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**DEMOCRACY WITHOUT POLITICS**

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Steven Bilakovics

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**Democracy  
without  
Politics**

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*For Timery and Jason*

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*That which we can find words for is something already dead in our hearts; there is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking.*

—Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

*To understand the specificity of the present situation, one ought to reconstitute its genesis, so that we understand that our democracy seeks to institute a political and thus human order that is free of all “incorporation” . . . , a political and human order that is purely “spiritual.” This idea conflicts with appearances: doesn’t our society give a large place to the body and hardly any place to the soul? In reality, our society is the one in Western history that most systematically reduces the role of the body.*

—Pierre Manent, *A World beyond Politics?*

*It could be said that people are losing the “will” to act socially, or that they are losing the “desire.” These words as pure psychological states mislead because they do not explain how a whole society could lose its will together, or change its desires. They further mislead in suggesting a therapeutic solution, to shake people out of this self-absorption—as if the environment which has eroded their social will and transformed their desire might suddenly welcome changed individuals with open arms.*

—Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*

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# Introduction

## *Democracy as Self-Subverting*

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

—Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

### *Playing Politics*

“Politics” has probably always been something of a dirty word. In America today it seems exclusively and irretrievably so. Polling data over the past half century 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 deterioration of “confidence” in political institutions and processes (even as opinions on a wide array of other issues have remained remarkably static).<sup>1</sup> When one considers this trend in conjunction with the long-term decline in political participation, from voting rates on out, a general contempt of 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 evidence that America is on the wrong track.<sup>2</sup>

More revealing even than the statistical representation of Americans’ low opinion of politics is the rhetorical culture within which today’s politics takes shape. Listening to the language that citizens, politicians, and journalists use to persuade one another, we begin to understand the particular mode of Americans’ contempt of politics; beyond the fact that Americans hate politics, an analysis of our political rhetoric helps us di-

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agnose precisely how and why Americans hate politics. Consider what the following phrases—and their pervasiveness—tell us about the specific character of Americans' attitudes and beliefs regarding politics. We hear political debate shot through with the bad-faith accusation of “playing politics.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> And outside the electoral moment, “politics as usual” is cast as inane, at once a childish game divorced from reality and a fraud wherein opportunistic maneuvers are (barely) disguised as reasoned arguments.<sup>5</sup> The alternative intentions of “playing politics”—of speaking in a political context—can only be to manipulate or to pander. Similarly, it seems unimaginable not only that political partisanship and disagreement can be anything but “petty” and “bickering” but also that political moderation and compromise represent anything but an unprincipled lack of “core conviction.”<sup>6</sup> The alternatives are the calculated obstructionism of “playing the blame game” and the calculated expediency of “flip-flopping.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Surveying this no-way-out rhetorical landscape, we might well conclude that politics, far from a means of addressing collective problems and purposes or a mode of exercising our freedom, has become something of a stage for us at our worst. Today, “political” and “cynical” seem to be synonymous.

Articulated in such language, contemporary political disenchantment apparently follows from something other than rational apathy and goes beyond the sense that political actors and institutions are usually corrupt. Rather, the practice of politics seems to be perceived 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-game frames a strikingly con-

sistent rhetorical strategy of persuasion, evident in the examples above.<sup>9</sup> One begins by invoking crisis or warlike conditions or by asserting some truth obvious to plain common sense or by asserting the obviousness of crisis. In any case, it's 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 to "get something done" we must set aside or rise above words: "Stop Talking; Start Doing," as one recent advertising campaign puts it; "Rhetoric or Real?" as a common CNN sidebar asks).<sup>10</sup> In this sense, persuasion within the rhetorical culture of "playing politics" takes effect as an attack upon rhetoric—in a sort of performative contradiction, words are used to reject the need or efficacy of words.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, insofar as the politics of democracy is premised upon the possibility of replacing force with persuasion—insofar as argument serves as the very medium of democratic politics—the rhetoric of "playing politics" takes effect as an antipolitical rhetoric. To be sure, politics may proceed in economic terms, in which language is used to signal self-interest and argument is reduced to bargaining. 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 political position is taken as either a "fiddling" waste of time in the face of emergency (when persuasion must give way to the force of necessity) or as just the public mask of private self-interest (when service to the public good is a dire necessity), we are left with a politics of negotiation in times of necessity—drastic times met by trifling and petty measures. Reduced to this, the democratic mode of politics cannot but seem out of place, incongruous with experience and detached from pressing reality.<sup>12</sup>

Today's political alienation is thus much more intractable than if apathy or corruption were 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 democratic politics is experienced as nonsense—as quite literally a theater of the absurd, the play where nothing happens? What is to be done when the practice of politics 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 ("battleground states") so as to put a mark in the win col-

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umn for the red or the blue team, with the consequence of nothing much changing? What is to be done when what was once considered the most human of activities becomes 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 dead-end 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 assumed to conceal rather than convey meaning? How can we reform our politics when such uncritical cynicism undermines reflection, argument, and action? What is to be done when, as one recent account puts it, the world of politics appears an “unfit place for human habitation”?<sup>13</sup> One conclusion seems warranted already: political reformation (assuming these terms are not mutually exclusive) must come from outside democratic politics.<sup>14</sup>

### *Why Is Democratic Politics So Unpopular? Market Structures and Liberal Systems*

Given the long-term nature of the phenomenon, Americans’ growing distaste for politics cannot be explained exclusively in terms of recent events (Vietnam, Watergate), prevailing conditions associated with 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 consolidated ownership and multiplied venues).<sup>15</sup> 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, our analysis of political disaffection, to be of sufficient scope, must consider more sustained conditions, relatively long-standing 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.” The reasoning here generally follows one of two paths. First, in our modern, middle-class, commercial republic, people are otherwise occupied by matters both noble and base and so are “rationally ignorant”

of and uninterested in a complex political process that daily effects them little; the consumer-citizen chooses to spend finite resources elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> In turn, the ordinary running of government is intentionally (and perhaps fortunately) entrusted to institutional mechanisms, elected representatives, and technocratic “experts.” Second, consumed by the need to make a living and with their political power institutionally channeled into the merely symbolic act of voting in occasional elections, citizens are reduced to spectators of a distant and byzantine 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 in our pay-to-play political system, the people’s putative authority amounts to sound without fury. “Democracy” has been 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 described here, 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.<sup>17</sup>

Neither of these familiar views is wholly convincing, though. The first (wherein the liberal democratic political system makes possible the semipublic governance of an apolitical populace) predicts political apathy but not the contempt so widely and vocally expressed today. While surely rationally disengaged from politics, the majority describes itself less as apolitical than as antipolitical. 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) makes perfect sense of this contempt. But it apparently misrepresents the expressed desires of the majority of Americans. Recent research calls into question the extent to which people want or would affirm their own increased participation in democratic politics. 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, “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

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assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making process.”<sup>18</sup> 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 sours us on the whole endeavor. Indeed, they find 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.<sup>19</sup> Along deeply Tocquevillian lines, as we shall see, people appear willing, even eager, to embrace political powerlessness, but resent any abuse (or perhaps even sign) of privilege—in this case, those in power taking advantage of their privileged position to take advantage of us.<sup>20</sup> And it is this prospect that compels citizens to intervene in the political process.

