

The Mob Begins to Think and Reason

The Covert History of Democracy

Chapter 3 of *The Democracy Project*

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Reading accounts of social movements written by outright conservatives can often feel strangely refreshing. Particularly when one is used to dealing with liberals. Liberals tend to be touchy and unpredictable because they claim to share the ideas of radical movements—democracy, egalitarianism, freedom—but they’ve also managed to convince themselves that these ideals are ultimately unattainable. For that reason, they see anyone determined to bring about a world based on those principles as a kind of moral threat. I noticed this during the days of the Global Justice Movement. There was a kind of mocking defensiveness on the part of many in the “liberal media” that was in its own way just as caustic as anything thrown at us by the right. As I read their critiques of the movement, it became clear to me that many senior members of the media, having gone to college in the 1960s, thought of themselves as former campus revolutionaries, if only through generational association. Within their work was an argument they were having with themselves; they were convincing themselves that even though they were now working for the establishment, they hadn’t really sold out because their former revolutionary dreams were profoundly unrealistic, and actually, fighting for abortion rights or gay marriage is about as radical as one can realistically be. If you are a radical, at least with conservatives you know where you stand: they are your enemies. If they wish to understand you, it is only to facilitate your being violently suppressed. This leads to a certain clarity. It also means they often honestly do wish to understand you.

In the early days of Occupy Wall Street, the first major salvo from the right took the form of an essay in *The Weekly Standard* by one Matthew Continetti entitled “Anarchy in the U.S.A.: The Roots of American Disorder.”¹ “Both left and right,” Continetti argued, “have made the error of thinking that the forces behind Occupy Wall Street are interested in democratic politics and problem solving.” In fact, their core were anarchists dreaming of a utopian socialist paradise as peculiar as the phalanxes of Charles Fourier or free love communes like the 1840s New Harmony. The author goes on to quote proponents of contemporary anarchism, mainly Noam Chomsky and myself:

This permanent rebellion leads to some predictable outcomes. By denying the legitimacy of democratic politics, the anarchists undermine their ability to affect people’s lives. No living wage movement for them. No debate over the Bush tax rates. Anarchists don’t believe in wages, and they certainly don’t believe in taxes. David Graeber, an anthropologist and a leading figure in Occupy Wall Street, puts it this way: “By participating in policy debates the very best one can achieve is to limit the damage, since the very premise is inimical to the idea of people managing their own affairs.” The reason that Occupy Wall Street has no agenda is that anarchism allows for no agenda. All the anarchist can do is set an example—or tear down the existing order through violence.

This paragraph is typical: it alternates legitimate insights with a series of calculated slurs and insinuations designed to encourage violence. It is true that anarchists did, as I said, refuse to enter the political system itself, but this was on the grounds that the system itself was undemocratic—having been reduced to a system of open institutionalized bribery, backed up by coercive force. We wanted to make that fact evident to everyone, in the United States and elsewhere. And that is what OWS did—in a way that no amount of waving of policy statements could ever have done. To say that we have no agenda, then, is absurd; to assert that we have no choice but to eventually resort to violence, despite the studious nonviolence of the occupiers, is the kind of statement one only makes if one is desperately trying to come up with justifications for violence oneself.

The piece went on to correctly trace the origins of the current global anticapitalist networks back to the Zapatista revolt in 1994, and, again correctly, to note their increasingly anti-authoritarian politics, their rejection of any notion of seizing power by force, their use of the Internet. Continetti concludes:

An intellectual, financial, technological, and social infrastructure to undermine global capitalism has been developing for more than two decades, and we are in the middle of its latest manifestation.... The occupiers' tent cities are self-governing, communal, egalitarian, and networked. They reject everyday politics. They foster bohemianism and confrontation with the civil authorities. They are the Phalanx and New Harmony, updated for postmodern times and plopped in the middle of our cities.

There may not be that many activists in the camps. They may appear silly, even grotesque. They may resist "agendas" and "policies." They may not agree on what they want or when they want it. And they may disappear as winter arrives and the liberals whose parks they are occupying lose patience with them. But the utopians and anarchists will reappear.... The occupation will persist as long as individuals believe that inequalities of property are unjust and that the brotherhood of man can be established on the earth.

You can see why anarchists might find this sort of thing refreshingly honest. The author makes no secret of his desire to see us all in prison, but at least he's willing to make an honest assessment of what the stakes are. Still, there is one screamingly dishonest theme that runs throughout the Weekly Standard piece: the intentional conflation of "democracy" with "everyday politics," that is, lobbying, fund-raising, working for electoral campaigns, and otherwise participating in the current American political system. The premise is that the author stands in favor of democracy, and that occupiers, in rejecting the existing system, are against it. In fact, the conservative tradition that produced and sustains journals like The Weekly Standard is profoundly antidemocratic. Its heroes, from Plato to Edmund Burke, are, almost uniformly, men who opposed democracy on principle, and its readers are still fond of statements like "America is not a democracy, it's a republic." What's more, the sort of arguments Continetti breaks out here—that anarchist-inspired movements are unstable, confused, threaten established orders of property, and must necessarily lead to violence—are precisely the arguments that have, for centuries, been levelled by conservatives against democracy itself.

In reality, OWS is anarchist-inspired, but for precisely that reason it stands squarely in the very tradition of American popular democracy that conservatives like Continetti have always staunchly opposed. Anarchism does not mean the negation of democracy—or at least, any of the aspects of democracy that most Americans have historically liked. Rather, anarchism is a matter of taking those core democratic principles to their logical conclusions. The reason it's difficult to see this is because the word “democracy” has had such an endlessly contested history: so much so that most American pundits and politicians, for instance, now use the term to refer to a form of government established with the explicit purpose of ensuring what John Adams once called “the horrors of democracy” would never come about.²

As I mentioned at the beginning of the book, most Americans are unaware that nowhere in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution does it say anything about the United States being a democracy.* In fact, most of those who took part in composing those founding documents readily agreed with the seventeenth-century Puritan preacher John Winthrop, who wrote that “a democracy is, among most civil nations, accounted the meanest and worst of all forms of government.”³

Most of the Founders learned what they did know about the subject of democracy from Thomas Hobbes's English translation of Thucydides' History, his account of the Peloponnesian War. Hobbes undertook this project, he was careful to inform his readers, to warn about the dangers of democracy. As a result, the founders used the word in its ancient Greek sense, assuming democracy to refer to communal self-governance through popular assemblies such as the Athenian agora. It was what we would now call “direct democracy.” One might say that it was a system of rule by General Assemblies, except that these assemblies were assumed to always operate exclusively by the principle of 51 to 49 percent majority rule. James Madison for instance, made clear in his contributions to the Federalist Papers why he felt this sort of Athenian democracy was not only impossible in a great nation of his day, since it could not by definition operate over an extended geographical area, but was actively undesirable, since he felt history showed that any system of direct democracy would inevitably descend into factionalism, demagoguery, and finally, the seizure of power by some dictator willing to restore order and control:

A pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction.... Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.⁴

Like all the men we've come to know as Founding Fathers, Madison insisted that his preferred form of government, a “republic,” was necessarily quite different: In a democracy the people meet and exercise the government in person; in a republic they assemble and administer it by their representatives and agents. A democracy, consequently, must be confined to a small spot. A republic may be extended over a large region.⁵

Now, this notion that republics were administered by “representatives” might seem odd at first glance, since they borrowed the term “republic” from ancient Rome, and Roman senators were not elected; they were aristocrats who held their seats by birthright, which meant they weren’t really “representatives and agents” of anyone but themselves. Still, the idea of representative bodies was something the Founders had inherited from the British during the Revolution: the rulers of the new nation were precisely those who had been elected, by a vote of property-holding males, to representative assemblies like the Continental Congress, originally meant to allow a limited measure of self-governance under the authority of the king. After the revolution, they immediately transferred the power of government from King George III to themselves. As a result, the representative bodies meant to operate under the authority of the king would now operate under the authority of the people, however narrowly defined.

The custom of electing delegates to such bodies was nothing new. In England it went back to at least the thirteenth century. By the fifteenth century, it had become standard practice to allow men of property to select their parliamentary representatives by sending in their votes to their local sheriff (usually recorded on notched sticks). At that time it never would have occurred to anyone that this system had anything to do with “democracy.”⁶ Elections were assumed to be an extension of monarchical systems of government, since representatives were in no sense empowered to govern. They did not rule anything, collectively or as individuals; their role was to speak for (“represent”) the inhabitants of their district before the sovereign power of the king, to offer advice, air grievances, and, above all, deliver their county’s taxes. So while the representatives were powerless and the elections rarely contested, the system of elected representatives was considered necessary according to the prevailing medieval legal principle of consent: it was felt that while orders naturally came from above, and ordinary subjects should have no role in framing policy, those same ordinary subjects could not be held to be bound by orders to which they had not, in some broad sense, assented. True, after the English Civil War, Parliament did begin to assert its own rights to have a say in the disposal of tax receipts, creating what the framers called a “limited monarchy”—but still, the American idea of saying that the people could actually exercise sovereign power, the power once held by kings, by voting for representatives with real governing power, was a genuine innovation and immediately recognized as such.⁷

The American War of Independence had been fought in the name of “the people,” and all the framers felt that the “whole body of the people” had to be consulted at some point to make their revolution legitimate—but the entire purpose of the Constitution was to ensure that this form of consultation was extremely limited, lest the “horrors of democracy” ensue. At the time, the common assumption among educated people was that there were three elementary principles of government that were held to exist, in different measure, in all known human societies: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The framers agreed with ancient political theorists who held that the Roman Republic represented the most perfect balance between them. Republican Rome had two consuls (elected by the Senate) who filled the monarchical function, a permanent patrician class of senators, and, finally, popular assemblies with limited powers of their own. These assemblies selected from among aristocratic candidates for magistracies, and also chose two tribunes, who

represented the interest of the plebeian class; tribunes could not vote or even enter the Senate (they sat just outside the doorway) but they were granted veto power over senatorial decisions.

