomenal reaction to the perceived excesses of a more essential materialism. Instead, the character of democratic society lies in the tendency toward co-constitutive extremes. The democratic revolution, Tocqueville explains, destroys the vast disparities of aristocratic society: the commanding heights of nobility and the depths of servitude dissolve into one vast middle-class. Hierarchy collapses into equality. But this very collapse of hierarchy into equality produces new polar oppositions of cynicism and idealism around which democratic society takes shape.

Tocqueville exposes the most significant example of this when he writes of the new extremes of elevation and degradation embedded in democratic modernity. With leveling equality comes a stultifying sense of insignificance, of being lost and adrift in the great grey sea of mass mediocrity, and so of neediness. Deprived of examples of aristocratic greatness and grandeur, and with the loss of pride, passion, and purpose that

comes with bourgeois materialism and individualism, the inhabitants of democracy fear no less than “sinking below the level of humanity.” But with the presence of equality comes the absence of hierarchy and hierarchical absolutes, and in this absence comes the freedom of openness. The idealizing imagination seizes upon the prospect of being without limits, of infinite re-creative possibility. Unbounded, democratic peoples dream of no less than “rising above the level of humanity.” The aristocrat commanded, the democratic creates; the aristocrat stood atop, the democrat rises above. In his individualism, for instance, the “common man” of democracy will demand a sovereign independence and self-sufficiency of himself that is entirely uncommon - indeed, historically unprecedented. And in his materialism he will recklessly gamble all and abandon material well-being for the love of risk and opportunity for indefinite future gain. In one stroke, then, the democratic revolution in the principle of authority stultifies and liberates; henceforth we imagine ourselves as free as we are powerless.

In the second chapter, also building open Tocqueville, I turn to the poles of freedom (mastery and escape) and association (the family and humanity) inscribed in democratic society. On Tocqueville’s account, freedom in aristocratic times meant having one’s own *place* to stand in public, and so to be seen, heard, and honored by others. In democratic times, freedom means having the *space* to restlessly move about and take to the open road, as it were, or simply having enough power so that one need not move or compromise or depend upon others. Association in aristocratic times was principled upon the political right of command, and so upon the social place into which one was born. Democratic associations too are born into (at least insofar as they are experienced as meaningful), but they are principled upon the ties of family and

humanitarian resemblance/compassion. Along these lines, Tocqueville sums the movement from aristocracy to democracy as the shift from political bonds to natural bonds. The former were put into practice as intricate, formal codes of manners and etiquette demarcating one's due obligations up and down the social chain. The latter coalesce around the simple, relaxed norms of informality and intimacy that span social space. The public posture of the aristocrat is deemed too demanding, absurdly rigorous, cold and superficial. It is replaced by the more demanding hope of being at home with others, by oneself even when with others. In aristocracy even the family was a sort of political entity; in democracy even political associations aspire to the naturalness of the family.

I go on to suggest that all that falls short of this ideal of unmediated intimacy is cynically reduced to cold power-relations driven solely by competitive self-interest and strategic calculation (providentially restrained a few degrees short of actual violence and war by this same self-interested calculation). The dualism of *competition* and *intimacy* - with their respective currencies of power and love - supplants aristocratic command and obedience. The market and the family become the new models of human association. As much romantics as we are realists, today's advice holds that we follow our hearts and follow the money. Insofar as politics conforms to the model of market competition, I conclude, it will be conceived of as the blood-sport of *Realpolitik*, regrettably necessary, and inevitably corrupt. Insofar as politics aspires to the model of familial intimacy, it will be conceived of as utterly good and meaningful while rendering the everyday practice of politics absurd by comparison.