Even as people assume selfishness in their elected officials and corruption in their governing institutions, though, they apparently don’t want to “return power to the people.” The people are not exactly populists; they seek “to weaken the power of institutions but not strengthen the power of ordinary people.”<sup>21</sup> The authors identify three primary reasons why people turn down political power. First, 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 neither do we trust ourselves as citizens. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write, “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.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, people demonstrate an abiding aversion to the very stuff of democratic politics—to addressing common issues, goals, and conflicts by means of arguing together. Two primary explanations are offered. First, the majority believes that Americans are basically unified rather than factious, thinking that “Americans generally agree on overall societal goals” and that “the common good is not debatable.”<sup>23</sup> The common good is a matter of common sense, and so disagreement does not seem reasonable. Conflict becomes a sign that there is something very wrong with us and our government; insofar

as politics is a stage for conflict, it displays us at our worst. Second, and similarly, people think that arguing both should be unnecessary and actually is inefficacious. The majority considers arguing to be “a complete waste of time” and just “bickering” and “pointless conflict.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the public overwhelmingly supported (by 86 percent) the proposition “Elected officials should stop talking and take action.”<sup>25</sup> As useless as it is ugly, the politics of argument is as such rejected; the good citizen of democracy participates, we might say, as conscientious objector.

Weighing against the notion that political cynicism is rooted in the American people’s experience of being institutionally and materially locked out of a distant political system, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse conclude, “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.” Simply, Americans “yearn for ‘the end of politics.’ ” 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 a selfish, rather than other-regarding, manner.” The perceived way out of this dilemma is to place power in the hands of virtue. Today, the relevant virtues are formulated as empathetic selflessness and problem-solving competence. Above the world of self-interested partisanship, people seek in a representative not so much an official responsive to their policy preferences as a part Burkean disinterested trustee of the common good and part Clintonian feeler of their pain. At the same time, given the desire for quiet 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 shared goals is measurable.<sup>26</sup>

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse dub this the politics of “stealth democracy”—“government by autopilot” that renders the processes of politics at once trustworthy and unseen (like a stealth bomber, power operating from on high).<sup>27</sup> In the people’s ideal form of democratic politics, decisions are made “efficiently, objectively, and without commotion or dis-

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agreement” while decision makers display the personable selflessness of empathy and/or the impersonal selflessness of impartiality.<sup>28</sup> 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 of efficacy and selflessness: the Cincinnatus figure who rises above the paradox of republican politics, wherein the pursuit of power 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.<sup>29</sup> And the very realization of this combination would be the seating of power in some perfectly virtuous (empathetic and impartial, efficient and effective) superhuman agency.

Expressing an almost equally low regard for direct democratic participation and popular power as for liberal democratic institutions and procedures, Americans’ aversion to politics runs deep, below the liberal political system, to the practice of democratic politics as such.<sup>30</sup> This picture is complicated, of course, by the possibility that we have been in some way programmed or 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 been led or manipulated or subconsciously reconstructed to imagine human association as at bottom a market and human beings as at bottom bourgeois. 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, inescapable, even

coded into our biology. Moreover, market orders are taken as Natural: endowed as our faith with a sort of religious moral significance.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, politics (along with everything else) is perceived as an essentially economic activity, preconceived in terms of competitive self-interest and judged by the logic of efficiency. On both counts, a robustly democratic politics is reflexively dismissed by the people themselves as unrealistic. Citizens believe themselves lacking not only the time and expertise but also the requisite public-spiritedness to manage democratic politics. Prejudiced against our own political possibilities and capacities, we come to hold that in the modern world we simply cannot afford the luxury of democracy.<sup>32</sup>

There is much to recommend this interpretation. That “education policy” is most 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.<sup>33</sup> 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 to condemn them, never to affirm them as legitimate or aspirational, undermines the analysis of capitalism as effectively “totalizing.”<sup>34</sup> Far from being indoctrinated into an unquestioned capitalist consciousness, people constantly question and regret the costs of capitalism. Every word of praise for the efficiency, prosperity, and freedom following from 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, conspicuous consumption, the rich getting richer, ubiquitous advertising, selling out, Hollywood vanity, inauthenticity, shallowness, greed.<sup>35</sup> If Americans are materialistic consumers, it would seem that they are self-loathing materialistic consumers. American culture seems largely composed of the criticism of what that culture is perceived to be.

The widespread view that we exist blindly invested in the one-dimensional shadows of consumer culture undermines itself: were we fully socialized into the cave, we would not know it, much less be prone to decry it. More than any reality the concept 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 that we do passionately affirm. Second, as a reductive exaggeration of elements of society that are prevalent, the notion of a “consumer society” preys upon our insecurities as precisely the type of corruption of human association we fear possible, likely, even inevitable. 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 thus 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 and challenging, populated by herds of last men or cheerful robots. Similarly, we *elevate* greed by making the effort to philosophize it as good (the spur to individual striving, and so to collective prosperity and human progress) even as we anxiously await the dissolution of society into a base and degrading greediness. We love opportunity and hate opportunism. Any plausible interpretation of our social form must account for this dualism and so must look toward the multidimensionality of the wider frame of reference by which we judge the market elements of our society.<sup>36</sup>

*The Antipolitics of Democratic Openness: Cynicism and Idealism*

In response to the shortcomings of the views outlined above, my argument proceeds in two parts. First, insofar as one can make 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 manner of contempt for politics so widespread today, the reflexive cynicism that we might juxtapose to reflective skepticism and a vigilant distrust of those in power.<sup>37</sup> Building 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, providential order of human association—and that both the liberal democratic form of government and the direct democratic practice of politics are devalued within democratic society. There is an *antipolitical prejudice* inscribed in the democratic way of imagining, understanding, and evaluating the world.

My analysis of the sources and modes of contemporary political cynicism focuses on what we might call “democratic openness.”<sup>38</sup> Modern democratic society, I shall argue, is in large part principled upon openness—that is, upon the type of freedom that comes to the fore in the context of democratic equality. This is the freedom that takes center stage with the democratic revolution’s destruction of hierarchy as the ordering principle of nature, society, and self. It is the freedom of open-ended, revolutionary possibility—of what Tocqueville captures in the paradox of “indefinite perfectibility.”

As I elaborate below, by its very nature the principle of openness is as expansive in its legitimacy as it is impossible to put into form and practice. More accurately, the authority of openness as our standard of judgment of goodness, truth, and beauty is premised precisely upon its being irreducible to particularity—to its being made manifest in the here and now of the conventional world. The result is a regime that takes shape via schism between the world we imagine possible, even inevitable, and the world we experience as real, even inescapable. Framed by the freedom of openness, by the impossible promise of possibility without limits, democratic society harbors a tendency toward idealism as extreme as its concomitant tendency toward cynicism.