The American Constitution was designed to achieve a similar balance. The monarchical function was to be filled by a president elected by the Senate; the Senate was meant to represent the aristocratic interests of wealth, and Congress was to represent the democratic element. Its purview was largely to be confined to raising and spending money, since the Revolution had, after all, been fought on the principle of “no taxation without representation.” Popular assemblies were eliminated altogether. The American colonies, of course, lacked any hereditary aristocracy. But by electing a temporary monarch, and temporary representatives, the framers argued they could instead create what they sometimes explicitly called a kind of “natural aristocracy,” drawn from the educated and propertied classes who had the same sober concern for the public welfare that they felt characterized the Roman senate of Cicero and Cincinnatus.

It is worthwhile, I think, to dwell on this point for a moment. When the framers spoke of an “aristocracy” they were not using the term metaphorically. They were well aware that they were creating a new political form that fused together democratic and aristocratic elements. In all previous European history, elections had been considered—as Aristotle had originally insisted—the quintessentially aristocratic mode of selecting public officials. In elections, the populace chooses between a small number of usually professional politicians who claim to be wiser and more educated than everyone else, and chooses the one they think the best of all. (This is what “aristocracy” literally means: “rule of the best.”) Elections were ways that mercenary armies chose their commanders, or nobles vied for the support of future retainers. The democratic approach—employed widely in the ancient world, but also in Renaissance cities like Florence—was lottery, or, as it was sometimes called, “sortition.” Essentially, the procedure was to take the names of anyone in the community willing to hold public office, and then, after screening them for basic competence, choose their names at random. This ensured all competent and interested parties had an equal chance of holding public office. It also minimized factionalism, since there was no point making promises to win over key constituencies if one was to be chosen by lot. (Elections, by contract, fostered factionalism, for obvious reasons.) It’s striking that while in the generations immediately before the French and American revolutions there was a lively debate among Enlightenment thinkers like Montesquieu and Rousseau on the relative merits of election and lottery, those creating the new revolutionary constitutions in the 1770s and 1780s did not consider using lotteries at all. The only use they found for lottery was in the jury system, and this was allowed to stand largely because it was already there, a tradition inherited from English common law. And even the jury system was compulsory, not voluntary; juries were (and still are) regularly informed that their role is not to consider the justice of the law, but only to judge the facts of evidence.

There were to be no assemblies. There was to be no sortition. The Founding Fathers insisted that sovereignty belongs to the people, but that—unless they rose up in arms in another revolution—the people could only exercise that sovereignty by

choosing among members of a class of superior men—superior both because they were trained as lawyers, and because coming from the upper classes they were wiser and better able to understand the people’s true interests than the people themselves were. Since “the people” would also be bound to obey the laws passed by the legislative bodies over which this new natural aristocracy presided, the Founders’ notion of popular sovereignty was really not too far removed from the old medieval notion of consent to orders from above.

Actually, if one reads the work of John Adams, or the Federalist Papers, one might well wonder why such authors spent so much time discussing the dangers of Athenian-style direct democracy at all. This was, after all, a political system that had not existed for more than two thousand years and no major political figure of the time was openly advocating re-establishing it.

Here is where it becomes useful to consider the larger political context. There might not have been democracies in the eighteenth-century North Atlantic, but there were definitely men who referred to themselves as “democrats.” In America, Tom Paine is perhaps the most famous example. During the same period in which the Continental Congress was beginning to contemplate severing relations with the English Crown, the term was undergoing something of a revival in Europe, where populists opposed to aristocratic rule increasingly began to refer to themselves as “democrats”—at first, it would seem, mainly for shock value, in much the same way that the gay rights movement defiantly adopted the word “queer.” In most places, they were a tiny minority of rabble-rousers, not intellectuals; few propounded any elaborate theory of government. Most appear to have been involved in campaigns against noble or ecclesiastical privilege, and for very basic principles like equality before the law. When revolutions did break out, however, such men found their natural homes in the mass meetings and assemblies that always emerge in such situations—whether in New England town hall meetings or in the “sections” of the French revolutions—and many of them came to see such assemblies as potential building blocks for a new political order.⁸ Since, unlike elected bodies, there were no property restrictions on voting at mass meetings, they tended to entertain far more radical ideas.

In the years immediately leading up to the American Revolution, the Patriots made much use of mass meetings, as well as calling up “the mob” or “mobility” (as they liked to call it) for mass actions like the Boston Tea Party. Often they were terrified by the results. On May 19, 1774, for example, a mass meeting was called in New York City to discuss a tax boycott to respond to the British closing of Boston Harbor—a meeting probably held not far from the present Zuccotti Park, and which apparently produced the very first proposal to convene a Continental Congress. We have an account of it from Gouverneur Morris, then chief justice of New Jersey, scion of the family that then owned most of what’s now the Bronx. Morris describes watching as common mechanics and tradesmen who had taken the day off work ended up locked in a prolonged debate with the gentry and their supporters over “the future forms of our government, and whether it should be founded on aristocratic or democratic principles.” As the gentry argued the merits of continuing with the existing (extremely conservative) English constitution, butchers and bakers responded with arguments from the Gracchi and Polybius:

I stood in the balcony, and on my right hand were ranged all the people of property, with some few poor dependants, and on the other all the tradesmen, &c., who thought it worth their while to leave daily labor for the good of the country. The spirit of the English Constitution has yet a little influence left, but just a little. The remains of it, however, will give the wealthy people a superiority this time, but would they secure it, they must banish all schoolmasters, and confine all knowledge to themselves. This cannot be.

The mob begin to think and to reason. Poor reptiles! it is with them a vernal morning, they are struggling to cast off their winter's slough, they bask in the sunshine, and ere noon they will bite, depend upon it. The gentry begin to fear this.⁹

So did Morris, who concluded from the event that full independence from Britain would be a very bad idea, lest, "I see it with fear and trembling, we will be under the worst of all possible dominions—a riotous mob."

Still, this conclusion seems rather disingenuous. What his account makes clear is it was not the irrational passions of "the mob" that frightened Morris, but precisely the opposite, the fact that so many of New York's mechanics and tradesmen could apparently not only trade classical references with the best of them, but frame thoughtful, reasoned arguments for democracy. The mob begin to think and to reason. Since there seemed no way to deny them access to education, the only remaining expedient was to rely on the force of British arms.

Morris ended the letter noting that the gentry put together a committee loaded with the wealthy to "trick" the ordinary people into thinking they had their best interests at heart. Unlike most of New York's propertied classes, he did eventually come over to the revolutionaries and ultimately went on to compose the final draft of the U.S. Constitution, although some of his strongest proposals at the Constitutional Convention, for instance, that senators should be appointed for life, were considered too conservative even for his fellow delegates, and were not ultimately adopted.

Even after the war, it was difficult to put the genie of democracy back in the bottle. Mobilizations, mass meetings, and threats of popular uprising continued. As before the Revolution, many of these protests centered on debt. After the war, there was a heated debate over what to do about the Revolutionary War debt. The popular demand was to let it inflate away into nothing and base the currency on paper notes issued by local "land banks" under public control. The Continental Congress took the opposite approach, following the advice of wealthy Philadelphia merchant Robert Morris (apparently no relation to Gouverneur) that wealthy speculators who'd bought up the debt at depreciated prices should be paid in full. This, he said, would cause wealth to flow "into the hands of those who would render it most productive"; at the same time, creating a single, central bank, on the model of the Bank of England, would allow the national debt to circulate as "new medium of commerce."¹⁰ This system, of making government war debt the basis of the currency, was tried and true, and in a way it's the one we still have now in the Federal Reserve—but in the early days of the republic the ramifications for simple farmers who ended up effectively having to pay the debt were catastrophic.

Thousands of returning Revolutionary War veterans would often find themselves greeted by “sheriff’s wagons” arriving to seize their most valuable possessions. The result was waves of popular mobilizations and at least two major uprisings, one in western Massachusetts, one in rural Pennsylvania, and even calls, in some quarters, to introduce legislation to expropriate the largest speculators instead.†

For men like Adams, Madison, or Hamilton, such projects bore a disturbing similarity to those of revolutionary movements of antiquity, with their calls to abolish debts and redistribute the land, and became prima facie evidence that America should never operate by a principle of majority rule. For instance, John Adams:

If all were to be decided by a vote of the majority, the eight or nine millions who have no property, would not think of usurping over the rights of the one or two millions who have? ...

Debts would be abolished first; taxes laid heavy on the rich, and not at all on the others; and at last a downright equal division of everything be demanded, and voted. What would be the consequence of this? The idle, the vicious, the intemperate, would rush into the utmost extravagance of debauchery, sell and spend all their share, and then demand a new division of those who purchased from them. The moment the idea is admitted into society, that property is not as sacred as the laws of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence.¹¹

Similarly, for Madison, republican government was not just superior because it was capable of operating over a wide geographical range; it was better to have a government operating over a wide geographical range because if there ever was “a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project,”¹² it was likely to occur on a local level—and a strong central government would ensure it could be quickly contained.

