
LECTURE III: WHAT IS THE COMMON GOOD?

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WHAT KIND OF CREATURES ARE WE?

LECTURE III: WHAT IS THE COMMON GOOD?

In the past two lectures, I have been looking at the closely related topics of language and thought. Close inquiry reveals, I think, that they have many striking properties, for the most part hidden from direct observation and in important respects not accessible to consciousness. Among these are the basic structure and design of the underlying computational system of the “language of thought” provided by the internal language, the I-language, that each person has mastered, with rich but bounded scope determined by our essential nature. Furthermore, the atoms of computation, the atomic concepts of language and thought, appear to be unique to humans in fundamental respects, raising difficult problems about their origins, problems that cannot be productively investigated unless the properties of the phenotype are carefully taken into account. Inquiry reveals as well, I think, that the reach of human thought is itself bounded by the “limits on admissible hypotheses” that yield its richness and depth, leaving mysteries that will resist the kind of understanding to which creators of the early modern scientific revolution aspired, as was recognized in various ways by the great figures of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought; and also opening possibilities for research into intriguing questions that have been too little explored.

I have so far been keeping to certain cognitive aspects of human nature, and thinking of people as individuals. But of course humans are social beings, and the kind of creatures we become depends crucially on the social, cultural, and institutional circumstances of our lives. We are therefore led to inquire into the social arrangements that are conducive to the rights and welfare of people, to fulfilling their just aspirations—in brief, the common good.

I have also been keeping largely to what seem to me virtual truisms, though of an odd kind, since they are generally rejected. I would like to suggest some more of these today, with the same odd features. And with the broader scope of the concerns I will try to address, these alleged truisms relate to an interesting category of ethical principles: those that are not only universal, in that they are virtually always professed, but doubly universal, in that at the same time they are almost universally rejected in practice. These range from very general principles, such as the truism that we should apply to ourselves the same standards we do to others, if not harsher ones, to more specific doctrines, such as dedication to promoting justice and human rights, proclaimed almost universally, even by the worst monsters, though the actual record is grim, across the spectrum.

A good place to start is with Mill's classic *On Liberty*. Its epigraph formulates "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges: the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity." The words are quoted from Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the founders of classical liberalism among many other accomplishments. It follows that institutions that constrain such human development are illegitimate, unless they can somehow justify themselves.

Humboldt was expressing views that were familiar during the Enlightenment. Another illustration is Adam Smith's sharp critique of division of labor, and particularly his reasons.¹ In his words, "The understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments," and that being so, "the man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding...and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to be....But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it." Concern for the common good should impel us to find ways to overcome the devilish impact of these disastrous policies, from the educational system to the conditions of work, providing opportunities to exert the understanding and cultivate human development in its richest diversity.

Smith's sharp critique of division of labor is not as well known as his fulsome praise for its great benefits. In fact, in the University of Chicago scholarly bicentennial edition, it is not even listed in the index. But it is an instructive illustration of Enlightenment ideals that are founding principles of classical liberalism.

Smith perhaps felt that it should not be too difficult to institute such humane policies as these. He opens his *Moral Sentiments* by observing that "However selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it." Despite the power of the "vile maxim of the masters of mankind"—"All for ourselves, and nothing for other people"—the more benign "original passions of human nature" might compensate for that pathology.²

¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (1776; repr., Chicago: University Press, 1976), Bk. V, Ch. I, Pt. III, Art. II (ii, 302–03).

² Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; repr., New York: Penguin, 2009). "Vile maxim": *Wealth of Nations*, Bk. III, Ch. IV (i, 437).

Classical liberalism was wrecked on the shoals of capitalism, but its humanistic commitments and aspirations did not die. In the modern period, similar ideas are reiterated, for example, by an important political thinker who described what he called “a definite trend in the historic development of mankind,” which strives for “the free unhindered unfolding of all the individual and social forces in life.” The author was Rudolf Rocker, a leading twentieth-century anarchist thinker and activist.³ He was outlining an anarchist tradition culminating in his view in anarcho-syndicalism—in European terms, a variety of “libertarian socialism.” These ideas, he held, do not depict “a fixed, self-enclosed social system” with a definite answer to all the multifarious questions and problems of human life, but rather a trend in human development that strives to attain Enlightenment ideals.