How does this democratic *duality* of idealism and cynicism manifest itself? Most obviously, in times of openness all barriers to progress—to the opening of society and self—are taken as contingent and arbitrary. As such, their persistence is experienced as equal parts inexplicable, inescapable, and intolerable. For instance, we demand of ourselves the beautiful impossibility of judging others solely upon their abstract moral and spiritual qualities rather than upon physical appearance or social status, and we assess our lingering closed-mindedness severely, as indicative of something deeply wrong with the present—a sad sign of “just the way the world works.”<sup>39</sup> As Tocqueville explains, progress toward an ideal might well be experienced as regression when met by the promise of open-ended perfectibility, and unchecked revolutionary ambition might easily turn into unchecked resignation to reality’s intransigence. A second manifestation of the cynicism/idealism duality follows in that the very condition that enables us to envision indefinite perfectibility also enables us to foresee indefinite imperfectibility. There are two directions to the boundless potentiality of an open world. For instance,

the impending transcendence of fettering materiality and the impending decadence of unfettered materialism—autonomy and licentiousness—seem equally possible. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this duality manifests itself in that any attempt to represent, establish, or institute the essentially indefinite principle of openness can only be met with a sort of buyer's remorse of spent potential, defining and thereby diminishing the authority of openness. The spirit of democracy, as has often been observed, is in the dreaming, as something neither actual nor necessarily apart but rather "always to come." Idealization in times of openness lies not in achieved perfection but in the concept of perfectibility rendered indefinite, not in end or form realized but in open-endedness and transformation as such—in revolution's promise of an always *imminent transcendence*. Just as the purity of religious faith is thought preserved by its transcending conventionality, temporality, materiality, particularity, and the partisan striving for power (whether of church or state), democracy's principle maintains its universal authority by remaining uninvolved with the ways and means of worldly orders and powers. At the same time, democratic faith does not differentiate between this world and the next. Democracy's aspirational norm of openness cannot be represented in conventional form—including those of democracy itself—but nor can it be deferred as a world apart from the here and now. Present as unrealizable possibility, democracy's aspiration remains as sublime as its ordinary practices appear absurd. Relative to the sublime freedom of openness, the experience of freedom that follows from the political practice of democracy—the "political freedom" Tocqueville cherishes perhaps above all—seems mundane and even oxymoronic.

Recognizing this unmediable conjunction of norm and form, and in turn the co-operation of idealism and cynicism, we can account for a second mode of antipolitical rhetoric inscribed in democratic society. The first mode degrades politics to the status of an absurd game and to petty economics. This is the rhetoric of "playing politics" described above. The second mode elevates politics to the status of revolutionary transcendence, whether toward the past or the future, or both. This is the rhetoric of "It's morning again in America" and "We have the power to begin the world over again."<sup>40</sup> In his "Reclaiming the American Dream" election-night acceptance speech, Barack Obama offers an ex-

emplary iteration: “If there is anyone out there who still doubts America is a place where *all things are possible*, who still wonders if the *dream of our founders* is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy—tonight is your answer.”<sup>41</sup> Framed by the characteristic idealism of democratic openness—of limitless possibility and the dream of renewal—we are likely at once uplifted, tempted to dismiss such rhetoric (and perhaps rhetoric as such) as just so much fanciful talk, and moved to view the conventional practice of politics as by comparison just so much meaningless power playing.

Many have recognized, of course, that there is a great gulf between the respect granted our democratic ideals and that which is denied our democratic institutions, and that the promissory language of democracy so far outstrips its actual practices that we may well grow disillusioned and reject democracy altogether. As I have begun to detail, my work aims at diagnosing why and how this situation takes shape. What is it about democracy as a principle of human organization that has enabled it to achieve the status of unquestioned ideal? How is this status maintained despite the fact that democracy’s promises are unkept—indeed, palpably unkeepable? Why do we not lose faith when our faith is not rewarded? Or better, why does our faith seem to deepen right along with our disappointment?<sup>42</sup> I argue that the democratic principle has achieved its status not despite but because it is utterly unrealistic and yet seems an utterly natural—free, informal, authentic—basis of human organization, requiring for its realization only the revolutionary dissolution of present reality’s obstructing artificiality. In turn, the democratic ideal manifests not in opposition to cynicism but precisely as the cynical contempt of the conventional world. Our growing cynicism is not evidence of ideals unmet but of our ideals in effect. Contempt of the here and now is rendered intelligible not as disappointment but as the affirmation of our faith in democracy.<sup>43</sup>

I suggest, then, 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.”<sup>44</sup> Even with such universality ac-

corded democracy, with its status as a sort of moral Esperanto that even its enemies must invoke, not only is popular disdain for political representatives and institutions increasing, but also basic participation in questioning and deciding things in common seems almost nowhere to be found. Everywhere preached but nowhere practiced, democracy is apparently experiencing the best of times and the worst of times. I argue that these two phenomena are intrinsically intertwined. Democracy is not in crisis despite the fact that democratic principles are hegemonic but precisely because democratic principles are hegemonic. By virtue of openness, the democratic principle enjoys a historically unprecedented monopoly of legitimacy even while fostering widespread cynicism regarding the conventional practices 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.<sup>45</sup>

#### *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 American political development) that we live in a democratic third republic, analogous to the *laissez-faire* second republic. Where market competition was once massively affirmed as both a fact of the world in which we live and the principle of a free and rightly ordered society, democratic openness stands today as a similarly unquestionable fact/value. Openness is taken as natural (as we experience it in time, the world is intrinsically contingent, in flux and free flowing, uncertain and unpredictable, subject to revolutionary changes, mysterious and open-ended) and normative (society ought to be similarly free of settled absolutes, open to question and change, vitalized by opportunity and mobility, inclusive and pluralistic, inhabited by open minds and open hearts). Where the contract once served as a general metaphor for social integration amid competition, today communication serves such a function amid openness. Rights are thus conceptualized around, not the freedom of contract, but rather the freedom of self-expression (with its component parts of privacy and recognition). Progress is understood as moving 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 bloom spontaneously the world over, once obstructions of whatever sort are removed. Consider in this context the familiar phrase “democratic spring,” with its attendant assumptions and associations.

While free-market capitalism is still at times affirmed as natural and normative, I argue that it is so affirmed only insofar as it can be portrayed as an aspect 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, it’s apparent that consumerism is itself “branded” and sold in terms of democratic populism.<sup>46</sup> Any “ethos of consumer infantilization,” as Benjamin R. Barber puts it, 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.<sup>47</sup> 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 market 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 central principle of proper social arrangements and relationships, the political element of human association is devalued. Framed by the democratic duality of cynicism and idealism, the belief takes shape that we are at once 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 be-

cause he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.<sup>48</sup> I argue that within democratic society we consider ourselves both unable to participate in *and* in need of nothing from political association. Democratic man does not consider himself a political animal—a citizen who is capable of and who is 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 revolutionary dissolution of hierarchy, the social order is no longer thought to potentially instantiate the natural order (natural law made manifest in positive law, for example, or divinity incorporated through 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 (Aristotelian habituation is re-presented as Freudian repression, for example). 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 are hardly more questioned after the democratic revolution than before (notice the reflexive appeal today of the “all-natural,” “organic,” “green,” and the like). But “natural” comes to mean “spontaneous,” “authentic,” “raw,” “primal,” “pristine,” and so forth. In its openness, nature—conceived in terms of its vital energy rather than as a harmonious order, in the language of power rather than of peace, and of purity rather than of purpose—is precisely that which cannot be domesticated and embodied in conventional form. Nature is dis-encharmed but romanticized; conventionality is, as such, debased.<sup>49</sup>

The democratic revolution consequently launches a 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, intimate relationships beyond the need for mediating institutions, the immediate experience of the events of the world. Most everything meaningful (whether good, true, or beautiful) is thought hidden or distant, before or after our time, above or be-

low the surface of the present world. The revolution in turn gives birth to a constitutive passion for revolution, for the overturn of conventional norms and forms in the liberating event of opening. This passion takes shape in terms of originalism (the present-transcending, revolutionary return to fundamentals, untouched conscience, archaic traditions and principles) 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, the master value of freedom comes to mean being “undomesticated.” More specifically, as we shall see, freedom amounts to *mastery* or *escape*—power over others, or a power-free privacy in which one is either 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. These are what Tocqueville describes as the freedoms of the savage, as opposed to the artfully staged freedom of democratic political association. And it is the worth of such political freedom—wherein power is both moderated and made effective in association with equal others—that freedom-as-openness undermines and overwhelms. Along these lines, Tocqueville identifies the common source of both the restless activity and the flight into passive isolation so characteristic of democratic peoples.