In the third chapter, I critique Claude Lefort's theory of democracy and the democratic revolution. Lefort, a leading interpreter of Tocqueville, wonderfully illuminates the source of the idea of democratic openness in the democratic revolution. The revolution is the original phenomenon of opening, which Lefort describes as "the dissolution of the markers of certainty." The revolutionary beheading of the king constitutes the symbolic demise of the *present father-figure* - the visible and audible incorporation of paternal authority - and of the social form organized by this presence. With the disappearance from the scene of the body of the king - the focal intersection of the divine and the mundane - every claim to authority is opened to contestation.

Along these lines, Lefort rightly rejects Tocqueville's prediction that democracy's original revolutionary thirst for freedom might eventually dissipate under the equality of conditions, inverting to socialism's tutelary despotism (I argue that Tocqueville's own analysis does not warrant his prediction.). Democratic equality and democratic freedom are inextricable, two sides of the same coin, born into the world at the same revolutionary moment. Lefort's interpretation helps us to see, moreover, that the rarity of great revolutions in democratic times anticipated by Tocqueville follows not from the waning of the passion for revolutionary openings, but from the belief that politics is an inadequate vehicle for our transformative aspirations (Tocqueville's conclusion is correct, but for the wrong reasons). The passion for revolution isn't lost, its sublimated into restlessness - into a love affair with technological innovation and the dynamic qualities of science and capitalism (information/digital/genetic/green/etc. revolutions), an infatuation with unprecedented historical "events" and "turning-point" crises, the idea of transforming the world (by military or economic, if not political, means), the advertising

of every new product as something that forever alters the way we see and do things, and so forth. In democracy, every day is depicted as the day everything changed, a revolutionary new beginning or departure to new worlds.

At the same time, Lefort's work represents an implicit confirmation of Tocqueville's prediction that we will come to see democratic society, precisely in its openness, as natural - providentially given and inevitable. Through Lefort's writings a self-subverting quality of openness becomes apparent: the fact/value of openness itself comes to stand as unquestioned orthodoxy, even "ontological." In one sense, as the postmodernist followers of Lefort claim, the conventional order is opened to question (no longer received as ordained by God, for example). In another sense the conventions of the democratic regime seem as much inscribed in the revolutionary openness of modern nature - that is, in the inescapable but unpredictable and open-ended flow of historical time - as aristocratic conventions seemed inscribed in the immutable hierarchy of Nature. In society as in nature, democratic openness is decreed by the unruly rule of history - not as the end of History but by history's endlessness. Democratization is as natural as change.

In the final chapter I take up Wolin's theory of democracy as fleeting but transgressive, "fugitive" moments in history - the revolutionary practice of politics most in accord with the revolutionary "dissolution of the markers of certainty." Another prominent interpreter of Tocqueville, Wolin is led by his commitment to democratic openness to what I describe as an emergency power or executive (as opposed to a legislative) notion of democracy. Here, the unity and energy required for genuine democratic action can only be a short-lived response to crisis. Popular power is catalyzed

by the experience of popular powerlessness. Political association coheres not via argument, but only in opposition to collective oppression and suffering - the solidarity of a transient community of victims. Yet, precisely because it is so-limited in time, democratic action always maintains its unlimited potential for radically creative beginnings and disruptive endings - it is never economized, constitutionalized, rationalized, systematized, organized, or rendered the property of elites. Such a politics of the extraordinary is never compromised or domesticated, always maintaining its youthful integrity and vitality.

I argue that the radical idealism and cynicism at the center of Wolin's theory leaves little room for the routine practice of democratic politics. Fugitive democracy is exceptional: an exception to the ordinary rules (of economics), and of exceptionally pure (even otherworldly) quality. All that falls short of this ideal is categorized as co-opted and inauthentic "managed democracy." Voting, for instance, seems more a betrayal than an integral element of democracy. Participation in the extant political system renders one complicit in the production and projection of anti-democratic state power. There is the heroic "demos," the manipulated-into-collaboration "electorate," and nothing in between.

I conclude that there is a certain sort of silence inherent in democratic society. Democracy is duly celebrated as the social form that allows nearly unlimited freedom of expression and breaks down most every barrier to communication. But what sort of expression is experienced as meaningful within the democratic regime? Which avenues of communication become predominant, and which are left unused?