This, then, is what the nightmare vision of Athenian democracy seemed to mean for such men: that if the town hall assemblies and mass meetings of farmers, mechanics, and tradesmen that had formed in the years leading up to the Revolution became institutionalized, these—“abolition of debts ... equal division of property”—were the sorts of demands they would likely make. Even more, they feared the specter of orgy, tumult, and indiscipline, where the sort of grave republicans who led Rome to glory and whom the Founders saw as their model would be cast aside for the vulgar passions of the masses. Another telling Adams quote about Athens: “From the first to the last moment of her democratical constitution, levity, gayety, inconstancy, dissipation, intemperance, debauchery, and a dissolution of manners, were the prevailing character of the whole nation.”¹³ Dr. Benjamin Rush, a physician and stalwart of Philadelphia’s Sons of Liberty, actually felt that this democratic loosening of manners could be diagnosed as a kind of disease—thinking, here, particularly of the effects of “the changes in the habits of diet, and company, and manners, produced by annihilation of just debts by means of depreciated paper money”:

The excess of the passion for liberty, inflamed by the successful issue of the war, produced, in many people, opinions and conduct which could not be removed by

reason nor restrained by government.... The extensive influence which these opinions had upon the understandings, passions and morals of many of the citizens of the United States, constituted a species of insanity, which I shall take the liberty of distinguishing by the name of Anarchia.¹⁴

The reference to “depreciated paper money” is significant here. One of the issues that drove the Federalists to convene the Constitutional convention in the first place was not just the threat of riots and rebellions against hard-money policies, which could be militarily contained, but the fear that “democratic” forces might begin to take over state governments and begin printing their own currency—both George Washington, then the richest man in America, and Thomas Jefferson, had personally lost considerable chunks of their personal fortunes through such schemes. And this is precisely what had already begun to happen in Pennsylvania, which had eliminated property qualifications for voting, and quickly saw the formation of a populist legislature that, in 1785, first revoked the charter for Robert Morris’s central bank, and then began a scheme to create a system of public credit, with paper money designed to depreciate in value over time, so as to relieve debtors and thwart speculators. One of the leaders of the popular faction, Quaker preacher Herman Husband—who men like Rush referred to as “the madman of Alleghenies”—openly argued that such measures were justified because vast inequalities of wealth made it impossible for freeborn citizens to participate in politics.‡ When the Framers assembled in Philadelphia in 1787, Morris among them, they were determined to prevent the contagion from spreading. To get a sense of the flavor of the debate at the convention, we might consider its opening remarks, by Edmund Randolph, then governor of Virginia. Even outside of Pennsylvania, state constitutions did not contain sufficient safeguards against “government exercised by the people”:

Our chief danger arises from the democratic parts of our constitutions. It is a maxim which I hold incontrovertible, that the powers of government exercised by the people swallows up the other branches. None of the constitutions have provided sufficient checks against the democracy. The feeble senate of Virginia is a phantom. Maryland has a more powerful senate, but the late distractions in that state have discovered that it is not powerful enough. The check established in the constitution of New York and Massachusetts is yet a stronger barrier against democracy, but they all seem insufficient.§

The Canadian political scientist Francis Dupuis-Déri has carefully mapped out the way the word “democracy” was used by major political figures in the United States, France, and Canada during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and has discovered in every case exactly the same pattern. When the word first gains currency between 1770 and 1800, it is deployed almost exclusively as a term of opprobrium and abuse. The French revolutionaries disdained “democracy” almost as much as the American ones. It was seen as anarchy, the lack of government, and riotous chaos. Over time, a few begin to use the term, often as a provocation: as when Robespierre, at the height of the terror, began to refer to himself as a democrat, or when in 1800, Thomas Jefferson—who never mentioned the word “democracy” at all in his early writings,^l but who ran against Adams as a radical, sympathetic with the organizers of debt uprisings and strongly opposed to central

banking schemes—decided to rename his party the “Democratic-Republicans.”

Still, it took some time before the term came into common use.

It was between 1830 and 1850 that politicians in the United States and France began to identify themselves as democrats and to use democracy to designate the electoral regime, even though no constitutional change or transformation of the decision-making process warranted this change in name. The shift in meaning first occurred in the United States. Andrew Jackson was the first presidential candidate to present himself as a democrat, a label by which he meant that he would defend the interests of the little people (in particular, small Midwest farmers and laborers in the large Eastern cities) against the powerful (bureaucrats and politicians in Washington and the upper classes in large cities).¹⁵

Jackson was running as a populist—once again, against the central banking system, which he did temporarily manage to dismantle. As Dupuis-Déri observes, “Jackson and his allies were well aware that their use of democracy was akin to what would today be called political marketing”; it was basically a cynical ploy, but it was wildly successful—so much so that within ten years time all candidates of all political parties were referring to themselves as “democrats.” Since the same thing happened everywhere—France, England, Canada—where the franchise was widened sufficiently that masses of ordinary citizens were allowed to vote, the result was that the term “democracy” itself changed as well—so that the elaborate republican system that the Founders had created with the express purpose of containing the dangers of democracy, itself was relabeled “democracy,” which is how we continue to use the term today.

Clearly, then, the word “democracy” meant something different for ordinary Americans, as well as ordinary Frenchmen and Englishmen, than it did for members of the political elite. The question is precisely what. Owing to the limited nature of our sources—we have no way of knowing for instance, once the New York mob “began to think and reason,” what arguments they actually put forth—we can really only guess. But I think we can reconstruct some broad principles.

First of all, when members of the educated classes spoke of “democracy,” they were thinking of a system of government, which traced back specifically to the ancient world. Ordinary Americans in contrast appear to have seen it, as we would say today, in much broader social and cultural terms: “democracy” was freedom, equality, the ability of a simple farmer or tradesman to address his “betters” with dignity and self-respect—the kind of broader democratic sensibility that was soon to so impress foreign observers like Alexis de Tocqueville when they spoke of “Democracy in America” two generations later. The roots of this sensibility, like the real roots of many of the political innovations that made the great eighteenth-century revolutions possible, are difficult to reconstruct. But they do not seem to lie where we are used to looking for them.

One reason we find it so difficult to reconstruct the history of these democratic sensibilities, and the everyday forms of organization and decision making they inspired, is that we are used to telling the story in a very peculiar way. It’s a story that only really took shape in the wake of World War I, when universities in the United States and some parts of Europe began promulgating the notion that

democracy was an intrinsic part of what they called “Western civilization.” The idea that there even was something called “Western civilization” was, at the time, relatively new: the expression would have been meaningless in the time of Washington or Jefferson. According to this new version of history, which soon became gospel to American conservatives, and is largely taken for granted by everyone else, democracy is really a set of institutional structures, based on voting, that was first “invented” in ancient Athens and has remained somehow embedded in a grand tradition that traveled from Greece to Rome to medieval England, making a detour through Renaissance Italy, and then finally lodging itself in the North Atlantic, which is now its special home. This formulation is how former cold warriors like Samuel Huntington can argue that we are now engaged in a “war of civilizations,” with the free and democratic West vainly trying to inflict its values on everyone else. As an historical argument, this is an obvious example of special pleading. The whole story makes no sense. First of all, about the only thing Voltaire, Madison, or Gladstone really had in common with an inhabitant of ancient Greece is that he grew up reading ancient Greek books. But if the Western tradition is simply an intellectual tradition, how can one possibly call it democratic? In fact, not a single surviving ancient Greek author was in favor of democracy, and for 2,400 years at least, virtually every author now identified with “Western civilization” was explicitly antidemocratic. When someone has the temerity to point this out, the usual response by conservatives is to switch gears and say that “the West” is a cultural tradition, whose unique love of liberty can already be witnessed in medieval documents like the Magna Carta and was just waiting to burst out in the Age of Revolutions. This makes a little better sense. If nothing else, it would explain the popular enthusiasm for democracy in countries like the United States and France, even in the face of universal elite disapproval. But, if one takes that approach, and says “the West” is really a deep cultural tradition, then other parts of the conventional story fall apart. For one thing, how can one say that the Western tradition begins in Greece? After all, if we’re speaking in cultural terms, the people alive today most similar to ancient Greeks are obviously modern Greeks. Yet most of those who celebrate the “Western tradition” don’t even think modern Greece is part of the West anymore—Greece apparently having defected back around A.D. 600 when they chose the wrong variety of Christianity.

In fact, as it’s currently used, “the West” can mean almost anything. It can be used to refer to an intellectual tradition, a cultural tradition, a locus of political power (“Western intervention”), even a racial term (“the bodies discovered in Afghanistan appeared to be those of Westerners”), more or less depending on the needs of the moment.

It’s not surprising then that American conservatives react so violently to any challenge to the primacy of “Western civilization”—since “Western civilization” is, essentially, something they made up. In fact for all its incoherence it might well be the only powerful idea they ever made up. In order to have any chance of understanding the real history of democracy, we have to put all this aside and start from scratch. If we do not see Western Europe as some special chosen land, then what, in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, do we really see? Well, first of all, we see a group of North Atlantic kingdoms that were in almost every case moving away from earlier forms of popular participation in government,

and forming ever more centralized, absolutist governments. Remember, until that time Northern Europe had been something of a backwater. During this period, European societies were not only expanding everywhere, with projects of overseas trade, conquest, and colonization across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, but they were also, as a result, being flooded with a dazzling welter of new and unfamiliar political ideas. Most European intellectuals who encountered these ideas were interested in using them to create even stronger centralized monarchies: like the German scholar Leibniz, who found inspiration in the example of China, with its cultural uniformity, national examination boards, and rational civil service, or Montesquieu, who became equally intrigued by the example of Persia. Others (John Locke, for example, or many of the other English political philosophers so beloved by the Founding Fathers) became fascinated by the discovery of societies in North America that appeared to be simultaneously far more egalitarian, and far more individualistic, than anything Europeans had previously imagined possible.

In Europe, tracts and arguments about the significance, and political and moral implications, of these newly discovered social possibilities abounded. In the American colonies, this was not a matter of mere intellectual reflection. The first European settlers in North America not only were in the paradoxical situation of being in direct contact with indigenous nations, and being obliged to learn many of their ways just to be able to survive in their new environment, at exactly the same time; they were also displacing and largely exterminating them. In the process—at least, according to the scandalized accounts of the leaders of early settler communities—they themselves, and especially their children, began acting more and more like Indians.