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 and staged, suit-and-tie, teleprompter politics itself becomes mainstream.<sup>50</sup> 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 “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, it is now considered even by many of its advocates less fully democratic, defensible only insofar as regrettably necessary.<sup>51</sup> 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 fake and ridiculous, especially when they try to act authentic.<sup>52</sup>

John Edwards, former U.S. senator from North Carolina and candidate for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, expressed this manner of contempt for mainstream politics exactly: “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.”<sup>53</sup> Speech that seems scripted is as such devalued, on the basis of its scriptedness. Demonstrating informality and intimacy via personal confession is to be the technique of the successful (anti)politician. In a similar vein, “political correctness”—the self-censoring politeness we are forced to cover up with in public, as opposed to the self-expressive and brutal (primitive) honesty of “just telling it like it is”—is the shameful hallmark of our trained and conditioned (domesticated) present. 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 disruptive resistance to domination. Genuine democratic freedom and equality are not about collective self-rule, with its need for stable institutions and settled procedures. Rather, democracy is the unruly action that challenges authority of every sort, even of “the people.” Protest, not self-government, is the heart of democracy, which beats insofar as every decision and closure is subject to open-ended questioning and “transgression.” Sheldon Wolin, today’s leading theorist of radical democracy, thus argues that a vital politics of popular protestant power both can only be and ought to be limited to punctuated moments in time. Authentic democracy is at once regrettably and ideally “fugitive,”—epic and episodic.<sup>54</sup> Fugitive democratic association can only be fleeting, given the economic realities the demos faces; the demos’ activating sense of common cause is produced by the oppression of an enemy (usually impersonal and structural, in Wolin’s account); and genuine democratic action, when it does occur, induces a rupture with the inequities and constraints of routine material reality. The fugitive democratic event, in short, is largely synonymous with revolution.

Attempting to preserve the transgressive, transcendent spirit of the democratic “mode of being” from the rationalizing imperatives of the material realm (where democracy is “domesticated” and “managed” by constitutional formalization and economic systematization), Wolin proposes “accepting the familiar charges that democracy is . . . inclined toward anarchy” and “rational disorganization.”<sup>55</sup>

Fugitive democracy is, then, the ideal politics of democratic openness, of revolutionary openings and the renewal of democratic fundamentals. It is also self-subverting. Democracy as significant protest and resistance to domination requires sustained civic organization, one presumes, but such organization would seem to signify the loss of democratic openness. Once a political *movement* to disrupt authority is perceived as a political *organization*, once it seems more systematic than spontaneous, everyday rather than eruptive, it ceases to be authentically radical. The democratic authority of the grassroots uprising turns into the political power of the “special interest” group. The requirements of political action’s effectiveness and sustainability seem inseparable from a sense of devitalization and freedom’s domestication.<sup>56</sup> What begins as a theorization of participatory power against systemic power ends in retreat from politics and into righteous powerlessness—a democracy too good for politics. Striving for unconstrained power, the demos turns to fugitive escape. In this sense, the radical democratic practice of politics is no less undermined by the commitment to democratic openness than are liberal democratic formulations.

*Arguing Together: 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. It requires, however, thinking outside the boundaries of the norm of openness, beyond the consequent tendency to formulate associative action as enabled by and limited to extraordinary moments of heroic struggle. The idea of democratic politics should be able to accommodate the common action of ordinary people. As for what counts as “the practice of democratic politics,” I take an ecumenical view. Voting, deliberative decision making both in and out of

structured institutional settings, protest in the streets, interest group organization, and community organization: all of these and more are practices wherein people might meet as citizens, think publicly, argue together about common problems and purposes, and exercise 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 flourishing of modern democratic society follow not from a tyrannically overactive majority but from an apolitical or antipolitical 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, if less than transcendent, freedom. This intermediate freedom manifests as acting in the world with equal others rather than as the dream of standing over or being apart from others. It is an effective but limited freedom—effective because limited. As Tocqueville writes, the practice of democratic politics teaches the art of freedom by enabling us to envision being “independent without arrogance and obedient without baseness.”<sup>57</sup> 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*

Much of my project constitutes a sympathetic critique of so-called post-modern, post-structuralist, and agonistic theorizations of radical democracy, such as appear variously 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 both possible in and essential to our social well-being today. However, I question the diagnosis they offer for the causes of the infirmity of, and in turn their civic and institutional prescriptions for, the political practice of democracy.

Wendy Brown, for instance, argues that the central threats to democracy in America are the rationalities she stylizes as neoconservative fundamentalism and neoliberal globalization. Today, the citizen “produced”

within 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 Christianity and self-righteous capitalism, largely to the end of projecting undemocratic state power at home and abroad. The political sphere has been organized in accord with these religious and economic models—the church and the business corporation—as citizens not only concede but actually affirm “de-democratization.” Democratic politics and culture are “hollowed out” by the viral incursion of prophetic and profit motives, and public decision making is ceded to pious adherence to the mystical inerrancy of Bible and Market.<sup>58</sup>

Diagnosing the condition of our democratic politics requires, I suggest, reversing the explanatory arrow here to ask the overlooked Tocquevillian question of how our democratic political 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 expressions of the idea of democratic openness—of the quest for the pre/postconventional, a world before or beyond political, economic, and religious forms. These logics of extremism—of extreme materialism or extreme spiritualism, as it were—proceed from 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 ultimately 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 and intimate, given and spontaneous, a state wherein membership is born into. These are the associations of the preconventional family (the tribe, community, nation, culture), or of postconventional humanity (the global village, global market, universal rights community, World Wide Web). The types of freedom affirmed are those of control and of being uncon-

trolled, whether by oneself or in intimate union with others. Such norms simply cannot find expression in democratic political association, argument, and action. The product, I argue, is not Brown's "undemocratic citizen, . . . who loves and wants neither freedom nor equality, even of a liberal sort," but rather the antipolitical citizen, who loves and wants freedom and equality of a characteristically democratic sort.<sup>59</sup>

### *Plan of the Book*

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. Tocqueville identifies a series of contradictions within the democratic character: those in democracy are at once the most materialistic and the most spiritualistic; the most practical and abstract minded; the most restless and docile; the most prideful and the neediest. I show that for Tocqueville neither side of these extremes is more characteristic of the democratic way of life. Nor are democratic flights of spiritualism, for instance, simply an epiphenomenal reaction to the excesses of a more essential materialism. Rather, the character of democratic society follows from the simultaneous 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 around which democratic society takes shape.