Democratic society, I have suggested, is largely principled upon the freedom of openness - the freedom that becomes imaginable only after the revolutionary collapse of

hierarchy and advent of equality. This freedom takes shape as the striving for mastery over and flight from others and the world. In the company of equals, we compete in the anti-paternalistic free-market, or we relax in the intimacy of our “community” (our fatherless-family, as it were).

For all of their polar oppositions, what competition and communion as modes of human association have in common is that they are unspoken, having no need of words as liaisons. More specifically, these relationships take shape below or above the level of language deployed in argument, persuasion, and judgment. In the market’s civil struggle for power and “competitive advantage,” arguments might be useful as a strategy for success via sales-pitch manipulation and the masking of our interests, or a useless waste of time we cannot risk in a world where “money talks.” Within the self-regulating system of market “forces” and “mechanisms,” judgment is reduced to calculation; we respond to “incentives” rather than persuasion. At the other end of the spectrum, in the realm of familial intimacy, arguments signify only the sad divorce between us and our aspiration to union free of the need for mediation. Arguing means we are not “at one with,” and the exercise of judgment means we cannot be “at home with.” We might express (confess) our inner authentic selves so as to be recognized (to “let someone in”), but ultimately the connection is to be deeper than any public presentation allows, in the reflex of compassion toward those like us, in our biological or national blood-bond, or in the “chemistry” between us.

Whether we believe ourselves stuck in a world wholly determined by the economics of power (wherein the distinction between force and persuasion collapses), or to live in a world potentially free of power and authority (wherein persuasion and

judgment have no standing), argument as a mode of communication and of expression is devalued. The only things that seem impossible in a world of infinite possibility are good faith arguments and rightful persuasion. Insofar as arguing about how we can and ought to live together is the activity *par excellence* of the citizen, the social state of openness thus subverts the very notion of citizenship. The democratic way of life does not tend toward dissociation, anarchy, fragmentation, or “atomistic individualism” (quite the opposite, in many ways), but it does dissolve the political element of human association. Living before and beyond politics, the coordination of how we are to live together is left to other forces, whether sub or super humanistic.

NOTES

Introduction: Democracy as Self Subverting

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² Despite some optimistic predictions, the recent election of Barack Obama to the presidency has thus far not significantly altered these perceptions. A September of 2009 Gallup Poll finds: "Trust in the 'men and women in political life in this country who either hold or are running for public office' has dropped to an all-time low of 49% this year At points in the 1970s, about two-thirds of Americans reported having a great deal or fair amount of trust in the men and women in politics, and this had never been below the majority level until now." In another 2009 Gallup Poll, "dissatisfaction with government" came in second only to "healthcare" as "the most important (non-economic) problem facing this country today." Down from the peak of 91% in October of 2008 but continuing its decades long upward trend, around 70% consider themselves "dissatisfied" with "the way things are going in the United States at this time." At 51%, President Obama's own approval rating is the lowest of any president in the past half-century at this point of his presidency. See, respectively:

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/122897/Americans-Trust-Legislative-Branch-Record-Low.aspx>;

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1675/Most-Important-Problem.aspx>;

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1669/General-Mood-Country.aspx>;

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/116479/Barack-Obama-Presidential-Job-Approval.aspx>.