The terms of political discourse are hardly models of precision. Considering the way the terms are used, it is next to impossible to give meaningful answers to such questions as “What is socialism?” Or capitalism, or free markets, or others in common usage. That is even more true of the term “anarchism.” It has been subject to widely varied use, and outright abuse both by bitter enemies and those who hold its banner high, so much so that it resists any straightforward characterization. But I think Rocker’s formulation captures leading ideas that animate at least some major currents of the rich and complex and often contradictory traditions of anarchist thought and action.

So understood, anarchism is the inheritor of the classical liberal ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment. It is part of a broader range of libertarian socialist thought and action that ranges from the left anti-Bolshevik Marxism of Anton Pannekoek, Karl Korsch, Paul Mattick, and others, to the anarcho-syndicalism that crucially includes the practical achievements of revolutionary Spain in 1936, reaching further to worker-owned enterprises spreading today in the U.S. rust belt, in northern Mexico, in Egypt, and many other countries, most extensively in the Basque country in Spain, also encompassing the many cooperative movements around the world and a good part of feminist and civil and human rights initiatives.

This broad tendency in human development seeks to identify structures of hierarchy, authority, and domination that constrain human development, and then to subject them to a very reasonable challenge: Justify yourself. Demonstrate that you are legitimate,

³Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938).

either in some special circumstances at a particular stage of society, or in principle. And if they cannot meet that challenge, they should be dismantled. And not just dismantled, but also reconstructed, and for anarchists, “refashioned from below,” as Nathan Schneider observes in a recent commentary on anarchism.⁴

In part this sounds like truism: Why should anyone defend illegitimate structures and institutions? The perception is correct; the principle should be regarded as truism. But truisms at least have the merit of being true, which distinguishes them from a good deal of political discourse. And I think these truisms provide some useful stepping stones to finding the common good.

These particular truisms belong to the interesting category of moral principles that I mentioned earlier: those that are doubly universal. Among these is the truism that we should challenge coercive institutions and reject those that cannot demonstrate their legitimacy, dismantling them and reconstructing them from below. It is hard to see how it can plausibly be rejected in principle, though as usual to act on the principle is not as easy as to enunciate it grandly.

Proceeding with the same thoughts, again quoting Rocker, anarchism “seeks to free labor from economic exploitation” and to free society from “ecclesiastical or political guardianship,” thereby opening the way to “an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labor and a planned administration of things in the interest of the community.” As an anarchist *activist*, Rocker goes on to call on popular organizations to create “not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself” within the present society, following Bakunin’s injunction.

A traditional anarchist slogan is “Ni Dieu, Ni Maître”—No God, No Master—a phrase that Daniel Guerin took as the title of his valuable collection of anarchist classics. I think it is fair to understand the slogan “No God” in Rocker’s terms: opposition to ecclesiastical *guardianship*. Individual beliefs are a different matter. That leaves open the door to the lively and impressive tradition of Christian anarchism, for example Dorothy Day’s Catholic Workers Movement. And to many achievements of the liberation theology that was initiated half a century ago in Vatican II, igniting a vicious U.S. war against the Church to destroy the heresy of a return to the radical pacifist message of the Gospels. The war was a success, according to the School of the Americas (since renamed), which trains Latin

⁴Nathan Schneider, “Introduction: Anarcho-Curious? or, Anarchist America,” in Noam Chomsky, *On Anarchism* (New York: New Press, 2013), pp. vii–xvi, at p. xi.

American killers and torturers, and boasts triumphantly that the U.S. Army helped defeat liberation theology.⁵ So it did, leaving a trail of religious martyrs, part of a hideous plague of repression that consumed the hemisphere.

Most of this is out of conventional history, because of the fallacy of wrong agency. We would know the details very well if the crimes could be attributed to an official enemy, another illustration of those interesting doubly universal ethical principles.

Genuine scholarship of course is well aware that from 1960 until “the Soviet collapse in 1990, the numbers of political prisoners, torture victims, and executions of nonviolent political dissenters in Latin America vastly exceeded those in the Soviet Union and its East European satellites. In other words, from 1960 to 1990, the Soviet bloc as a whole was less repressive, measured in terms of human victims, than many individual Latin American countries....an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe” in Central America alone, particularly during the Reagan years.⁶

Among those executed were many religious martyrs, and there were mass slaughters as well, consistently supported or initiated by Washington. The reasons for the plague of repression had little to do with the Cold War, as we discover when we look beyond the standard rhetorical framework; rather, it was a reaction to the fact that subjects were daring to raise their heads, inspired in part by the return of the Church to the “preferential option of the poor” of the Gospels.