This is important since most debates over the influence of indigenous societies on American democracy largely miss the profoundly cultural transformation that resulted. There has been quite a lively debate on the topic since the 1980s. It's usually referred to in the scholarly literature as "the influence debate." While the scholars who kicked it off, historians Donald Grinde, himself a Native American, and Bruce Johansen, were making a much broader argument, the whole debate quickly became sidetracked over one very specific question: whether certain elements in the American Constitution, particularly its federal structure, were originally inspired by the example of the League of Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois. This particular debate began in 1977, when Grinde pointed out that the idea of a federation of colonies seemed to have been first proposed by an Onondaga ambassador named Canassatego during negotiations over the Lancaster Treaty of 1744. Exhausted by having to negotiate with six different colonies, he snapped an arrow in half to show how easy it was to break it, then took a bundle of six arrows, and challenged his interlocutors to do the same. (This bundle of arrows still appears on the Seal of the Union of the United States, though with the number increased to thirteen.) Benjamin Franklin, who had taken part in the negotiations, did later propose the colonies adopt a federal system, though it was at first without success.

Grinde was not the first to suggest that Iroquois federal institutions might have had some influence on the U.S. Constitution. Similar ideas were occasionally proposed in the nineteenth century and, at the time, no one found anything particularly

threatening or remarkable about it. When it was proposed again in the 1980s it set off a firestorm. Congress passed a bill recognizing the Haudenosaunee contribution and conservatives were up in arms at any suggestion that the Founders were influenced by anything but the tradition of “Western civilization.” Almost all scholars of Native American descent embraced the notion, but they also emphasized that this was simply one example of a broader process of settlers being influenced by the freedom-loving ways of indigenous societies. Meanwhile, both (nonnative) anthropologists who studied the Six Nations and American constitutional historians insisted on focusing exclusively on the constitutional question, and rejected the argument out of hand. This meant insisting that despite the fact that many of the Founders had taken part in treaty negotiations with the Haudenosaunee federation, and despite the fact that this was the only federal system with which any of them had direct experience, that experience played no role whatsoever in their thinking when they pondered how to create a federal system themselves.

On the face of it, this seems an extraordinary claim. The reason it’s possible to make it is that when the authors of the Federalist Papers did openly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different sorts of federal systems, they did not mention the one they had seen, but rather others they’d only read about: the organization of Judaea in the time of the Book of Judges, the Achaean League, the Swiss Confederacy, the United Provinces of the Netherlands. When they did refer to indigenous peoples, they ordinarily referred to them as “the American savages,” who were perhaps to be occasionally celebrated as exemplars of individual liberty but whose political experience was strictly irrelevant for that very reason. John Adams, for instance, compared them to the ancient Goths, a people unusual, he held, in that they actually could support a largely democratic system of government without it being plunged into violent unrest. This was possible for both peoples, he concluded, because they were too scattered and indolent to have accumulated any significant amount of property, and therefore did not need institutions designed to protect wealth.

Still, the entire constitutional debate was something of a sideshow. It’s a way of keeping everything focused on the reading habits of the educated gentry, and the kinds of arguments and allusions they considered appropriate to employ in public debate. For instance, it’s clear that the Founders were well aware of Canassatego’s metaphor of the arrows—after all, they put the image on the seal of their new republic—it never seems to have occurred to any to so much as allude to it in their published writings, speeches, or debates. Even New York’s butchers and wainwrights knew that when debating with the gentry, they had to adorn their arguments with plenty of classical references.

If we want to explore the origins of those democratic sensibilities that caused ordinary New Yorkers to feel sympathetic to the idea of democratic rule in the first place, or even to find where people actually had direct, hands-on experience in collective decision making that might have influenced their sense of what democracy might actually be like, we not only have to look beyond the sitting rooms of the educated gentry. In fact, we soon find ourselves in places that might seem, at first, genuinely startling. In 1999, one of the leading contemporary

historians of European democracy, John Markoff, published an essay called “Where and When Was Democracy Invented?” In it there appears the following passage:

That leadership could derive from the consent of the led, rather than be bestowed by higher authority, would have been a likely experience of the crews of pirate vessels in the early modern Atlantic world. Pirate crews not only elected their captains, but were familiar with countervailing power (in the forms of the quartermaster and ship’s council) and contractual relations of individual and collectivity (in the form of written ship’s articles specifying shares of booty and rates of compensation for on-the-job injury).¹⁶

He makes the remark very much in passing but in a way it’s a very telling example. If existing ship constitutions are anything to go by, the typical organization of eighteenth-century pirate ships was remarkably democratic.¹⁷ Captains were not only elected, they usually functioned much like Native American war chiefs: granted total power during chase or combat, but otherwise treated like ordinary crewmen. Those ships whose captains were granted more general powers also insisted on the crew’s right to remove them at any time for cowardice, cruelty, or any other reason. In every case, ultimate power rested in a general assembly, which often ruled on even the most minor matters, always, apparently, by a majority show of hands.

This isn’t surprising if one considers the pirates’ origins. Pirates were generally mutineers, sailors often originally pressed into service against their will in port towns across the Atlantic, who had mutinied against tyrannical captains and “declared war against the whole world.” They often became classic social bandits, wreaking vengeance against captains who abused their crews, and releasing or even rewarding those against whom they found no complaints. The makeup of crews was often extraordinarily heterogeneous. According to Marcus Rediker’s *Villains of All Nations*, “Black Sam Bellamy’s crew of 1717 was ‘a Mix’d Multitude of all Country’s,’ including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native American, African American, and two dozen Africans who had been liberated from a slave ship.”¹⁸ In other words, we are dealing with a collection of people in which there was likely to be at least some firsthand knowledge of a very wide range of directly democratic institutions, ranging from Swedish things (councils) to African village assemblies to Native American federal structures, suddenly finding themselves forced to improvise some mode of self-government in the complete absence of any state. It was the perfect intercultural space of experiment. There was likely to be no more conducive ground for the development of new democratic institutions anywhere in the Atlantic world at the time.

Did the democratic practices developed on Atlantic pirate ships in the early part of the eighteenth century have any influence, direct or indirect, on the evolution of democratic constitutions in the North Atlantic world sixty or seventy years later? It’s possible. There’s no doubt that the typical eighteenth-century New York mechanic or tradesman had spent plenty of time trading pirate stories over a pint at dockside bars. Sensationalist accounts of the pirates did circulate widely and it’s

likely that men like Madison or Jefferson had read them, at least as children. But it's impossible to really know if such men culled any ideas from such accounts; if such stories had influenced them in any way, it would have been the last influence they would ever have openly acknowledged.

One might even speculate about the existence of a kind of broad democratic unconscious that lay behind many of the ideas and arguments of the American Revolution, ideas whose origins even ordinary citizens felt uncomfortable with, since they were so firmly associated with savagery and criminality. The pirates are just the most vivid example. Even more important in the North American colonies were the societies of the frontier. But those early colonies were far more similar to pirate ships than we are given to imagine. Frontier communities might not have been as densely populated as pirate ships, or in as immediate need of constant cooperation, but they were spaces of intercultural improvisation, and, like the pirate ships, largely outside the purview of any states. It's only recently that historians have begun to document just how thoroughly entangled the societies of settlers and natives were in those early days,¹⁹ with settlers adopting Indian crops, clothes, medicines, customs, and styles of warfare. They engaged in trading, often living side by side, sometimes intermarrying, while others lived for years as captives in Indian communities before returning to their homes having learned native languages, habits, and mores. Most of all, historians have noted the endless fears among the leaders of colonial communities and military units that their subordinates were—in the same way that they had taken up the use of tomahawks, wampum, and canoes—beginning to absorb Indian attitudes of equality and individual liberty.

The result was a cultural transformation that affected almost every aspect of settler life. For instance, Puritans felt that corporal punishment was absolutely essential in the raising of children: the birch was required to teach children the meaning of authority, to break their will (tainted by original sin), in much the way one breaks a horse or other animal—in the same way as, they also held, the birch was required in adult life to discipline wives and servants. Most Native Americans in contrast felt that children should never be beaten, under any circumstances. In the 1690s, at the same time as the famous Boston Calvinist minister Cotton Mather was inveighing against pirates as a blaspheming scourge of mankind, he was also complaining that his fellow settlers, led astray by the ease of the climate in the New World and relaxed attitudes of its native inhabitants, had begun to undergo what he called “Indianization”—refusing to apply corporal punishment to their children, and thus undermining the principles of discipline, hierarchy, and formality that should govern relations between masters and servants, men and women, or young and old:

Though the first English planters in this country had usually a government and a discipline in their families and had a sufficient severity in it, yet, as if the climate had taught us to Indianize, the relaxation of it is now such that it is wholly laid aside, and a foolish indulgence to children is become an epidemical miscarriage of the country, and like to be attended with many evil consequences.²⁰

In other words, insofar as an individualistic, indulgent, freedom-loving spirit first began emerging among the colonists, the early Puritan Fathers laid it squarely at the feet of the Indians—or, as they still called them at the time, “the Americans,” since the settlers then still considered themselves not American but English. One of the

ironies of the “influence debate” is that in all the sound and fury over the Iroquois influence on the federal system, this was what Grinde and Johansen were really trying to emphasize: that ordinary Englishmen and Frenchmen settled in the colonies only began to think of themselves as “Americans,” as a new sort of freedom-loving people, when they began to see themselves as more like Indians.

What was true in towns like Boston was all the more true on the frontiers, especially in those communities often made up of escaped slaves and servants who “became Indians” outside the control of colonial governments entirely,²¹ or island enclaves of what historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have called “the Atlantic proletariat,” the motley collection of freedmen, sailors, ship’s whores, renegades, Antinomians, and rebels who developed in the port cities of the North Atlantic world before the emergence of modern racism, and from whom much of the democratic impulse of the American—and other—revolutions seems to have first emerged.²² Men like Mather would have agreed with that as well: he often wrote that Indian attacks on frontier settlements were God’s punishment on such folk for abandoning their rightful masters and living like Indians themselves.