³ The following are just a few examples of this truly inescapable strategy of persuasion. The theme is similar in most instances: these are times of crisis, and the common good necessitates immediate action above the petty obstructionism of arguing (and partisan self-interest disguised as arguments); politicians, like generals with no "experience of the front," are clueless and out of touch. In February of 2009, for example, former Secretary of Labor and current UC Berkeley professor Robert Reich dismissed Senate Republican's opposition to President Obama's proposed stimulus package as "Playing Politics When the Economy Burns." President Obama expressed a similarly low view of politics, saying of health care reform: "This shouldn't be a political issue, this is an issue for the American people." In September of the same year, USA.com reported: "Rep. Joe Wilson, who faces a disciplinary vote in the House today for yelling 'You lie' at President Obama last week, posted a Twitvid in which he says the Democrats are 'playing politics' and should get back to health care." An "open forum" letter in *The Salt Lake Tribune* adds: "So Sen. Orrin Hatch accuses Democrats of playing politics with health care reform ... Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. As a Republican, I am disgusted with how my party has played politics with this vital issue." Of course, this language isn't reserved for the debate, such as it is, surrounding health care reform. In September of 2009, Fox News personality Glenn Beck demanded that Democrats "Stop Playing Politics; Fight to Win in Afghanistan." In the same month, Jena Baker McNeill of the Heritage Foundation made her case by saying "Congress should stop playing politics with E-Verify." Again in September, San Francisco Assemblywoman Fiona Ma rejected a bill that proposed early prisoner release as a cost saving measure by asserting: "We should

not play politics with public safety." In August of 2009, an editorial in *Nature* called for the US House of Representatives to "Stop playing politics with the peer-review process" by ending funding for three NIH studies looking at substance abuse and HIV risk behavior. In May of 2009, Missouri Senator Kit Bond (R) claimed the Obama administration was "playing politics" with the selective release of information regarding the interrogation of terrorist detainees: "It's really distressing to see politics being played like this." In 2008, *The Boston Globe* accused vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin of "Playing politics with family values." *The Washington Post* reported in 2004 that "Sen. John Kerry accused the president of 'sacrificing science for ideology and playing politics with people who need cures'" And again in September of 2009, the mayor of Crown Point, Indiana accused the sheriff of "playing political games" with the pot bust of a precinct official allied with the mayor. See, respectively:

<http://robertreich.blogspot.com/2009/02/senate-republicans-and-stimulus-playing.html>;

http://www.politico.com/blogs/glennthrush/0809/Obama_GOP_leaders_making_political_calculation.html;

<http://blogs.usatoday.com/onpolitics/2009/09/rep-wilson-dems-playing-politics.html>;

http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/ci_13438427;

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,555200,00.html>;

<http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2622.cfm>;

http://www.sfbg.com/blogs/politics/2009/09/prison_report_playing_politics.html;

<http://blogs.usatoday.com/onpolitics/2009/09/rep-wilson-dems-playing-politics.html>;

http://www.newsmax.com/headlines/kit_bond_cia_torture/2009/05/13/214095.html;

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/09/07/playing_politics_with_family_values;

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articSen. John Kerry accused the president of "sacrificing science for ideology and playing politics with people who need cures,"les/A16510-2004Oct7.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articSen. John Kerry accused the president of 'sacrificing science for ideology and playing politics with people who need cures,);

<http://www.post-trib.com/news/1789027,McDermott-924.article>.

⁴ Apparently the silly season isn't confined to electoral moments any longer. The most recent national instance comes from presidential spokesman Robert Gibbs, regarding the criticism of President Obama's plan to deliver a televised back-to-school speech to the nation's students: "I think we've reached a little bit of the silly season when the president of the United States can't tell kids in school to study hard and stay in school." See: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/04/gibbs-furor-over-school-speech-silly-season>.

⁵ Again taking the debate over health care reform as our example, the following passage from an editorial in *The Colorado Springs Gazette* nicely captures the view of politics, both national and local, sunken to the level of school-yard antics: "The health care debate has regrettably, tragically sunk into the painful Washington routine of partisan sniping, irresponsible scare tactics and name calling by politicians on both sides of the aisle. Inject a record sum of advertising and orchestrated demonstrations from competing interest groups and you get volatile town hall meetings that deteriorate into meaningless shouting matches. ... This is that singular moment in history when Congress must lead on the real issues and not lock down in party ideology and politics as usual." And its apparently not too soon to declare the failure of the 2008 presidential election in

delivering the hoped for transcendence of ordinary politics. As David Ignatius writes: "For all the legislative commotion surrounding the economic crisis, we are still living in the equivalent of 'the phony war' of 1939 and 1940. War has been declared on the Great Recession, but it's basically politics as usual. The bickering and mismanagement that helped create the crisis are continuing, even though we elected a president who promised a new start." See, respectively:

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4191/is_20090915/ai_n35671200/;](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4191/is_20090915/ai_n35671200/)

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/03/stuck_in_phony_war_rut.html.