Dostoyevsky’s parable of the Grand Inquisitor comes at once to mind.

The phrase “No Master” is different: it refers not to individual belief, but to a social relation, a relation of subordination and dominance that anarchism seeks to dismantle and rebuild from below, unless it can somehow meet the harsh burden of establishing its legitimacy.

By now we have departed from truism to ample controversy. In particular, at this point the American brand of libertarianism departs sharply from the libertarian tradition, accepting and indeed advocating the subordination of working people to the masters of the

⁵ United States Army, School of the Americas, May 1999, cited in Adam Isacson and Joy Olson, *Just the Facts: A Civilian’s Guide to U.S. Defense and Security Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, D.C.: Latin America Working Group, 1999).

⁶ John H. Coatsworth, “The Cold War in Central America, 1975–1991,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume III: Endings* (New York: Cambridge, 2010), pp. 201–21, at p. 221.

economy, and the subjection of everyone to the restrictive discipline and destructive features of markets. These are topics worth pursuing but I will put them aside here, while at the same time noting that there may be ways to bring together the energies of libertarian left and right—as is sometimes done, for example in the valuable theoretical and practical work of economist David Ellerman.⁷

Anarchism is, famously, opposed to the state, while advocating “planned administration of things in the interest of the community,” in Rocker’s words; and beyond that, wide-ranging federations of self-governing communities and workplaces. In the real world of today, anarchists dedicated to these goals often support state power to protect people, society, and the earth itself from the ravages of concentrated private capital. Take, say, a venerable anarchist journal like *Freedom*, established as a journal of anarchist socialism by followers of Kropotkin in 1886. Opening its pages we find that many are devoted to defending these rights, often by invoking state power, like regulation of safety and health and environmental protection.

There is no contradiction here. People live and suffer and endure in the real world of existing society, and any decent person should favor employing what means are available to safeguard and benefit them, even if a long-term goal is to displace these devices and construct preferable alternatives. In discussing such concerns, I have sometimes borrowed an image used by the Brazilian rural workers movement.⁸ They speak of widening the floors of the cage, the cage of existing coercive institutions that can be widened by popular struggle, as has happened effectively over many years. And we can extend the image to think of the cage of coercive state institutions as a protection from savage beasts roaming outside, the predatory state-supported capitalist institutions that are dedicated in principle to the vile maxim of the masters, to private gain, power, and domination, with the interest of the community and its members at most a footnote, perhaps revered in rhetoric but dismissed in practice as a matter of principle and even law.

It is also worth remembering that the states that anarchists condemned were actually existing states, not visions of unrealized democratic dreams, such as government of, by, and for the people. They bitterly opposed the rule of what Bakunin called “the red bureaucracy,” which he predicted, all too accurately, would be among the

⁷David Ellerman, *Property and Contract in Economics: The Case for Economic Democracy* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

⁸Biorn Maybury-Lewis, *The Politics of the Possible: The Brazilian Rural Workers’ Trade Union Movement, 1964–1985* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1994).

most savage of human creations. And they also opposed parliamentary systems that are instruments of class rule: the contemporary United States, for example. Some of the most respected work in academic political science compares attitudes and policy, the latter evident, the former accessible in careful polling that yields fairly consistent results. The most detailed current work reveals that the majority of the population is effectively disenfranchised.⁹ About seventy percent, at the lower end of the wealth/income scale, have no influence on policy. As we move up the scale influence slowly increases, and at the very top we reach those who pretty much determine policy, by means that are not obscure. The resulting system is not democracy but plutocracy.

Recognition of the fact is so deeply internalized that it becomes virtually invisible, sometimes in remarkable ways. Consider health care, which for years has ranked high among concerns of Americans. And for good reasons. The health care system is a scandal. It has about twice the per capita costs of OECD countries along with relatively poor outcomes, and is a tremendous drain on the economy. It is also the only system that is largely privatized and unregulated.