Tocqueville exposes the most significant example of this when he writes of the new norms of elevation and degradation embedded in democratic modernity. With leveling equality comes a stultifying sense of neediness and insignificance, of being lost and adrift in the great gray sea of mass mediocrity. Deprived of examples of aristocratic pride and grandeur, and with the withering of great passions and lofty purposes that accompanies bourgeois materialism and individualism, the inhabitants of democracy fear no less than sinking below the level of humanity, as Tocqueville puts it. But with the presence of equality comes the absence

of hierarchy and hierarchical absolutes, and in this absence arises the thought of freedom-as-openness. The idealizing imagination seizes upon the prospect of being without limits, of infinite revolutionary possibility. Unbound and audacious, democratic peoples dream of no less than rising above the level of humanity. Where the aristocrat commanded, the democrat creates; where the aristocrat stood atop, the democrat rises above. In his individualism, for instance, the “common man” of democracy will demand of himself a sovereign independence and self-sufficiency that is entirely uncommon—indeed, historically unprecedented. And in his materialism, he will gamble all and abandon material well-being for reckless love of risk and the opportunity for indefinite future gain. In one stroke, then, the democratic revolution in the principle of authority stultifies and liberates, introducing radical new notions of perfectibility and imperfectibility into human association.

In the second chapter, also building upon Tocqueville, I turn to the norms of freedom (mastery and escape) and human association (the family and humanity) inscribed in democratic society. In Tocqueville’s account, freedom in aristocratic times meant having a *place* of one’s own to stand in public, and so to be seen, heard, and honored. In democratic times freedom means having the *space* to move about restlessly 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 or station into which one was born. Democratic association too is born into (at least insofar as it is experienced as meaningful), but it is principled upon the egalitarian ties of familial and human resemblance. Along these lines, Tocqueville sums the movement from aristocracy to democracy as the shift from political 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, as if 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 tends to be perceived cynically, as power relations driven by competitive self-interest and strategic calculation (providentially restrained a few degrees short of actual violence by this same self-interested calculation). Competition and intimacy—with their respective currencies of power and love—constitute the poles of democratic society. The market and the family are thought the primary models of human association. As much romantics as we are realists, today's advice holds that we follow our hearts and follow the money. As a mode of human association, politics is conceived of as the blood sport of *realpolitik*—regrettably necessary and inevitably corrupt—insofar as it conforms to the model of market competition. Insofar as politics aspires to the model of familial intimacy, it will be conceived of as utterly natural and meaningful, rendering the everyday practice of politics alien and absurd by comparison.

In the third chapter, I critique Claude Lefort's theory of democratic society 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."<sup>60</sup> The revolutionary beheading of the king constitutes the symbolic demise of the *present father figure*—the visible and audible embodiment of hierarchy—and of the social form organized by the presence of paternal authority. 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; opinion unseats command.

Along these lines, Lefort rightly rejects Tocqueville's prediction that democracy's original revolutionary desire 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 rather from the belief that politics is an inadequate vehicle

for our transformative aspirations (Tocqueville's conclusion is largely correct, but for the wrong reasons). The passion for revolution isn't lost; it is sublimated into restlessness—into a love affair with technological innovation and the dynamic qualities of science and capitalism (information/digital/genetic/green revolutions); an infatuation with the historical "event" of "turning-point" or "game-changing" crisis; the idea of remaking the world ("democratization" 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. In democracy, most every day is depicted as the day everything changed, a revolutionary beginning or departure to new worlds.

At the same time, Lefort's work implicitly confirms Tocqueville's prediction that we will come to see democratic society, precisely in its openness, as natural—providentially given and inevitable. In Lefort's writings, a self-subverting quality of openness becomes apparent: the fact/value of openness itself comes to stand as unquestioned orthodoxy and ontology. In one sense, as many followers of Lefort highlight, the democratic revolution opens the conventional order to interrogation, as no remaining presence can unproblematically represent it in the name of the divine. In another sense, the conventions of the emergent democratic regime come to seem as much inscribed in modern nature—that is, in the revolutionary openness, the inescapable but unpredictable 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 "fugitive"—radically transgressive but fleeting—moments in history. This is 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. Political association coheres not via argument but only in opposition to collective oppression and suffering—the transient solidarity of a community of victims. Popular power is catalyzed by the ex-

perience of popular powerlessness. Yet, precisely because it is so limited in time, democratic action can always claim an unlimited potential for radically creative beginnings and disruptive endings. It does not operate in the world long enough to be economized, constitutionalized, rationalized, systematized, or organized. Such a politics of the extraordinary is never compromised or domesticated, maintaining its youthful integrity and vitality by virtue of its evanescence.

I argue that the extreme idealism and cynicism at the core of Wolin's theory leaves little room for the routine practice of democratic politics. Fugitive democracy is exceptional—an exception to ordinary rules (whether political, economic, or legal) 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 antidemocratic state power. For Wolin, there is the heroic demos, the manipulated-into-collaboration electorate, and nothing in between.

I conclude by suggesting that there is a certain sort of silence inherent in democratic society. Democracy is duly celebrated as the social form that, in its egalitarianism, 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?

As I have begun to detail, democratic society is largely principled upon the freedom of openness—the freedom that becomes intelligible only after the revolutionary collapse of hierarchy and advent of equality. This freedom takes shape as the fight for power over, and the flight from, others and the world. In the company of equals, we compete in the antipaternalistic free market, and we relax within the fatherless family of our intimate community.

For all of their polar differences, what competition and communion share as modes of human association is that they have no need of words as liaisons between participants. 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 they might be a useless waste of time in a world where “money talks”). Within the self-regulating system of market “forces” and “mechanisms,” judgment is reduced to rational calculation, and we respond to “incentives” rather than persuasion. At the other end of the spectrum, in the realm of familial communion, arguments signify only the sad distance between us and our aspiration to union unfettered by the need for mediation—argument reduced to “bickering” and interpreted as the first sign on the road to divorce.<sup>61</sup> Arguing means we are not “at one with,” and the exercise of judgment means we cannot relax and be “at home with.” We might express (confess) our inner authentic selves so as to be recognized (to “let someone in”), but ultimately, to be experienced as meaningful, the connection must be deeper than any public presentation allows. It must be rooted 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 either collapses or is deemed complete) or poised to enter into a world free of power and external authority (wherein persuasion and judgment have no standing), argument as a mode of expression and communication is devalued. The only things that seem impossible in a world of infinite possibility are good-faith argument and rightful persuasion. Insofar as arguing about how we can and ought to live together is the activity par excellence of the citizen, citizenship is subverted by the extremes of democratic society. The democratic way of life does not ultimately tend toward dissociation, fragmentation, or “atomistic individualism” (quite the opposite, in many ways), but it does dissolve the political element of human association. Absent politics, the coordination of how we are to live together is left to other forces, whether sub- or superhumanistic.