⁶ Karl Rove formulated the new identity politics of "core convictions" perfectly in his advice to Republican candidates during the 2008 primary campaign: "Say in authentic terms what you believe. The GOP nominee must highlight his core convictions to help people understand who he is and to set up a natural contrast with (Hillary) Clinton, both on style and substance. ... The American people want their president to be authentic. And against a Democrat who calculates almost everything, including her accent and laugh, being seen as someone who says what he believes in a direct way will help." See: <http://www.theleftcoaster.com/archives/011367.php>.

⁷ In the wake of the devastatingly effective "attack ad" of the 2004 general election featuring John Kerry windsurfing - with the tag-line: "John Kerry. Whichever way the wind blows." - many described the 2008 campaign as a "flip-flop war." Listing the "waffling" accusations aimed at both Barack Obama and John McCain, *Newsweek* summed: "So it has already come to this. At the end of its first month, the great and noble general-election campaign of 2008 has been defined by a single question: who is the biggest flip-flopper? ... True believers in both men are glum: if Mr. Maverick and Mr. New Politics won't stick to their principles, who on earth will?" The story continues: "Too many candidates have offered conversion narratives that track too perfectly with the course of political expediency. The nation has lost its faith." As I shall return to later, this framing dichotomy of the economic and the religious - "expediency" versus "conversion narratives" and "faith" - is telling. Available at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/143864>.

⁸ In August of 2007, Gallup found: "Congress' approval rating was 18% -- matching the lowest Gallup has measured since it first asked the question in 1974. To gain more insight as to why Americans are so displeased with Congress ... (a) Gallup Panel survey asked Americans to explain in their own words why they hold the view they do about Congress. ... The poll results make clear that Americans who disapprove of the job Congress is doing are frustrated with perceived inaction There is also a widely held perception that there is too much bickering and party politics in Congress. The relatively small proportion of Americans who approve of Congress are largely giving them credit for trying, even while acknowledging they are not accomplishing much. ... All told, 67% of those who disapprove of Congress mention some type of congressional inaction as a reason why they disapprove of Congress. That translates into 48% of all Americans who disapprove of Congress for perceived inaction." In January of 2008, a Gallup Poll found similarly that 80% of those surveyed thought it either a "crisis" or "major problem" that the government had failed "to solve the major challenges facing the country in the last few years." The same poll found that 82% thought "powerful special interests having too

much control over what the government does" constituted either a crisis or a major problem. Available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/28600/Perceived-Inaction-Largely-Behind-Low-Ratings-Congress.aspx>;
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/27286/Government.aspx#2>.

⁹ "The most striking feature of the contemporary public realm is how uniformly the attitudes of manipulation and opportunism characterize all who enter it. ... By universally taking up an exploitative, instrumental, and fundamentally strategic approach to politics and political action, we have rendered the public sphere an unfit place for human habitation." Dana Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 5-6.

¹⁰ On "conceptual metaphor" and "framing rhetoric" see, respectively, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think, 2nd edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹¹ The 2009 "Effie Award" winning IBM add is available at <http://www.effie.org/winners/showcase/2009/3758>.