The facts are noted in instructive ways. A review of the health care fiasco in the *New York Times* observes that the U.S. “is fundamentally handicapped in its quest for cheaper health care: All other developed countries rely on a large degree of direct government intervention, negotiation or rate-setting to achieve lower-priced medical treatment for all citizens. That is not politically acceptable here.” An expert is quoted as tracing the complexity of the Affordable Care Act to “the political need in the U.S. to rely on the private market to provide health care access.” One consequence is “Kafkaesque” bills because “Even Medicare is not allowed to negotiate drug prices for its tens of millions of beneficiaries.”

The problem of “political impossibility” has been noted before. Thus in the 2004 presidential campaign, the *New York Times* reported, candidate John Kerry “took pains...to say that his plan for expanding access to health insurance would not create a new government program,” because “there is so little political support for government intervention in the health care market in the United States.”¹⁰

⁹ Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton: University Press, 2012); Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton: University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Rosenthal, “Health Care’s Road to Ruin,” *New York Times*, Dec. 21, 2013. Gardiner Harris, “In American Health Care, Drug Shortages Are Chronic,” *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2004.

Why is government intervention, even negotiation to set drug prices, “not politically acceptable here”? Why does it have “so little political support”? As polls have made clear for years, that is not because of public opinion. Quite the contrary. Thus 85% of the public favor “allowing the federal government to negotiate with drug companies to try to get lower drug prices for seniors.” When Obama abandoned a public option it had about 2/3 popular support. In past years there has been very high public support for a national health plan of the kind familiar in developed countries, sometimes poorer ones as well. Support has been so high that in the late Reagan years, more than 70% of the public “thought health care should be a constitutional guarantee,” while 40% “thought it already was.”¹¹

The tacit understanding is that “political support” means support by the pharmaceutical corporations and financial institutions. They determine what is “politically acceptable.” In short, plutocracy, rising to the level of virtual necessary truth.

Or perhaps, a little more kindly, it is what British legal scholar Conor Gearty calls “neo-democracy,” a partner of neo-liberalism, a system in which liberty is enjoyed by the few and security in its fullest sense is available only to the elite, but within a system of more general formal rights.¹² It is a society that is free in the Hobbesian sense that a person “is not hindered to do what he has a will to do,” and “If I choose not to do something merely because I dread the consequences, this does not mean that I am not free to do it; it merely means that I do not want to, that is, I am still free,” so Hobbes explains. If the choice is starvation or servitude, and nothing hinders the choice, then we are free; it is merely that we do not choose starvation, dreading the consequences.

In contrast, a truly democratic system would seek to achieve the Humboldtian ideal. It might well have the character of “an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labor and a planned administration of things in the interest of the community,” quoting Rocker again. In fact, that is not so remote from at least one version of the democratic ideal. One version. I will return to others.

Take for example John Dewey, whose major social and political concerns were democracy and education. No one took Dewey to be

¹¹ Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, April 2009. Polls: see Chomsky, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2006), chapter 6.

¹² Conor Gearty, *Liberty and Security* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013).

an anarchist. But consider his ideas.¹³ In his conception of democracy, illegitimate structures of coercion must be dismantled. That includes, crucially, domination by “business for private profit through private control of banking, land, industry, reinforced by command of the press, press agents and other means of publicity and propaganda.” He recognized that “Power today resides in control of the means of production, exchange, publicity, transportation and communication. Whoever owns them rules the life of the country,” even if democratic forms remain. Until those institutions are in the hands of the public, politics will remain “the shadow cast on society by big business,” much as we see today.

But Dewey went well beyond calling for some form of public control. In a free and democratic society, he wrote, workers should be “the masters of their own industrial fate,” not tools rented by employers, nor directed by state authorities. That position traces back to leading ideas of classical liberalism articulated by von Humboldt and Smith, among others, and extended in the anarchist tradition.

Turning to education, Dewey held that it is “illiberal and immoral” to train children to work “not freely and intelligently, but for the sake of the work earned”—to achieve test scores for example—in which case their activity is “not free because not freely participated in.” To use imagery dating from the Enlightenment, education should not be a matter of pouring water into a vessel—and a very leaky vessel as we have all experienced—but rather, to borrow from von Humboldt again, it should be conceived as laying out a string along which learners proceed in their own ways, exercising and improving their creative capacities and imaginations, and experiencing the joy of discovery.