If the history were truly written, it seems to me that the real origin of the democratic spirit—and most likely, many democratic institutions—lies precisely in those spaces of improvisation just outside the control of governments and organized churches. I might add that this includes the Haudenosaunee themselves. The league was originally formed—we don’t know precisely when—as a kind of contractual agreement among the Seneca, Onondaga, Cayuga, Oneida, and Mohawk (the sixth tribe, the Tuscarora, joined later) to create a way of mediating disputes and making peace; but during their period of expansion in the seventeenth century it became an extraordinary jumble of peoples, with large proportions of the population adopted war captives from other indigenous nations, captured settlers, and runaways. One Jesuit missionary at the height of the seventeenth century Beaver Wars complained that it was almost impossible to preach to the Seneca in their own language, since so many were barely fluent in it! Even during the eighteenth century, for instance, while Canassatego, the ambassador who first suggested a federation to the colonists, was born to Onondaga parents, the other main Haudenosaunee negotiator with the colonists at this time, Swatane, was actually French—or, anyway, originally born to French parents in Quebec. Like all living constitutions, the league was constantly changing and evolving, and no doubt much of the careful architecture and solemn dignity of its council structure was the product of just such a creative mix of cultures, tradition, and experience.

Why do conservatives insist that democracy was invented in ancient Greece, and that it is somehow inherent in what they call “Western civilization”—despite all the overwhelming evidence to the contrary? In the end, it’s just a way of doing what the rich and powerful always do: taking possession of the fruits of other people’s labor. It’s a way of staking a property claim. And property claims must be defended. This is why, if whenever someone like Amartya Sen appears (as he has recently done) to make the obvious point that democracy can just as easily be found in village councils in southern Africa, or India, one can count on an immediate wave of indignant responses in conservative journals and web pages arguing that he has completely missed the point.

Generally speaking, if you can find a concept—truth, freedom, democracy—that everyone agrees is a good thing, then you can be sure that no one will agree on precisely what it is. But the moment you ask why most Americans, or most people generally, like the idea of democracy, the conventional story not only falls apart, it becomes completely irrelevant.

Democracy was not invented in ancient Greece. Granted, the word “democracy” was invented in ancient Greece—but largely by people who didn’t like the thing itself very much. Democracy was never really “invented” at all. Neither does it emerge from any particular intellectual tradition. It’s not even really a mode of government. In its essence it is just the belief that humans are fundamentally equal and ought to be allowed to manage their collective affairs in an egalitarian fashion, using whatever means appear most conducive. That, and the hard work of bringing arrangements based on those principles into being.

In this sense democracy is as old as history, as human intelligence itself. No one could possibly own it. I suppose, if one were so inclined, one could argue it emerged the moment hominids ceased merely trying to bully one another and developed the communication skills to work out a common problem collectively. But such speculation is idle; the point is that democratic assemblies can be attested in all times and places, from Balinese seka to Bolivian ayllu, employing an endless variety of formal procedures, and will always crop up wherever a large group of people sat down together to make a collective decision on the principle that all taking part should have equal say.

One of the reasons it is easy for political scientists to ignore such local associations and assemblies when speaking of the history of democracy is that in most such assemblies, things never come down to a vote. The idea that democracy is simply a matter of voting—which the Founders, too, assumed—also allows one to think of it as an innovation, some sort of conceptual breakthrough: as if it had never occurred to anyone in previous epochs to test support for a proposal by asking people to all put up their hands, scratch something on a potsherd, or have everyone supporting a proposal stand on one side of a public square. But even if people throughout history have always known how to count, there are good reasons why counting has often been avoided as a means of reaching group decisions. Voting is divisive. If a community lacks means to compel its members to obey a collective decision, then probably the stupidest thing one could do is to stage a series of public contests in which one side will, necessarily, be seen to lose; this would not only allow decisions that as many as 49 percent of the community strongly oppose, it would also maximize the possibility of hard feelings among that part of the community one most needs to convince to go along despite their opposition. A process of consensus finding, of mutual accommodation and compromise to reach a collective decision everyone at least does not find strongly objectionable, is far more suited to situations where those who have to carry out a decision lack the sort of centralized bureaucracy, and particularly, the means of systematic coercion, that would be required to force an angry minority to comply with decisions they found stupid, obnoxious, or unfair.

Historically, it is extremely unusual to find both of these together. Throughout most of human history, egalitarian societies were precisely those that did not have some military or police apparatus to force people to do things they did not wish to do (all those *sekas* and *ayllus* referred to above); where the means of compulsion did exist, it never occurred to anyone that ordinary people's opinions were in any way important.

Where do we find voting, then? Sometimes in societies where spectacles of public competition are considered normal—such as ancient Greece (ancient Greeks would make a contest out of anything)—but mainly in situations where everyone taking part in an assembly is armed or, at least, trained in the use of weapons. In the ancient world, voting occurred mainly within armies. Aristotle was well aware of this: the constitution of a Greek state, he observed, largely depends on the chief arm of its military: if it's a cavalry, one can expect an aristocracy, if it's heavy infantry, voting rights will be extended to those wealthy men who can afford armor, if it's light troops, archers, slingers, or a navy (as in Athens), one can expect democracy. Similarly, in Rome, popular assemblies that also relied on majority vote were based directly on military units of one hundred men, called centuries. Underlying the institution was the rather commonsensical idea that if a man was armed, his opinions had to be taken into account. Ancient military units often elected their own officers. It's also easy to see why majority voting would make sense in a military unit: even if a vote was 60–40, both sides are armed; if it did come down to a fight, one could see immediately who was most likely to win. And this pattern applies, broadly, more or less across the historical record: in the 1600s, for instance, Six Nations councils—which were primarily engaged in peacemaking—operated by consensus, but pirate ships, which were military operations, used majority vote.

All this is important because it shows that the aristocratic fears of the wealthy early Patriots—who when they thought of their nightmare vision “democracy” thought of an armed populace making decisions by majority show of hands—were not entirely unfounded.

Democracy, then, is not necessarily defined by majority voting: it is, rather, the process of collective deliberation on the principle of full and equal participation. Democratic creativity, in turn, is most likely to occur when one has a diverse collection of participants, drawn from very different traditions, with an urgent need to improvise some means to regulate their common affairs, free of a preexisting overarching authority.

In today's North America, it's largely anarchists—proponents of a political philosophy that has generally been opposed to governments of any sort—who actively try to develop and promote such democratic institutions. In a way the anarchist identification with this notion of democracy goes back a long way. In 1550, or even 1750, when both words were still terms of abuse, detractors often used “democracy” interchangeably with “anarchy,” or “democrat” with “anarchist.” In each case, some radicals eventually began using the term, defiantly, to describe themselves. But while “democracy” gradually became something everyone felt they had to support (even as no one agreed on what precisely it was), “anarchy” took the opposite path, becoming for most a synonym for violent disorder.

What then is anarchism?

Actually the term means simply “without rulers.” Just as in the case of democracy, there are two different ways one could tell the history of anarchism. On the one hand, we could look at the history of the word “anarchism,” which was coined by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1840 and was adopted by a political movement in late-nineteenth-century Europe, becoming especially strongly established in Russia, Italy, and Spain, before spreading across the rest of the world; on the other hand, we could see it as a much broader political sensibility.

The easiest way to explain anarchism in either sense is to say that it is a political movement that aims to bring about a genuinely free society—and that defines a “free society” as one where humans only enter those kinds of relations with one another that would not have to be enforced by the constant threat of violence. History has shown that vast inequalities of wealth, institutions like slavery, debt peonage, or wage labor, can only exist if backed up by armies, prisons, and police. Even deeper structural inequalities like racism and sexism are ultimately based on the (more subtle and insidious) threat of force. Anarchists thus envision a world based on equality and solidarity, in which human beings would be free to associate with one another to pursue an endless variety of visions, projects, and conceptions of what they find valuable in life. When people ask me what sorts of organization could exist in an anarchist society, I always answer: any form of organization one can imagine, and probably many we presently can’t, with only one proviso—they would be limited to ones that could exist without anyone having the ability, at any point, to call on armed men to show up and say “I don’t care what you have to say about this; shut up and do what you’re told.”

In this sense there have always been anarchists: you find them pretty much any time a group of people confronted with some system of power or domination imposed over them object to it so violently that they begin imagining ways of dealing with each other free of any such forms of power or domination. Most such projects remain lost to history but every now and then evidence for one or another crops up. In China around 400 B.C., for example, there was a philosophical movement that came to be known as the “School of the Tillers,” which held that both merchants and government officials were both useless parasites, and attempted to create communities of equals where the only leadership would be by example, and the economy would be democratically regulated in unclaimed territories between the major states. Apparently, the movement was created by an alliance between renegade intellectuals who fled to such free villages and the peasant intellectuals they encountered there. Their ultimate aim appears to have been to gradually draw off defectors from surrounding kingdoms and thus, eventually, cause their collapse. This kind of encouragement of mass defection is a classic anarchist strategy. Needless to say they were not ultimately successful, but their ideas had enormous influence on court philosophers of later generations. And in the cities, anarchist

ideas gave rise to notions that the individual should not be bound by any social conventions and that all technology should be rejected in order to return to an imagined primitive utopia—a pattern that was to repeat itself many times through world history. Those individualist and primitivist ideas, in turn, had an enormous influence on the Taoist philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu.²³

How many similar movements have there been throughout human history? We cannot know. (We only happen to know about the Tillers because they also compiled manuals of agricultural technology so good they were read and recopied for thousands of years.) But really all the Tillers were doing was an intellectually self-conscious version of what, as James Scott has recently shown in his “anarchist history of Southeast Asia,” millions of people in that part of the world have been doing for centuries: flee from the control of nearby kingdoms and try to set up societies based on a rejection of everything those states represent; then try to convince others to do the same.²⁴ There are likely to have been many such movements winning free spaces of one sort or another from different states. My point is that such initiatives have always been around. For most of human history, rejection has been more likely to take the form of flight, defection, and the creation of new communities than of revolutionary confrontation with the powers-that-be. Of course, all this is much easier when there are distant hills to run away to and states that had difficulty extending their control over wide stretches of terrain. After the industrial revolution, when radical workers’ movements began to emerge across Europe, and some factory workers in places like France or Spain began to espouse openly anarchist ideas, this option was no longer available. Anarchists instead embraced a variety of strategies, from the formation of alternative economic enterprises (co-ops, mutualist banking), workplace strikes and sabotage, and the general strike, to outright insurrection.