¹² For an illuminating exploration of western political thought's tradition of anti-rhetorical rhetoric, see Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Garsten traces the attack upon the classical-humanist tradition of rhetoric to the sixteenth century's "crisis of confidence about citizens' capacity to exercise practical judgment in public deliberations." In reaction to the discord caused by "the dogmatism of private judgment as it displayed itself in the Puritan rhetoric of conscience," Hobbes, for instance, formulated a "rhetoric of representation" that would persuade "citizens to distance themselves from their private judgment and to judge from a sovereign, unitary, public standpoint." In different ways, Garsten argues, Rousseau and Kant followed suit in offering a "rhetoric against rhetoric" - a sort of argument to end all arguments, 4, 10-11.

¹³ Alan Blinder puts this view succinctly: "the real source of the current estrangement between Americans and their politicians is the feeling that ... elected officials are playing games rather than solving politics." Alan S. Blinder, "Is Government Too Political?," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997), 115-126.

¹⁴ As should be apparent already, my approach to the study of political cynicism differs from most in that I draw upon patterns of speech more so than patterns of behavior to understand the beliefs that orient prevailing attitudes and opinions. In other words, the primary artifact analyzed in this work is our political rhetorical culture rather than the more familiar measurements of voting behavior, citizen compliance, the indices of social capital and political trust and confidence, and so on. The contours of this rhetorical culture, I shall suggest, are more telling of precisely how, why, and when we engage in and disengage from politics. Democracy is in large measure about speaking, and so I attend to what is said. For the most comprehensive compilation of data regarding political participation and alienation, see John Paul Robinson, Philip S. Shaver, and Lawrence S. Wrightsman, eds., *Measures of Political Attitudes* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999). For the finest comprehensive study, see Robert D. Putnam and Susan J. Pharr, eds., *Disaffected Democracies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ On the weakness in America and beyond of the link between levels of "trust in" or "satisfaction with" government and events and conditions in general, and economic conditions in particular, see, for instance, Robert D. Putnam and Susan J. Pharr, eds., *Disaffected Democracies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapters 1, 2, 8, 9; and Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Dalton concludes that rising expectations of government, rather than perceived poor performance of government or political scandals, goes furthest in explaining the ongoing collapse of support for political institutions.

¹⁶ For the classic account of "rational ignorance," see Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1957).

¹⁷ Bruce Ackerman, for instance, advances the first line of reasoning in what he describes as the Madisonian project of "economizing virtue" by means of a constitutional system designed to ordinarily make only minimal demands of people's attention and public spiritedness. Sheldon Wolin has been over the past half century perhaps the leading theorist of the second line of reasoning. Where Ackerman sees the economization of virtue, Wolin (in a view deeply resonant with Madison's anti-federalist opponents) sees "managed democracy" - a rationalized politics so inegalitarian and distant as to render people's attention and public spiritedness irrelevant. **Ackerman and Wolin reference**

¹⁸ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-2. For works that reach similar empirical conclusions, see Thomas Cronin, *Direct Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Morris P. Fiorina, "The Dark Side of Civic Engagement," *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1999). Jane Mansbridge's classic study of local, participatory democracy in the context of even minimal diversity can be read as in line with this finding. Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

¹⁹ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 130. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write that indicators of political cynicism - trust, confidence, perceptions of being played for a sucker, and so on - rise and fall independently for the most part of both "policy-outcomes" (whether the economy is prospering, for instance) and "policy-outputs" (whether government decisions are seen to correspond with one's own preferences and ideology), 62-65.

²⁰ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85.

²¹ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44.

²² Hibbing and Theiss-Morse continue, "People are not at all certain that the 'country would be better off if the American people rather than politicians decided important political matters.' In fact, just as many people disagree with this statement as agree. ... People themselves believe that people aren't very bright, ... they are selfish, ... and they

don't want to be informed." John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126-127. Teaching and talking to students at Harvard, the University of Pittsburgh, and Yale over the past few years, my own observations resonate with this view: students declare something bordering on disdain for the intellectual and moral virtues of "the average American," and even in the political science programs of these elite institutions students generally express a real lack of confidence regarding their own capabilities.

²³ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156, 9. Invoking Rousseau, they write that the existence of a "general will" remains "a popular myth among both academics and the populace," 141.