Under these conceptions, in Dewey’s words, industry must be changed “from a feudalistic to a democratic social order,” and educational practice should be designed to encourage creativity, exploration, independence, cooperative work—much the opposite of what is happening today.

These ideas lead very naturally to a vision of society based on workers’ control of productive institutions, as envisioned by nineteenth-century thinkers, notably Marx but also—less familiarly—John Stuart Mill, who held that “The form of association, however, which if mankind continue to improve, must be expected to predominate is...the association of the labourers themselves on terms

¹³Quotations from Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991).

of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers electable and removable by themselves.¹⁴ These should further be linked to community control within a framework of free association and federal organization, in the general style of a range of thought that includes, along with many anarchists, G. D. H. Cole's guild socialism and left anti-Bolshevik Marxism, and such current developments as the participatory economics and politics of Michael Albert, Robin Hahnel, Steven Shalom, and others, along with important work in theory and practice by the late Seymour Melman and his associates, and Gar Alperovitz's valuable recent contributions on the growth of worker-owned enterprise and cooperatives in the U.S. rust belt and elsewhere.

Dewey was a figure of the American mainstream. And in fact such ideas are deeply rooted in the American tradition. Pursuing them we enter into the terrain of inspiring and often bitter struggle since the dawn of the industrial revolution in the mid-nineteenth century. The first serious scholarly study of the industrial worker in those years was by Norman Ware ninety years ago, still very much worth reading.¹⁵ He reviews the hideous working conditions imposed on formerly independent craftsmen and farmers, as well as the "factory girls," young women from the farms working in the textile mills around Boston. But he focuses attention primarily on "the degradation suffered by the industrial worker," the loss "of status and independence," which could not be canceled even when there was material improvement. And on the radical capitalist "social revolution in which sovereignty in economic affairs passed from the community as a whole into the keeping of a special class" of masters, often remote from production, a group "alien to the producers." Ware shows that "for every protest against machine industry, there can be found a hundred against the new power of capitalist production and its discipline."

Workers were striking not just for bread, but for roses, for dignity and independence, for their rights as free men and women. In their journals, they condemned "the blasting influence of monarchical principles on democratic soil," which will not be overcome until "they who work in the mills [will] own them," and sovereignty will return to free producers. Then they will no longer be "menials or

¹⁴For more on Mill's and related views, see Ellerman, "Workplace Democracy and Human Development: The Example of the Postsocialist Transition Debate," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, xxiv, 4 (2010): 333–53.

¹⁵Norman Ware, *The Industrial Worker, 1840–1860: The Reaction of the American Industrial Society to the Advance of the Industrial Revolution* (1924; repr., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964).

the humble subjects of a foreign despot, [the absentee owners], slaves in the strictest sense of the word [who] toil...for their masters.” Rather, they will regain their status as “free American citizens.”

The capitalist revolution instituted a crucial change from price to wage. When the producer sold his product for a price, Ware writes, “he retained his person. But when he came to sell his labor, he sold himself,” and lost his dignity as a person as he became a slave—a “wage slave,” the term commonly used. 170 years ago a group of skilled workers in New York repeated the common view that a daily wage is a form of slavery and warned, perceptively, that a day might come when wage slaves “will so far forget what is due to manhood as to glory in a system forced on them by their necessity and in opposition to their feelings of independence and self-respect”—a day they hoped would be “far distant.”

Labor activists warned of the new “spirit of the age: gain wealth, forgetting all but self.” In sharp reaction to this demeaning spirit, the rising movements of working people and radical farmers, the most significant democratic popular movements in American history, were dedicated to solidarity and mutual aid¹⁶—a battle that is far from over, despite setbacks, often violent repression.

Apologists for the radical revolution of wage slavery argue that the worker should indeed glory in a system of free contracts, voluntarily undertaken. To them, Shelley had a response two centuries ago, in his great poem *Masque of Anarchy*, written after the Peterloo Massacre, when British cavalry brutally attacked a peaceful gathering of tens of thousands calling for parliamentary reform.

We know what slavery is, Shelley wrote:

“Tis to work and have such pay
As just keeps life from day to day
In your limbs, as in a cell
For the tyrants’ use to dwell,’

“Tis to be a slave in soul
And to hold no strong control
Over your own wills, but be
All that others make of ye.’