Marxism emerged as a political philosophy around the same time and, in its early days especially, aspired to the same ultimate goal as anarchism: a free society, the abolition of all forms of social inequality, self-managed workplaces, the dissolution of the state. But from the debates surrounding the creation of the First International onwards there was a key difference. Most Marxists insisted that it was necessary first to seize state power—whether by the ballot or otherwise—and use its mechanisms to transform society, to the point where, the argument usually went, such mechanisms would ultimately become redundant and simply fade away into nothingness. Even back in the nineteenth century, anarchists pointed out this was a pipe dream. One cannot, they argued, create peace by training for war, equality by creating top-down chains of command, or, for that matter, human happiness by becoming grim joyless revolutionaries who sacrifice all personal self-realization or self-fulfillment to the cause. Anarchists insisted that it wasn’t just that the ends do not justify the means (though the ends do not, of course, justify the means) but that you will never achieve the ends at all unless the means are themselves a model for the world you wish to create. Hence the famous anarchist call to begin “building the new society in the shell of the old” with egalitarian experiments ranging from nonhierarchical schools (like the Escuela Moderna in Spain or the Free School movement in the United States) to radical labor unions (CGT in France, CNT in Spain, IWW in North America) to an endless variety of communes (from the Modern Times collective in New York in 1851 to Christiania in Denmark in 1971;

the kibbutz movement in Israel, which was originally largely anarchist-inspired, being perhaps the most famous and successful spin-off from such experiments).

Sometimes, too, around the turn of the nineteenth century, individual anarchists would strike directly against world leaders or robber barons (as they were then called) with assassinations or bombings: in the period from roughly 1894 to 1901 there was a particularly intense spate, which led to the deaths of one French president, one Spanish prime minister, and U.S. president William McKinley, as well as attacks on at least a dozen other kings, princes, secret police chiefs, industrialists, and heads of state. This is the period that produced the notorious popular image of the anarchist bomb thrower, which has lingered in the popular imagination ever since. Anarchist thinkers like Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman often struggled with what to say about such attacks, which were often carried out by isolated individuals who were not actually part of any anarchist union or association. Still, it's worthy of note that anarchists were perhaps the first modern political movement to (gradually) realize that, as a political strategy, terrorism, even when it is not directed at innocents, doesn't work. For nearly a century now, in fact, anarchism has been one of the very few political philosophies whose exponents never blow anyone up (indeed, the twentieth-century political leader who drew most from the anarchist tradition was Mohandas K. Gandhi). Yet for the period of roughly 1914 to 1989, during which time the world was continually either fighting or preparing for world wars, anarchism went into something of an eclipse for precisely that reason: to seem "realistic" in such violent times a political movement had to be capable of organizing tank armies, aircraft carriers, and ballistic missile systems, and that was one thing at which Marxists could often excel, but everyone recognized that anarchists—rather to their credit, in my opinion—would never be able to pull off. It was only after 1989, when the age of great-war mobilizations seemed to have come to an end, that a global revolutionary movement based on anarchist principles—the Global Justice Movement—reappeared.

There are endless varieties, colors, and tendencies of anarchism. For my own part, I like to call myself a "small-a" anarchist. I'm less interested in figuring out what sort of anarchist I am than in working in broad coalitions that operate in accord with anarchist principles: movements that are not trying to work through or become governments; movements uninterested in assuming the role of de facto government institutions like trade organizations or capitalist firms; groups that focus on making our relations with each other a model of the world we wish to create. In other words, people working toward truly free societies. After all, it's hard to figure out exactly what kind of anarchism makes the most sense when so many questions can only be answered further down the road. Would there be a role for markets in a truly free society? How could we know? I myself am confident, based on history,²⁵ that even if we did try to maintain a market economy in such a free society—that is, one in which there would be no state to enforce contracts, so that agreements came to be based only on trust—economic relations would rapidly morph into something libertarians would find completely unrecognizable, and would soon not resemble anything we are used to thinking of as a "market" at all. I certainly can't imagine

anyone agreeing to work for wages if they have any other options. But who knows, maybe I'm wrong. I am less interested in working out what the detailed architecture of what a free society would be like than in creating the conditions that would enable us to find out.

We have little idea what sort of organizations, or for that matter, technologies, would emerge if free people were unfettered to use their imagination to actually solve collective problems rather than to make them worse. But the primary question is: how do we even get there? What would it take to allow our political and economic systems to become a mode of collective problem solving rather than, as they are now, a mode of collective war?

Even anarchists have taken a very long time to come around to grappling with the full extent of this problem. When anarchism was part of the broader workers' movement, for example, it tended to accept that "democracy" meant majority voting and Robert's Rules of Order, relying on appeals to solidarity to convince the minority to go along. Appeals to solidarity can be very effective when one is locked in life-or-death conflict of one sort or another, as revolutionaries usually were. The CNT, the anarchist labor union in Spain of the 1920s and 1930s, relied on a principle that when a workplace voted to strike, no member who had voted against striking was bound by the decision; the result was, almost invariably, 100 percent compliance. But again, strikes were quasi-military operations. Local rural communes tended to fall back, as rural communities everywhere do, on some sort of de facto consensus.

In the United States, on the other hand, consensus, rather than majority voting, has often been used by grassroots organizers who were not, explicitly, anarchists: SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was the horizontal branch of the civil rights movement, operated by consensus, and SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, claimed in their constitutional principles to operate by parliamentary procedure, but in fact tended to rely on consensus in practice. Most of those who participated in such meetings felt the process used at the time was crude, improvised, and often extremely frustrating. Part of it was just because Americans, for all their democratic spirit, mostly had absolutely no experience of democratic deliberation. There's a famous story from the civil rights movement of a small group of activists trying to come to a collective decision in an emergency situation, unable to attain consensus. At one point, one of them gave up and pulled out a gun and aimed it directly at the facilitator. "Either make a decision for us," he said, "or I'll shoot you." The facilitator replied, "Well I guess you'll just have to shoot me then." It took a very long time to develop what might be called a culture of democracy, and when it did emerge, it came from surprising directions: spiritual traditions, Quakerism, for instance, and feminism.

The American Society of Friends, the Quakers, for instance, had spent centuries developing their own form of consensus decision making as a spiritual exercise. Quakers had also been active in most grassroots American social movements from Abolitionism onward, but until the 1970s they were not, for the most part, willing to teach others their techniques for the precise reason that they considered it a spiritual matter, a part of their religion. "You rely on consensus," George Lakey, a famous Quaker pacifist activist once explained, "when you have a shared

understanding of the theology. It is not to be imposed on people. Quakers, at least in the '50s, were anti-proselytizing.”²⁶ It was really only a crisis in the feminist movement—which started using informal consensus in small consciousness-raising groups of usually around a dozen people, but found themselves running into all sorts of problems with cliques and tacit leadership structures when those became larger in size—that eventually inspired some dissident Quakers (the most famous was Lakey himself) to pitch in and begin disseminating some of their techniques. These techniques, in turn, now infused with a specifically feminist ethos, came to be modified when adopted for larger and more diverse groups.²⁷

This is just one example of how what has now come to be called “Anarchist Process”—all those elaborate techniques of facilitation and consensus finding, the hand signals and the like—emerged from radical feminism, Quakerism, and even Native American traditions. In fact, the particular variety employed in North America should really be called “feminist process” rather than “anarchist process.” These methods became identified with anarchism precisely because anarchists recognized them to be forms that could be employed in a free society, in which no one could be physically coerced to go along with a decision they found profoundly objectionable.

Consensus is not just a set of techniques. When we talk about process, what we’re really talking about is the gradual creation of a culture of democracy. This brings us back to rethinking some of our most basic assumptions about what democracy is even about.

If we return to the writings of men like Adams and Madison or even Jefferson in this light, it’s easy to see that, elitist though they were, some of their criticisms of democracy deserve to be taken seriously. First of all, they argued that instituting a system of majoritarian direct democracy among white adult males in a society deeply divided by inequalities of wealth would likely lead to tumultuous, unstable, and ultimately bloody results, to the rise of demagogues and tyrants. Here they were probably right.

Another argument they made is that only established men of property should be allowed to vote and hold office because only they were sufficiently independent and therefore free of self-interest that they could afford to think about the common good. This latter is an important argument and deserves more attention than it has usually been given.

Obviously, the way it was framed was nothing if not elitist. The profound hypocrisy of arguing that the common people lacked education or rationality come through clearly in the writings of men like Gouverneur Morris, who was willing to admit, at least in a private letter to a fellow member of the gentry, that it was the opposite idea—that ordinary people had acquired education and were capable of framing rational arguments—that terrified him most of all.

But the real problem with arguments based on the presumed “irrationality” of the common people was in the underlying assumptions about what constituted “rationality.” One common argument against popular rule in the early republic was that the “eight or nine millions who have no property” as Adams put it, were incapable of rational judgment because they were unused to managing their own

affairs. Servants and wage laborers, let alone women and slaves, were accustomed to taking orders. Some among the elites held this to be because they were capable of nothing else; some simply saw it as the outcome of their habitual circumstances. But almost all agreed that if such people were given the vote, they would not think about what was best for the country but immediately attach themselves to some leader—either because that leader bought them off in some way (promised to abolish their debts, or even directly paid them), or just because following others is all they knew how to do. An excess of liberty, therefore, would only lead to tyranny as the people threw themselves to the mercies of charismatic leaders. At best, it would result in “factionalism,” a political system dominated by political parties—almost all the framers were strongly opposed to the emergence of a party system—battling over their respective interests. Here they were right: while major class warfare didn’t ensue—partly because of the existence of the escape hatch of the frontier—factionalism and political parties immediately followed once an even modestly expanded franchise began to be put into place in the 1820s and 1830s. The fears of the elites were not entirely misplaced.