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# Notes

## Abbreviations

- DA Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004).
- DI Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- DPT Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
- Letters Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- NF Sheldon S. Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy," in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, ed. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach, and Josiah Ober (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994): 29–58.
- OR I Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, vol. 1: *The Complete Text*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- OR II Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, vol. 2: *Notes on the French Revolution and Napoleon*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- PFMS Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).
- PP Sheldon S. Wolin, *Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
- PV Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

TBTW Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

## Introduction

1. James Allan Davis and Tom W. Smith, “General Social Surveys, 1972–2008,” machine-readable data file (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2009) accessible by searching “confidence” at <http://www.norc.uchicago.edu/GSS+Website/Browse+GSS+Variables/Subject+Index/>.
2. Despite some optimistic predictions, the recent election of Barack Obama to the presidency has thus far not significantly altered these perceptions. Down from the startling peak of 91 percent in October of 2008 but continuing its decades-long upward trend, around 70 percent consider themselves “dissatisfied” with “the way things are going in the United States at this time.” Gallup Poll, August 31–September 2, 2009, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com). A 2009 Gallup Poll found that “trust in the ‘men and women in political life in this country who either hold or are running for public office’ . . . dropped to an all-time low of 49%.” Gallup Poll, 31 August 31–September 2, 2009, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com). 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.” Gallup Poll, August 31–September 2, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com). At 51 percent, President Obama’s approval rating is the lowest of any president in the past half century at this point of his presidency. Gallup Poll, December 21–27, 2009, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com).
3. The following are just a few recent instances of this truly inescapable strategy of persuasion. (Notice that the subtext is the same in most of these instances also: “these are times of crisis”; “the common good”; “obvious to all of good faith”; “necessitates immediate action above stalling argumentation”; “partisan self-interest disguised as arguments”; and “politicians, like generals with no experience of the front,” being “clueless and out of touch.”) In February of 2009, for example, former secretary of labor and current UC Berkeley professor Robert Reich dismissed Senate Republicans’ opposition to President Obama’s proposed stimulus package as “playing politics when the economy burns.” Reich, “Senate Republicans and the Stimulus: Playing Politics When the Economy Burns,” Robert Reich’s Blog, February 5, 2009, <http://robertreich.blogspot.com>. 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.” Barack Obama, interview by Michael Smerconish, *The Michael Smerconish Program*, WPHT, August 20, 2009. 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.” Eugene Kiely, “Rep. Wilson: Dems ‘Playing Politics,’” *USAToday.com*, September 15, 2009, <http://content.usatoday.com>. 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.” Public Forum Letter, “Playing Politics,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 28, 2009, [www.sltrib.com](http://www.sltrib.com). 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” and “fight to win in Afghanistan.” Beck, “Stop Playing Politics: Fight to Win in Afghanistan,” *FoxNews.com*, September 24, 2009, [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com). In the same month, Jena Baker McNeill of the Heritage Foundation made her case by asserting, “Congress should stop playing politics with E-Verify.” McNeill, “Congress Should Stop Playing Politics with E-verify,” Heritage Foundation, September 22, 2009, [www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org). Again in September, San Francisco Assemblywoman Fiona Ma rejected a bill that proposed early prisoner release as a cost-saving measure by claiming, “We should not play politics with public safety.” Quoted in Tim Redmond, “Prison Report: Playing Politics,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian online*, September 3, 2009, [www.sfbg.com](http://www.sfbg.com). In August of 2009, an editorial in *Nature* called for the U.S. House of Representatives to “stop playing politics with the peer-review process” by halting funding for three NIH studies that looked at substance abuse and HIV risk behavior. Maxine Clarke, “Stop Playing Politics with the Peer Review Process,” *Nature* 460 (2009): 667. In May of 2009, Missouri Senator Kit Bond (R) commented on the Obama administration’s selective release of information regarding the interrogation of terrorist detainees: “It’s really distressing to see politics being played like this.” Bond, press conference, May 14, 2009, [www.c-span.org](http://www.c-span.org). In 2008, the *Boston Globe* accused vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin of “playing politics with family values.” Barney Frank, “Playing Politics with Family Values,” September 7, 2008, [www.boston.com](http://www.boston.com). 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. Susan Brown, “Pot Charges Dropped, Political Charges Still Run High,” *nwi.com*, February 2, 2010, [www.nwitimes.com](http://www.nwitimes.com).

4. Apparently, silliness isn’t confined to the electoral season any longer. Presidential spokesman Robert Gibbs, for instance, recently dismissed critics of President Obama’s plan to deliver a televised back-to-school speech to the nation’s students by stating, “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." Quoted in Marcus Franklin, "Gibbs: Furor over School Speech Is 'Silly Season,'" *Washington Times*, September 4, 2009, [www.washingtontimes.com](http://www.washingtontimes.com).

5. Again taking the debate over health-care reform as our example, the following passage from an editorial in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* perfectly captures the view of ordinary politics as akin to 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." Jeffrey A. Moody, "We Can't Allow Politics-As-Usual to Derail Health Care Reform," *Colorado Springs Gazette*, September 15, 2009, <http://findarticles.com>. And it is apparently not too soon to declare the failure of the 2008 presidential election to deliver the hoped-for transcendence of ordinary politics. 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." Ignatius, "Despite Crisis, It's Still Politics as Usual," *Real Clear Politics*, March 12, 2009, [www.realclearpolitics.com](http://www.realclearpolitics.com).
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." Rove, "How to Beat Hillary (Next) November," *Newsweek.com*, November 17, 2007, [www.theleftcoaster.com](http://www.theleftcoaster.com).
7. In the wake of the devastatingly effective "attack ad" featuring John Kerry windsurfing—with the tagline "John Kerry. Whichever way the wind blows"—during the 2004 general election, many described the 2008 campaign as a "flip-flop war." Listing the "waffling" accusations aimed at both Barack Obama and John McCain, *Newsweek* summed up the situation: "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 account continues, "Too many candidates have offered conversion narratives that track too perfectly with the course of political expediency. The nation has lost its faith." Jonathan Darman, "Candidates Should Never Flip-Flop," *Newsweek.com*, June 28, 2008, [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com). This framing dichotomy of the economic and the religious—"expediency" versus "conversion narratives" and "faith"—is, I shall suggest, revealing.

8. In August of 2007, Gallup found that "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. . . . All told, 67% of those who disapprove of Congress mention some type of congressional inaction as a reason why they disapprove of Congress." Gallup Poll, August 23–26, 2007, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com). In January of 2008, a Gallup Poll found similarly that 80 percent 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 percent thought "powerful special interests having too much control over what the government does" constituted either a crisis or a major problem. Gallup Poll, January, 10–13, 2008, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com).
9. 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* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
10. The 2009 Effie Award–winning ad "Stop Talking, Start Doing," television advertisement for IBM Corporation, Ogilvy and Mather, [www.effie.org](http://www.effie.org).
11. For an illuminating exploration of Western political thought's tradition of antirhetorical rhetoric, see Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: 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" intended to 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. Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 4, 10–11.