The artisans and factory girls who struggled for dignity and independence and freedom might well have known Shelley’s words. Observers

¹⁶ See among others Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford, 1978).

noted that they had good libraries and were acquainted with standard works of English literature. Before mechanization and the wage system undermined independence and culture, Ware writes, a workshop would be a *lyceum*. Journeymen would hire boys to read to them while they worked. Their workplaces were “social businesses,” with many opportunities for reading, discussion, and mutual improvement. Along with the factory girls, they bitterly complained of the attack on their culture. The same was true in England, a matter discussed in Jonathan Rose’s monumental study of the reading habits of the working class of the day.¹⁷ He contrasts “the passionate pursuit of knowledge by proletarian autodidacts” with the “pervasive philistinism of the British aristocracy.” I am old enough to remember residues among working people in New York, who were immersed in the high culture of the day during the depths of the Great Depression.

I mentioned that Dewey and American workers held one version of democracy, with strong libertarian elements. But the dominant version has been a very different one. Its most instructive expression is at the progressive end of the mainstream intellectual spectrum, among good Wilson-FDR-Kennedy liberal intellectuals. Here are a few representative quotes.

The public are “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders [who] must be put in their place.” Decisions must be in hands of the “intelligent minority [of] responsible men,” who must be protected “from the trampling and roar of the bewildered herd.” The herd does have a *function*. Their task is to lend their weight every few years to a choice among the responsible men, but apart from that their function is to be “spectators, not participants in action.” All for their own good. We should not succumb to “democratic dogmatisms about men being the best judges of their own interests.” They are not. We are: we, the responsible men. Therefore attitudes and opinions must be shaped and controlled. We must “regiment the minds of men the way an army regiments their bodies.” In particular, we must introduce better discipline into the institutions responsible for “the indoctrination of the young.” If that is achieved, then it will be possible to avoid such dangerous periods as the 1960s, “the time of troubles,” in conventional elite discourse. We will be able to achieve more “moderation in democracy” and return to better days as when “Truman had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers.”

¹⁷Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale, 2002).

These are quotes from icons of the liberal establishment: Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, Harold Lasswell, Samuel Huntington and the Trilateral Commission, which largely staffed the Carter administration.¹⁸

This shriveled conception of democracy has solid roots. The founding fathers were much concerned about the hazards of democracy. In the debates of the Constitutional Convention, the main framer, James Madison, warned of these hazards. Naturally taking England as his model, he observed that “In England, at this day, if elections were open to all classes of people, the property of landed proprietors would be insecure. An agrarian law would soon take place,” undermining the right to property. To ward off such injustice, “our government ought to secure the permanent interests of the country against innovation,” arranging voting patterns and checks and balances so as “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” a prime task of decent government.¹⁹

The threat of democracy took on still larger proportions because of the likely increase in “the proportion of those who will labor under all the hardships of life, and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings,” as Madison anticipated. Perhaps influenced by Shays’ Rebellion, he warned that “the equal laws of suffrage” might in time shift power into their hands. “No agrarian attempts have yet been made in this Country,” he continued, “but symptoms of a levelling spirit...have sufficiently appeared in a [*sic*] certain quarters to give warning of the future danger.” For such reasons, Madison held that the Senate, the main seat of power in the constitutional system, “ought to come from and represent the wealth of the nation,” the “more capable sett of men,” and that other constraints on democratic rule should be instituted.

Madison’s conundrum has continued to trouble statesmen. In 1958, for example, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles pondered the difficulties the United States was facing in Latin America. He expressed his anxiety over the ability of domestic Communists “to get control

¹⁸ Walter Lippmann, in Clinton Rossiter and James Lare, eds., *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982), p. 91f.; Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928); Harold Lasswell, “Propaganda,” in Edwin Seligman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); M. J. Crozier, S. P. Huntington, and J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: University Press, 1975).

¹⁹ Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution, 1787*. Further Madison references and sources, see Chomsky, “Consent without Consent: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of Democracy,” *Cleveland State Law Review*, XLIV, 4 (1996): 415–37.

of mass movements,” which we “have no capacity to duplicate.” Their advantage is that “the poor people are the ones they appeal to and they have always wanted to plunder the rich.”²⁰ We somehow cannot rally them to the understanding that government must “protect the minority of the opulent from the majority.” That inability to get our message across regularly compels us to resort to violence, contrary to our noblest principles and much to our sincere regret.