²⁴ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7, 33.

²⁵ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 135-137. Even when asked whether they "believed 'officials should debate more because they are too likely to rush into action without discussing all sides'," 43 percent still viewed debate unfavorably.

²⁶ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

²⁷ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 157.

²⁸ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85-86.

²⁹ Hibbing and Theiss-Morse report that "the people would most prefer decisions to be made by what we call empathetic, non-self-interested decision makers. Elites are not what the people fear; self-serving elites are." John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86.

³⁰ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 137-143.

³¹ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9.

³² John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 143.

³³ A June, 2009 Gallup poll finds that, among a "list of institutions in American society," "the military" receives by far the highest grade, with 82% of those polled expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence. "Small business" comes in second at 67% (interestingly "big business" comes in last with only 16%). While "the police" receives

the third highest vote of confidence (59%), "the criminal justice system" enters in at 28%. Other "systems" ("the public school system," "the medical system") along with "banks," the media, and "organized labor" - join Congress below 25%. The Court comes in at 67%. See: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx>.

³⁴ That people apparently have such a low opinion of themselves as citizens calls into question the explanation of American's alienation from politics put forward most notably by E.J. Dionne and Morris Fiorina. Their respective analyses point to the systematic disconnect between a pragmatic electorate and partisan elites who, in their ideological extremism, manufacture a rhetoric "false choices" or "culture war polarization" misrepresentative of the centrist positions of the electorate and resistant to common sense solutions. Even granting the problematic claim that the electorate holds definable positions, which can then be classified as centrist or not, this characterization goes astray insofar as it implies either that people desire a greater role in government or that people believe government would work better if it better represented "average Americans." The average American has little respect for the political capacities, whether intellectual or moral, of the average American. We might wonder, in turn, if this helps explain why in our democracy the government that responds to - or is even caught listening to - "public opinion" is derided as feckless, pandering, and even without principles. Whether in fact centrist and pragmatic or not, the electorate would seem to not want itself represented. E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991). Morris P. Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).

³⁵ In an exemplary iterations of this claim, we hear: "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." Gordon Bigelow, "Let There be Markets: The Evangelical Roots of Economics," *Harper's Magazine* 310, no. 1860 (2005): 33.

³⁶ *Measuring Up 2006: The National Report Card on Higher Education* (a report commissioned by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education) invokes a looming crisis in American higher education, demonstrated by lagging "performance" and "falling rankings" relative to other countries, in calling for a national "mobilization" to meet the demands of a world being reshaped by globalization. The report's foreword puts the case thusly: "Other nations' gains in college participation and degree attainment reflect their recent recognition of the enormous advantages that a college-educated population represents in the context of a knowledge-based economy and growing global competition. ... We can and must mobilize our nation, our states, and our colleges for success in this external competition—as we did in the mid-20th century when the G.I.'s returned from Europe and Asia, and when the baby boomers came of college age. ... The current level of performance will fall short in a world being reshaped by the knowledge-based global economy." Available at <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Measuring%20Up%202006.pdf>.

³⁷ The critique of capitalism's totalizing tendencies has, of course, a very long lineage on both the left and the right. For one recent example available at most any bookstore see Benjamin R. Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006).

³⁸ Roger Rosenblatt identifies the following as the central trend of American life over the past quarter-century: "Now, 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;" But is this accurate? Do we "proudly" "judge" books and movies by how much money they make? Or do we, in fact, just assume that bestsellers and "the latest Hollywood blockbusters" are garbage - "guilty pleasures" we shamefacedly enjoy? Roger Rosenblatt, *The Newshour*, Originally Aired: July 10, 2006 (available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec06/rosenblatt_07-10.html).