12. Alan S. 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 problems.” Blinder, “Is Government Too Political?” *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 115.
13. As Dana Villa puts it, “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.” Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 5–6.
14. As should be apparent, my approach to the study of political cynicism differs from most in that I draw upon patterns of speech more so than 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 measures 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 and why we both disengage from and engage in 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, Calif.: Academic Press, 1999).
15. On the weakness in America and beyond of the link between levels of “trust in” or “satisfaction with” government and prevailing conditions (particularly economic conditions), see Robert D. Putnam and Susan J. Pharr, eds., *Disaffected Democracies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), chaps. 1, 2, 8, 9, and Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Interestingly, Dalton concludes that rising expectations of government rather than either the 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: HarperCollins Publishers, 1957). For a fine survey of the various strands of minimalist (elitist, economic, pluralist) democracy, see James Bohman and William Rehg, “Introduction,” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, eds. Bohman and Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997). For a seminal critique of

democratic minimalist, see Carol Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

17. Bruce Ackerman, for instance, advances the first line of reasoning in what he describes as the Madisonian project of enabling an “economy of virtue” by means of a constitutional system designed to ordinarily make only minimal demands of people’s attention and public spiritedness. Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 198. Sheldon Wolin is perhaps today’s leading theorist of the second line of reasoning. Whereas Ackerman sees the economization of virtue, Wolin (in a view deeply resonant with Madison’s antifederalist interlocutors) sees “managed democracy”—a rationalized political economy so inegalitarian and opaque as to render people’s attention and public-spiritedness simply irrelevant but one that nonetheless advertises itself as democratic. We should question the “democratic credentials,” Wolin writes, “of a system that legitimates the economic oppression and culturally stunted lives of millions of citizens while, for all practical purposes, excluding them from political power.” Wolin, *DI*, 23–24.
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 conclusions, see Thomas Cronin, *Direct Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), and Morris P. Fiorina, “The Dark Side of Civic Engagement,” *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, ed. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999). Jane J. Mansbridge’s classic study of local, participatory democracy in the context of even minimal diversity can also be read as in line with this finding. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
19. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy*. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write that indicators of political cynicism—trust, confidence, perceptions of being taken advantage of, 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. *Ibid.*, 130, 62–65.
20. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse comment, “People are amazingly attuned, hypersensitive even, to the possibility that decision makers will attempt to improve themselves at the expense of everyone else.” *Ibid.*, 85.
21. *Ibid.*, 44.
22. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write, “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.” *Ibid.*, 126–127.

23. Invoking Rousseau, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write that the existence of a “general will” remains “a popular myth among both academics and the populace.” *Ibid.*, 156, 9, 141.
24. *Ibid.*, 7, 33.
25. *Ibid.*, 135–137.
26. 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.” *Ibid.*, 3, 157, 85–86, 137–143.
27. *Ibid.*, 9.
28. *Ibid.*, 143.
29. A June 2009 Gallup Poll finds that, among American institutions, “the military” receives by far the highest grade, with 82 percent of those polled expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence. “Small business” comes in second at 67 percent (interestingly, “big business” comes in last, with only 16 percent). While “the police” receives the third-highest vote of confidence (59 percent), “the criminal justice system” enters in at just 28 percent. Other “systems” (“the public school system,” “the medical system”)—along with “banks,” the “media,” and “organized labor”—rank along with Congress at below 25 percent. The Supreme Court comes in at 67 percent. Gallup Poll, June, 14–17, 2009, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com).
30. That people apparently have such a low opinion of themselves as citizens calls into question the explanation of Americans’ alienation from politics put forward most notably by E.J. Dionne Jr. and Morris P. Fiorina. Their respective analyses point to the systematic disconnect between a pragmatic electorate and partisan elites who, in their ideological extremism, manufacture a rhetoric of false choices and a culture war polarization misrepresentative of the centrist positions of the electorate and resistant to commonsense 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 apparently 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 and pandering. Whether in fact centrist and pragmatic or not, the electorate would seem to not want itself represented.

- Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), and Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).
31. In an exemplary iteration 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.
  32. For a wide-ranging and penetrating analysis of the two theorizations of political disengagement described here—those of abdicating and of being locked out of political power—see Tom DeLuca, *The Two Faces of Political Apathy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). DeLuca writes, “Where the first face of apathy indicates individual responsibility for nonparticipation, the second shifts responsibility . . . to other sources, perhaps elites, institutional practices, social structures, or even the organizing principles of a society . . . over which one has little or no control, and perhaps little knowledge.” DeLuca, *The Two Faces of Political Apathy*, 11.
  33. *Measuring Up 2006: The National Report Card on Higher Education* (a report commissioned by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education) points to a “looming crisis” in American higher education, demonstrated by lagging “performance” and “falling rankings” relative to those of other countries: “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.” National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Measuring Up 2006: The National Report Card on Higher Education*, available at [www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Measuring%20Up%202006.pdf](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Measuring%20Up%202006.pdf).
  34. 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, *Con\$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

35. 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, “Essay: The Bottom Line,” *Newshour*, PBS, July 10, 2006.
36. In a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the causes and effects of the consumer way of life, David Ricci at times recognizes this dimensionality in what he terms the “uneasy dialectic between consumerism and republicanism” in contemporary America. Nonetheless, there is a sort of tone deafness to his characterization of the American view of happiness, and ultimately republicanism ends up playing a rather insignificant role in the dialectic: “Consumerism did not reject the Declaration and its republican sentiments.” But the pursuit of happiness was linked “to the phenomenal outpouring of commodities which modern industry and agriculture could produce. Thus in countless advertisements and eventually in countless political speeches, Americans described happiness to each other as making money, or, more technically, as the opportunity to earn the means to consume an endless supply of new commodities.” For instance, Ricci points out, Calvin Coolidge “sanctified the pursuit of wealth when he announced that ‘the man who builds a factory builds a temple . . . [and] the man who works there worships there.’ ” Ricci, *Good Citizenship in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 292, 147. But do we still abide by Coolidge’s sanctification? Do we equate the value of opportunity, even financial opportunity, to mere money-making and consumption (or rather to, say, the means of declaring our independence or providing for our children)? Do we describe money as being able to buy happiness?
37. Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall 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 [to draw] corrupt persons as participants.” In thinking about political cynicism, political and social trust—along with confidence in the fidelity and capacity of political institutions and actors, and satisfaction with the performance of government—are surely significant. My work, however, addresses something a bit different: the perceived absurdity of politics that seems to precede judgments of trust, confidence, and satisfaction. To the fine definition above, I would thus add the sense of contempt, disrespect, alienation, or disaffection generalized all the way to the practice of democratic politics as a whole. In this expanded definition, we might

expect the disposition of cynicism to actually 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. More generally, Capella and Jamieson cite the media’s coverage of politics—hyping conflict in the metaphors of sports and war, ignoring consensus and civility, giving sound-bite simplification and decontextualization of arguments, reducing “leaders to their presumed motives and substance to its strategic intent,” and so forth—as having “the power to activate cynical reactions in the public.” The question, which they themselves raise, briefly, is whether the media manipulates or panders—creating the perceptions and expectations that come to pass for reality or serving up the stories that satisfy our taste for the dramatic and for knowing the “truth” behind the words of those in power, including those in the media (thereby leveling the power disparity between us and them). Have we arrived at the explanatory bottom, when we identify news framing that directs and organizes the way people think, or is the media itself in effect organized and directed by the broader social state in which it operates? Is the media primarily the creature or the creator of the narrative it depicts? Cappella and Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 166, 4–10, 27–29.

38. For the leading contemporary analysis of modern cynicism as such, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Sloterdijk identifies cynicism as the hallmark product of modernity’s world-weary malaise of enlightenment reason, mass society, and the spirit of capitalism. Our cynicism is a dead-end condition of “enlightened false consciousness” wherein we jadedly live and work as faithless actors, as if we still believed in what we now know to be illusion. The promises of modernity have been broken and its faiths lost, yet still we persist in our modern ways and routines. Against this melancholic condition, Sloterdijk calls for a return to the ancient cynicism (kynicism) of Diogenes and his followers. Kynicism is a counter-cultural rebellion from below via the subversive and emancipatory “cheekiness” of disorderly, sensual, bodily antics, along with self-injured powerlessness and exile from mainstream concerns. In its defining act of laughing in the face of claims to authority and power (as did Diogenes before both Plato and Alexander), kynicism would seem to honor the equality and freedom of what I go on to describe as democratic openness. Cynicism is itself judged good when it is in the service of democracy. On political cynicism more specifically, see William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Alan Keenan, “Twilight of the Political? A Contribution to the Democratic Critique of Cynicism,” *Theory and Event* 2, no. 1 (1998).