To succeed in “framing a system which we wish to last for ages,” Madison held, it would be necessary to ensure that rulers will be drawn from the opulent minority. It would then be possible “to secure the rights of property agst. the danger from an equality of universality of suffrage, vesting complete power over property in hands without a share in it.” The phrase “rights of property” was regularly used to mean rights *to* property; that is, the rights of property owners. Many years later, in 1829, Madison reflected that those “without property, or the hope of acquiring it, cannot be expected to sympathize sufficiently with its rights, to be safe depositories of power over them.” The solution was to ensure that society be fragmented, with limited public participation in the political arena, which is to be effectively in the hands of the wealthy and their agents. Scholarship generally agrees that “The Constitution was intrinsically an aristocratic document designed to check the democratic tendencies of the period,” delivering power to a “better sort” of people and excluding “those who were not rich, well born, or prominent from exercising political power.”²¹

In Madison’s defense we should remember that he “was—to depths that we today are barely able to imagine—an eighteenth-century gentleman of honor.”²² It was the “enlightened Statesman” and “benevolent philosopher” who, he anticipated, would hold the reins of power. Ideally “pure and noble,” these “men of intelligence, patriotism, property and independent circumstances” would be a “chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interests of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” They would thus “refine” and “enlarge” the “public views,” guarding the public interest against the “mischiefs” of democratic majorities.

²⁰ John Foster Dulles, telephone call to Allen Dulles, June 19, 1958, “Minutes of Telephone Conversations of John Foster Dulles and Christian Herter,” Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home, Abilene, KS.

²¹ Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1995), p. 245, citing Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1969).

²² Banning, *Sacred Fire*, p. 333.

Not exactly the way it turned out.

The problem with democracy that Madison perceived had been recognized long before by Aristotle, in the first major work of political science, his *Politics*. Reviewing a variety of political systems, he concluded that democracy was the best—or perhaps the least bad—but he recognized a flaw: the great mass of the poor could use their voting power to take the property of the rich, which would be unfair. Madison and Aristotle faced the same problem, but selected opposite solutions: Aristotle advised reducing inequality, by what we would regard as welfare state measures. Madison felt that the answer was to reduce democracy.

The conflict between these conceptions of democracy goes back to the earliest modern democratic revolution, in seventeenth-century England, when a war raged between supporters of the King and of Parliament. The gentry, the “men of best quality” as they called themselves, were appalled by the rabble who did not want to be ruled by King or Parliament, but rather “by countrymen like ourselves, that know our wants.” Their pamphlets explained that “It will never be a good world while knights and gentlemen make us laws, that are chosen for fear and do but oppress us, and do not know the people’s sores.”²³

The essential nature of the conflict, which has far from ended, was captured simply by Jefferson in his last years, when he had serious concerns about the quality and fate of the democratic experiment. He distinguished between “aristocrats and democrats.” The aristocrats are “those who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes.” The democrats, in contrast, “identify...with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the honest & safe, altho’ not the most wise depository of the public interests.”²⁴

The modern progressive intellectuals who seek to “put the public in its place” and are free of “democratic dogmatisms” about the capacity of the “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” to enter the political arena are Jefferson’s “aristocrats.” Their basic views are widely held, though there are disputes about who should play the guiding role: “the technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals” of the progressive “knowledge society,” or bankers and corporate executives. Or in other versions, the Central Committee, or the Guardian Council of

²³ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1975), p. 60.

²⁴ Thomas Jefferson, cited by Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford, 1991), pp. 269–70.

clerics. All are instances of the “political guardianship” that the genuine libertarian tradition seeks to dismantle and reconstruct from below, while also changing industry “from a feudalistic to a democratic social order” based on workers’ control, respecting the dignity of the producer as a genuine person, not a tool in the hands of others, in accordance with a libertarian tradition that has deep roots—and like Marx’s Old Mole, is always burrowing close to the surface, always ready to peek through, sometimes in surprising and unexpected ways, seeking to bring about what seems to me at least to be a reasonable approximation to the common good.

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