The notion that only men with property can be fully rational, and that others exist primarily to follow orders, traces back at least to Athens. Aristotle states the matter quite explicitly in the beginning of his *Politics*, where he argues that only free adult males can be fully rational beings, in control of their own bodies, just as they are in control over others: their women, children, and slaves. Here then is the real flaw in the whole tradition of “rationality” that the Founders inherited. It’s not ultimately about self-sufficiency, being disinterested. To be rational in this tradition has everything to do with the ability to issue commands: to stand apart from a situation, assess it from a distance, make the appropriate set of calculations, and then tell others what to do.²⁸ Essentially, it is the kind of calculation one can make only when one can tell others to shut up and do as they are told, not work with them as free equals in search of solutions. It’s only the habit of command that allows one to imagine that the world can be reduced to the equivalent of mathematical formulae, formulae that can be applied to any situation, regardless of its real human complexities.

This is why any philosophy that begins by proposing that humans are, or should be, rational—as cold and calculating as a lord—invariably ends up concluding that, really, we’re the opposite: that reason, as Hume so famously put it, is always, and can only be, the “slave of the passions.” We seek pleasure; therefore we seek property, to guarantee our access to pleasure; therefore, we seek power, to guarantee our access to property. In every case there’s no natural end to it; we’ll always seek more and more and more. This theory of human nature is already present in the ancient philosophers (and is their explanation why democracy can only be disastrous), and recurs in the Christian tradition of Saint Augustine in the guise of original sin, and in the atheist Thomas Hobbes’s theory of why a state of nature could only have been a violent “war of all against all,” and again, of course, of why democracy must necessarily be disastrous. The creators of the eighteenth-century republican constitutions shared these assumptions as well. Humans were really incorrigible. So for all the occasional high-minded language, most of these

philosophers were ultimately willing to admit that the only real choice was between utterly blind passions and the rational calculation of the interests of an elite class; the ideal constitution, therefore, was one designed to ensure that such interests checked each other and ultimately balanced off.

This has some curious implications. On the one hand, it is universally held that democracy means little without free speech, a free press, and the means for open political deliberation and debate. At the same time, most theorists of liberal democracy—from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to John Rawls—grant that sphere of deliberation an incredibly limited purview, since they assume a set of political actors (politicians, voters, interest groups) who already know what they want before they show up in the political arena. Rather than using the political sphere to decide how to balance competing values, or make up their minds about the best course of action, such political actors, if they think about anything, consider only how best to pursue their already existing interests.²⁹

So this leaves us with a democracy of the “rational,” where we define rationality as detached mathematical calculation born of the power to issue commands, the kind of “rationality” that will inevitably produce monsters. As the basis for a true democratic system, these terms are clearly disastrous. But what is the alternative? How to found a theory of democracy on the kind of reasoning that goes on, instead, between equals?

One reason this has been difficult to do is that this sort of reasoning is actually more complex and sophisticated than simple mathematical calculation, and therefore doesn't lend itself to the quantifiable models beloved of political scientists and those who assess grant applications. After all, when one asks if a person is being rational, we aren't asking very much: really, just whether they are capable of making basic logical connections. The matter rarely comes up unless one suspects someone might actually be crazy or perhaps so blinded by passion that their arguments make no sense. Consider, in contrast, what's entailed when one asks if someone is being “reasonable.” The standard here is much higher. Reasonableness implies a much more sophisticated ability to achieve a balance between different perspectives, values, and imperatives, none of which, usually, could possibly be reduced to mathematical formulae. It means coming up with a compromise between positions that are, according to formal logic, incommensurable, just as there's no formal way, when deciding what to cook for dinner, to measure the contrasting advantages of ease of preparation, healthiness, and taste. But of course we make such decisions all the time. Most of life—particularly life with others—consists of making reasonable compromises that could never be reduced to mathematical models.

Another way to put this is that political theorists tend to assume actors who are operating on the intellectual level of an eight-year-old. Developmental psychologists have observed that children begin to make logical arguments not to solve problems, but when coming up with reasons for what they already want to think. Anyone who deals with small children on a regular basis will immediately recognize that this is true. The ability to compare and coordinate contrasting perspectives on the other hand comes later and is the very essence of mature intelligence. It's also precisely what those used to the power of command rarely have to do.

The philosopher Stephen Toulmin, already famous for his models of moral reasoning, made something of an intellectual splash in the 1990s when he tried to develop a similar contrast between rationality and reasonableness: though he started his analysis on the basis for rationality as deriving not from the power of command, but from the need for absolute certainty. Contrasting the generous spirit of an essayist like Montaigne, who wrote in the expansive Europe of the sixteenth century and assumed that truth is always situational, with the well-nigh paranoid rigor of René Descartes, who wrote a century later when Europe had collapsed into bloody wars of religion and who conceived a vision of society as based on purely “rational” grounds, Toulmin proposed that all subsequent political thought has been bedeviled by attempts to apply impossible standards of abstract rationality to concrete human realities. But Toulmin wasn’t the first to propose the distinction. I myself first encountered it in a rather whimsical essay published in 1960 by the British poet Robert Graves called “The Case for Xanthippe.”

For those who lack the classical education of New York’s early butchers and bakers,^b Xanthippe was Socrates’ wife, and has gone down in history as an atrocious nag. Socrates’ equanimity in enduring (ignoring) her is regularly held out as a proof of his nobility of character. Graves begins by pointing out: why is it that for two thousand years, no one seems to have asked what it might have actually been like to be married to Socrates? Imagine you were saddled with a husband who did next to nothing to support a family, spent all his time trying to prove everyone he met was wrong about everything, and felt true love was only possible between men and underage boys? You wouldn’t express some opinions about this? Socrates has been held out ever since as the paragon of a certain unrelenting notion of pure consistency, an unflinching determination to follow arguments to their logical conclusions, which is surely useful in its way—but he was not a very reasonable person, and those who celebrate him have ended up producing a “mechanized, insensate, inhumane, abstract rationality” that has done the world enormous harm. Graves writes that as a poet, he feels no choice but to identify himself more with those frozen out of the “rational” space of Greek city, starting with women like Xanthippe, for whom reasonableness doesn’t exclude logic (no one is actually against logic) but combines it with a sense of humor, practicality, and simple human decency.

With that in mind, it only makes sense that so much of the initiative for creating new forms of democratic process—like consensus—has emerged from the tradition of feminism, which means (among other things) the intellectual tradition of those who have, historically, tended not to be vested with the power of command. Consensus is an attempt to create a politics founded on the principle of reasonableness—one that, as feminist philosopher Deborah Heikes has pointed out, requires not only logical consistency, but “a measure of good judgment, self-criticism, a capacity for social interaction, and a willingness to give and consider reasons.”³⁰ Genuine deliberation, in short. As a facilitation trainer would likely put it, it requires the ability to listen well enough to understand perspectives that are

fundamentally different from one's own, and then try to find pragmatic common ground without attempting to convert one's interlocutors completely to one's own perspective. It means viewing democracy as common problem solving among those who respect the fact they will always have, like all humans, somewhat incommensurable points of view.

This is how consensus is supposed to work: the group agrees, first, to some common purpose. This allows the group to look at decision making as a matter of solving common problems. Seen this way, a diversity of perspectives, even a radical diversity of perspectives, while it might cause difficulties, can also be an enormous resource. After all, what sort of team is more likely to come up with a creative solution to a problem: a group of people who all see matters somewhat differently, or a group of people who all see things exactly the same?

As I've already observed, spaces of democratic creativity are precisely those where very different sorts of people, coming from very different traditions, are suddenly forced to improvise. One reason is because in such situations, people are forced to reconcile divergent assumptions about what politics is even about. In the 1980s, a group of would-be Maoist guerrillas from urban Mexico descended to the mountains of the Mexican southwest, where they began to create revolutionary networks, first by beginning women's literacy campaigns. Eventually, they became the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, who initiated a brief insurrection in 1994—not, however, to overthrow the state, but to create a liberated territory in which largely indigenous communities could begin experimenting with new forms of democracy. From the beginning, there were constant differences between the originally urban intellectuals, like the famous Subcomandante Marcos, who assumed democracy meant majority vote and elected representatives, and Mam, Choliti, Tzeltal, and Tzotzil speakers, whose communal assemblies had always operated by consensus, and preferred to see a system where, if delegates had to be selected, they could be recalled the moment communities no longer felt they were conveying the communal will. As Marcos recalled, they soon found there was no agreement about what “democracy” actually meant:

The communities are promoting democracy. But the concept seems vague. There are many kinds of democracy. That's what I tell them. I try to explain to them: “You can operate by consensus because you have a communal life.” When they arrive at an assembly, they know each other, they come to solve a common problem. “But in other places it isn't so,” I tell them. “People live separate lives and they use the assembly for other things, not to solve the problem.”

And they say, “no,” but it means “yes, it works for us.”

And it indeed does work for them, they solve the problem. So they propose that method for the Nation and the world. The world must organize itself thus.... And it is very difficult to go against that because that is how they solve their problems.³¹

Let us take this proposal seriously. Why shouldn't democracy be a matter of collective problem solving? We might have very different ideas about what life is ultimately about, but it's perfectly apparent that human beings on this planet share a large number of common problems (climate change comes most readily to mind as a pressing and immediate one, but there are any number of them) that we would

do well to work together to try to solve. Everyone seems to agree that in principle it would be better to do this democratically, in a spirit of equality and reasonable deliberation. Why does the idea that we might actually do so seem like such a utopian pipe dream?