39. Which is more telling today: the number of people who feel compelled to undergo cosmetic surgery or the society-wide scorn heaped upon those who undergo cosmetic surgery, to the point where recipients must keep hidden any such procedure?
40. The phrases come, respectively, from the 1984 and 1980 campaigns of the “Reagan Revolution.” Interestingly, the latter phrase (from Reagan’s July 17 presidential nomination acceptance speech) is quoted from Tom Paine’s *Common Sense*.
41. The speech continues, “It’s the answer that led those who’ve been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.” Barack Obama, speech at Grant Park rally, November 4, 2008, [www.news.com.au/adelaidenow/story/0,,24607123-5006301,00.html](http://www.news.com.au/adelaidenow/story/0,,24607123-5006301,00.html).
42. Patrick J. Deneen addresses such questions with great subtlety and insight in his recent work *Democratic Faith*. Deneen’s work is largely devoted to demonstrating the often unseen inversion from democracy’s purported antiutopianism, antifoundationalist embrace of fallibilism and pragmatism, and rejection of faith (religious or otherwise) as a central element of political association, on one hand, to democracy’s own utopianism, foundational embrace of the human capacity for self-transformation and perfectibility (whether via rational deliberation or agonistic engagement of otherness), and at times fanatical affirmation of democracy as itself an unquestioned faith. Exposing the attendant contradictions, paradoxes, and dangers of this simultaneous desacralization of human organization and sacralization of democracy as the principle of human organization, Deneen goes on to argue that there is “a dynamic by which ‘democratic faith’ contributes ironically to forms of democratic cynicism and even despair” because the actual “conditions of democracy fail to live up to that faith”—an “exaggerated and unrealizable vision of democracy leads to disillusionment; a response that dismisses ‘faith’ is the result, leading to a cynical democratic theory premised upon the inescapability of interest and manipulation; in turn, idealists resort to more fervent calls for democratic faith.” Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 36, 20, 8. While certainly significant, this “reinforcing cycle” view misses, I think, some of the fine contours of our situation. I suggest that our cynicism is best understood not as the alternate of our faith but as its instantiation. Faith and cynicism are opposite expressions of our affirmation of democratic openness, of the concept of perfectibility rendered indefinite. As such, they proceed not cyclically but in tandem. It is not that we lose faith and grow disillusioned but rather that our faith requires the disposition of cynicism toward conventionality. In turn, we should expect our belief in the democratic ideal to be as

unwavering as our discontent with the practices and institutions of democracy.

43. In this interpretation, we would expect not exactly Samuel P. Huntington's "creedal passion periods"—wherein dissatisfaction with the radical gap between democratic ideals and institutions boils over into "revolutionary situations" (characterized by "a pervasive unhappiness with things as they were" and "widespread and intense moral indignation" that are "manifested in the questioning and rejection" of "existing structures of authority")—which ultimately lead to a closer alignment of American institutions and practices with "American values." Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 91–92. More precisely, we would expect the constancy of creedal passion, occasioned not by dissatisfaction with things as they are but rather by democratic society's constitutive passion for revolution as such, with this passion leading to a radicalization of the gap between ideal and present reality.
44. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "The Interaction between Democracy and Development" (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2002), 10, available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001282/128283e.pdf>.
45. Thus far I have written that an antipolitical 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, of course. Rather, fluctuations in the daily degree of our contempt for politics—fluctuations 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, particularly in Chapter 3, I develop a "punctuated equilibrium" analysis of this change. 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 came to stand 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 for politics and government increases in degree and shifts in type, to the point where today's contempt is reflexive and rooted in the experience of politics as absurd.
46. See any of the wildly popular writings of Thomas L. Friedman for examples. A flat world is one sense of an open world.
47. Barber, *Con\$umed*, 27.

48. Aristotle, *The Politics*, book 1, sect. 14 (1253a), trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
49. 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, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 52.
50. 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—in the rise of “political handlers” and the “pollster-consultant industrial complex” which churns out choreographed campaigns and prefabricated candidates.
51. See, for example, Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations*; and Robert A. Dahl, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
52. In his penetrating study of the postmodern sources of cynicism, Timothy Bewes identifies the “abnegation of politics on the basis of its inauthenticity,” along with a more general “refusal to engage with the world” and the “flight into . . . interiority,” as a central modality of modern cynicism. Analogous to my argument regarding the relationship between democratic openness and conventionality, Bewes writes that authenticity, an “extremely abstract value,” “cannot by its very nature appear in the public realm, since by doing so it loses what is specific to it. Authenticity and its derivatives—honesty, sincerity, moral scrupulousness, ‘good intentions’—may only be maintained intact in absolute privacy, or in personal communion with the divine.” The rhetoric of authenticity, with its elevation of the values of “depth and energy” (intimacy and informality, respectively, in my terms) thus frames “the privatization or the depoliticization of politics.” Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997), 1–2, 10.
53. 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.” Todd Bishop, “John Edwards Courts Tech Crowd in Seattle,” *Seattlepi.com*, July 1, 2006, <http://seattlepi.com>.
54. For his most recent detailed formulation of this idea, see Wolin, *PV*, 601–606.
55. Wolin, *NF*, 29, 53–54.

56. The historical playing out 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. See Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
57. Tocqueville, *DA*, 272.
58. Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 692.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Lefort, DPT, 19.
61. In his fascinating study of the radical striving—particularly evident in the writings of Rousseau, Marx, and Lenin (and to some extent, Hegel and Arendt)—to achieve a postpolitical society free of pluralism, conflict, and the need for political mediation, Joseph M. Schwartz writes, “The radical vision’s desire to transcend the messy business of democratic disagreement through the instantiation of a solidaristic society embodying true universal human interests not only is profoundly antipolitical; it also violates the very democratic impulses that inspired the radical critique of . . . authoritarian regimes.” Schwartz, *The Permanence of the Political: A Democratic Critique of the Radical Impulse to Transcend Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 10. The radicalism Schwartz analyzes is born of the principle of democratic equality, and in envisioning a world beyond politics, it reflects its genealogy.

### “More Than Kings Yet Less Than Men”

1. Tocqueville, *DA*, 3–14.
2. Sheldon S. Wolin “Why democracy?” *democracy* 1, no. 1 (January 1981): 3–4. “Today it is difficult,” Wolin writes, “to imagine that any political scientist or political sociologist in good repute would write a book about the irresistible tide of democracy or its incarnation in America.” Wolin, PP, 78.
3. Wolin writes, “Thus democracy is poised to become for our time what aristocracy was for Tocqueville’s, the archaic remains of a superseded past. Unlike Tocqueville’s aristocracy, however, the passing of democracy, if that is what is happening, is not being experienced as loss, . . . but as freedom from an impossible obligation.” Wolin, *TBTW*, 567.
4. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 1.
5. Axel Hadenius, “Victory and Crisis: Introduction,” in *Democracy’s Victory and Crisis*, ed. Axel Hadenius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7, 2–3.
6. Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 13, 162.