³⁹ Cappella and Jamieson define political cynicism as "mistrust generalized from particular leaders or political groups to the political process as a whole – a process perceived to corrupt the persons who participate in it and that draws corrupt persons as participants." As significant as political and social *trust*, along with *confidence* in the fidelity and capacity of political institutions and actors and *satisfaction* with the performance of government, surely are in thinking about political cynicism, my work addresses something a bit different: the perceived absurdity of politics that seems to *precede* judgments of trust, confidence, and satisfaction. Thus to the fine definition above I would add the sense of contempt, disrespect, alienation, or disaffection generalized all the way to the practice of democratic politics *as such*. In turn, we might expect the disposition of cynicism to generate very high levels of trust in particular leaders, groups, or institutions acting *in* politics but perceived as not being *of* politics - as somehow not political in nature. Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (Oxford University Press, 1997) 166.

⁴⁰ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "The Interaction between Democracy and Development" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2002), 10 (available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001282/128283e.pdf>).

⁴¹ Thus far I have written that an anti-political prejudice is inscribed in democratic society, and so is a constant that cannot be fully explained by variable circumstances and contingent events. This is not to suggest that circumstances and events are irrelevant. Rather, fluctuations in the daily degree of our contempt for politics caused by the latest scandals, elections, wars, and so forth take shape within a more general climate of political cynicism. At the same time, polling data clearly demonstrates that cynicism has increased significantly over the past half century. In what follows, and particularly in the third chapter, I develop a "punctuated equilibrium" analysis of this change. Political cynicism is a constant of democratic society, but features of democratic society - including the predominant representations of freedom and equality - shift over time. In its early confrontations with aristocracy, democracy was allied with liberalism in defense of political equality and self-government. In its later confrontations with slavery, democracy was allied with capitalism in defense of competition and the right of contract (radicalizing liberal democracy's antipathy toward paternalism). In its more recent confrontation with fascism and totalitarianism, democracy stands for the freedom of

openness (an early formulation of the new order/openness dichotomy being Karl Popper's *Open Society*). In each phase the contempt of politics and government increases in degree and shifts in type, to where today's contempt is reflexive and rooted in the experience of absurdity.

⁴² See any of the wildly popular writings of Thomas L. Friedman for examples. A flat world is one sense of an open world.

⁴³ Benjamin R. Barber, *Con\$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 27.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, Trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁴⁵ Sanford Levinson offers one striking formulation of the intertwined collapse of hierarchy and conventionality: "The 'death of constitutionalism' may be the central event of our time, just as the 'death of God, was for the past century (and for much the same reason)." Sanford Levinson, *Constitutional Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 52.

⁴⁶ For a representative expression of this sort of contempt, see Joe Klein's tellingly titled *Politics Lost: How American Democracy Was Trivialized by People Who Think You're Stupid* (New York: Doubleday, 2006). Klein (author of *Primary Colors* and *Time* magazine columnist) regrets the loss of a politics that was fun - spontaneous and authentic - and the rise of the "pollster-consultant industrial complex" of "political handlers" that churns out choreographed campaigns and prefabricated candidates. Absent both reason and passion, the highest virtue of this well-managed politics is predictability.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Bruce Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991); *Robert A. Dahl, How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁴⁸ The article recounting Edwards's comments, which came during a Seattle convention on Internet technologies in 2006, continues: "Several in the audience stressed the importance of authenticity in politics, and the potential for blogs and other technology to give Americans a more accurate view of campaigns and the legislative process by getting closer to what's really going on. ... But one ... attendee pointed out that the human voice so fundamental to blogs contrasts with the practiced messages delivered by many politicians." Available at

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/business/276108_gnomedex01.html.

⁴⁹ The historical instantiation of this logic is described by James Miller in his classic account of how the participatory democracy of the New Left evolved into the antipolitics of the counterculture. James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987).

⁵⁰ For his most recent detailed formulation of this idea, see Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 601-606.

⁵¹ Sheldon S. Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy," in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, eds. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach, and Josiah Ober (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 29, 53-4.

⁵² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Trans. Arthur Gold Hammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 272.

⁵³ Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006), 692.

⁵⁴ Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006), 692.