Perhaps instead of asking what the best political system is that our current social order could support, we should be asking, What social arrangements would be necessary in order for us to have a genuine, participatory, democratic system that could dedicate itself to solving collective problems?^c

It seems kind of an obvious question. If we are not used to asking it, it's because we've been taught from an early age that the answer is itself unreasonable. Because the answer, of course, is anarchism.

In fact, there is reason to believe the Founders were right: one cannot create a political system based on the principle of direct, participatory democracy in a society such as their own, divided by vast inequalities of wealth, the total exclusion of the bulk of the population (in early America, women, slaves, indigenous people), and where most people's lives were organized around the giving and taking of orders. Nor is it possible in a society such as our own, in which 1 percent of the population controls 42 percent of the wealth.

If you propose the idea of anarchism to a roomful of ordinary people, someone will almost inevitably object: but of course we can't eliminate the state, prisons, and police. If we do, people will simply start killing one another. To most, this seems simple common sense. The odd thing about this prediction is that it can be empirically tested; in fact, it frequently has been empirically tested. And it turns out to be false. True, there are one or two cases like Somalia, where the state broke down when people were already in the midst of a bloody civil war, and warlords did not immediately stop killing each other when it happened (though in most respects, even in Somalia, a worst-case hypothesis, education, health, and other social indicators had actually improved twenty years after the dissolution of the central state!).³² And of course we hear about the cases like Somalia for the very reason that violence ensues. But in most cases, as I myself observed in parts of rural Madagascar, very little happens. Obviously, statistics are unavailable, since the absence of states generally also means the absence of anyone gathering statistics. However, I've talked to many anthropologists and others who've been in such places and their accounts are surprisingly similar. The police disappear, people stop paying taxes, otherwise they pretty much carry on as they had before. Certainly they do not break into a Hobbesian "war of all against all."

As a result, we almost never hear about such places at all. When I was living in the town of Arivonimamo in 1990, and wandering about the surrounding countryside, even I had no idea at first that I was living in an area where state control had effectively disappeared (I think part of the reason for my impression was that everyone talked and acted as if state institutions were still functioning, hoping no one would notice). When I returned in 2010, the police had returned, taxes were once again being collected, but everyone also felt that violent crime had increased dramatically.

So the real question we have to ask becomes: what is it about the experience of living under a state, that is, in a society where rules are enforced by the threat of prisons and police, and all the forms of inequality and alienation that makes possible, that makes it seem obvious to us that people, under such conditions, would behave in a way that it turns out they don't actually behave?

The anarchist answer is simple. If you treat people like children, they will tend to act like children. The only successful method anyone has ever devised to encourage others to act like adults is to treat them as if they already are. It's not infallible. Nothing is. But no other approach has any real chance of success. And the historical experience of what actually does happen in crisis situations demonstrates that even those who have not grown up in a culture of participatory democracy, if you take away their guns or ability to call their lawyers, can suddenly become extremely reasonable.³³ This is all that anarchists are really proposing to do.

* The same is true of all thirteen of the original state constitutions created after the Revolution.

† The uprisings are known to history as Shays' Rebellion, and even more condescendingly, the Whiskey Rebellion, though the latter name was consciously invented by Alexander Hamilton to dismiss the rebels as drunken hillbillies rather than, as Terry Bouton has demonstrated, citizens calling for greater democratic control. See Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). There has been a wealth of recent research on the topic: notably, Woody Holton's *Unruly Americans and the Origin of the Constitution* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), and William Hogeland's *The Whiskey Rebellion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), and *Founding Finance: How Debt, Speculation, Foreclosures, Protests, and Crackdowns Made Us a Nation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012). The intellectual tradition goes back at least to Charles Beard's famous *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: McMillan, 1913), which pointed out the Framers were almost exclusively bondholders, though his original conclusions have been much further refined by subsequent research.

‡ Husband had called for a relatively equal distribution of landed property as well, on the grounds that inequalities of property mitigate against democratic participation, and for voting districts small enough that representatives could regularly consult with their constituents. It is likely he was exactly who Adams was thinking of in his remarks about the dangers of majority vote.

§ This passage is the opening epigraph of William Hogeland's *The Whiskey Rebellion*, which emphasizes the degree to which the resulting document was careful to avoid actual democracy.

|| In the twelve collected volumes of Jefferson's work the word "democracy" appears once, and only then in a quote by Samuel von Pufendorf about the legalities of treaties! Of course, Jefferson was the closest to an advocate of direct democracy as

there was among the Founders, with his famous vision of dividing the country into thousands of “wards” small enough to afford public participation, allowing citizens to maintain the same sort of popular mobilization witnessed during the Revolution—but even these he referred to as small republics.

a With a few die-hard exceptions. I should note here that the first mass use of consensus process, in the antinuclear movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, was often quite rocky—partly out of simple lack of experience, partly out of purism (it was only later that modified consensus for larger groups came into common use)—and many who went through the experience, most famously libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin, who promoted the idea of communalism, came out strongly against consensus and for majority rule.

b One does sometimes worry that the Gouverneur Morris of the world have ultimately been successful in preventing such knowledge from reaching most of the population.

c It wouldn't have to be based on a system of strict consensus, by the way, since, as we'll see, absolute consensus is unrealistic in large groups—let alone on a planetary scale! What I am talking about is just what I say: an approach to politics, whatever particular institutional form it takes, that similarly sees political deliberation as problem solving rather than as a struggle between fixed interests.

NOTES

1. Matthew Continetti, “Anarchy in the U.S.A.: The Roots of American Disorder,” *Weekly Standard*, November 28, 2011.
2. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1854), Volume 6, p. 481.
3. R. C. Winthrop, *The Life and Letters of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1869).
4. James Madison, “Federalist #10,” in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 103. Note that while Madison calls this “pure democracy,” and Adams, “simple democracy,” rule by popular assembly is the only form of government to which they are willing to give the name.
5. *Federalist Papers*, No. 10, p. 119.
6. For a good description of how parliamentary elections worked under Henry VII, see P. R. Cavill, *The English Parliaments of Henry VII, 1485–1504* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 117–31. Generally the electorate was a local council of worthies; in London, for instance, such a group might consist of 150 out of 3,000 local inhabitants.
7. Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: The

- Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 38. In ancient Greece, for instance, democracies tended to choose holders of executive positions by lot, from among a pool of volunteers, while election was considered the oligarchic approach.
8. See John Markoff, "Where and When Was Democracy Invented?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no.4 (1991): 663–65.
 9. Gouverneur Morris to [John] Penn, May 20, 1774, in Jared Sparks, *The Life of Gouverneur Morris: With Selections from His Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers: Detailing Events in the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and in the Political History of the United States* (Boston: Grey & Bowen, 1830), p. 25.
 10. Both quoted from Morris in E. James Ferguson, *The Power of the Purse: A History of American Public Finance, 1776–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 68.
 11. Adams, *The Works*, Volume 6, pp. 8–9.
 12. Madison, *Federalist Papers*, No. 10, pp. 54–55.
 13. Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 183.
 14. Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: J. Conrad, 1805), pp. 292–93.
 15. Francis Dupuis-Déri, "History of the Word 'Democracy' in Canada and Québec: A Political Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies," *World Political Science Review*, 6, no. 1 (2010): 3–4.
 16. John Markoff, "Where and When Was Democracy Invented?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, no. 41 (1999): 673.
 17. As reconstructed by Marcus Rediker in *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
 19. Colin Calloway, *New Worlds for All* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). (cf. Axtell 1985)
 20. Cotton Mather, *Things for a Distress'd People to Think Upon* (Boston, 1696).
 21. Ron Sakolsky and James Koehnline, *Gone to Croatan: Origins of North American Dropout Culture* (Oakland: AK Press, 1993).
 22. Mediker, *Many-Headed Hydra* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
 23. Angus Graham, *The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2001).
 24. James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
 25. Many of the historical reasons for my thinking on this are outlined in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), particularly chaps. 10–12.

26. Quoted in Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 39.
27. I am offering only a very brief summary of what happened because I have written about it at greater length elsewhere. See, for instance, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), pp. 228–37.
28. As Aristotle puts it: “Here the very constitution of the soul has shown us the way; in it one part naturally rules, and the other is subject, and the virtue of the ruler we maintain to be different from that of the subject; the one being the virtue of the rational, and the other of the irrational part. Now, it is obvious that the same principle applies generally, and therefore almost all things rule and are ruled according to nature. But the kind of rule differs; the freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in any of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.” *Politics* 1.30. I’m grateful to Thomas Gibson for pointing out how odd this view of human nature is compared to almost any other agrarian society.
29. I owe this reflection to a brilliant essay by the French political philosopher Bernard Manin.
30. Deborah K. Heikes, *Rationality and Feminist Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 146.
31. Samuel Blixen and Carlos Fazio, “Interview with Marcos About Neoliberalism, the National State and Democracy,” *Struggle* archive, Autumn 1995, http://www.struggle.ws/mexico/ezln/inter_marcos_aut95.html.
32. The evidence has recently been surveyed in a working paper by economist Peter Leeson, who concluded that “while the state of development remains low, on nearly all of 18 key indicators that allow pre- and post-stateless welfare comparisons, Somalis are better off under anarchy than they were under government.” See Leeson, “Better Off Stateless: Somalia Before and After Government Collapse,” *Journal of Comparative Economics*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2007. You can find the full essay at www.peterleeson.com/Better_Off_Stateless.pdf.
33. Rebecca Solnit, for instance, has written a brilliant book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York, Viking Books, 2009), about what actually happens in natural disasters: people almost invariably invent forms of spontaneous cooperation and, often, democratic decision making that dramatically contrasts with the way they are used to behaving in their ordinary lives.

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