Slaves without Masters: The Feudal Imagination and the Critique of Impersonal Domination

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

The undersigned, appointed by the

Department of **Government**

have examined a dissertation entitled

"Slaves without Masters: The Feudal Imagination and the Critique of Impersonal Domination"

presented by **Dimitrios Ioannis Halikias**

candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and hereby certify that it is worthy of acceptance.

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof. Eric M. Nelson (Chair)

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof. Eric Beerbohm

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof. Richard Tuck

Date: **April 18, 2024**

Slaves without Masters: The Feudal Imagination and the Critique of Impersonal Domination

A dissertation presented

by

Dimitrios Ioannis Halikias

to

The Department of Government

in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Government

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 2024

Dissertation Advisor: Professor Eric Nelson Dimitrios Ioannis Halikias

Slaves without Masters: The Feudal Imagination and the Critique of Impersonal Domination

Abstract

A signal ambition of the liberal political project is the abolition of the arbitrary, capricious rule of man, and the establishment in its place of the impartial, rational rule of law. This dissertation is a study of a complaint that emerges in response to the triumph of this liberal vision of politics. Constitutional government and the market economy do away with the juridical inequality and personal hierarchy associated with medieval feudalism. Instead of delivering emancipation, however, this triumph of liberalism is accused of establishing new forms of depersonalized domination. No longer at the mercy of arbitrary lords or tyrants, modern subjects are said to be oppressed or constrained by systems and structures beyond the will of any recognizable rulers or elites. Liberal subjects, the argument goes, have become slaves without masters.

To better understand the origins and nature of this critique, my dissertation turns to a surprising historical tradition: the reinterpretation of medieval feudalism in the hands of nineteenth-century critics of liberal political economy. Feudalism constituted a perfect foil for the new constitutional state and market system. Where liberal societies separate the private from the public, feudalism entailed a unity of political and economic authority. The Middle Ages—long taken by republican and liberal thinkers to be synonymous with the tyrannical rule of man—came to serve as a means of diagnosing the anarchic and impersonal nature of liberal societies. I document how widespread this reinterpretation of feudalism was in the nineteenth century among conservative reactionaries, liberal romantics, and radical socialists. For those attempting to diagnose the new

servitude, appeals to feudalism served as a common vessel for wildly divergent moral, economic, and political programs.

Chapter one of this dissertation provides an overview of the many uses to which feudal nostalgia was put in the decades following the French Revolution. I trace how English and continental romantics, conservatives, and radicals invoked idealized accounts of feudalism to critique the cold, atomistic, and spiritless nature of modern politics. Chapter two takes up Thomas Carlyle's critique of the anarchic "age of mechanism" and his turn to the "most perfect feudal ages" as an inspiration for a new form of mastery. Chapter three turns to the young Marx and his enigmatic description of medieval feudalism as the "democracy of unfreedom." Attending to Marx's account of the integrated spirit of the Middle Ages helps to clarify what he terms "human emancipation" and "true democracy." Chapter four takes up Alexis de Tocqueville's contrast between the personal, master-servant relations characteristic of aristocratic feudalism and the impersonal, tutelary servitude he fears will arise in democracies. Chapter five offers a critical, conceptual study of the three divergent programs that flow from Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville's superficially similar interpretations of medieval feudalism. Chapter six connects this intellectual history with a debate in contemporary political theory concerning the nature of "depoliticization." By critically evaluating rival understandings of that term, I argue that the most philosophically potent meaning of depoliticization is an extension of the slaves-without-masters critique. A liberal demand to minimize the role of arbitrary will and rule and to elevate institutionalized forms of impartial reason leads to an objectionable offloading of responsibility to the market economy and to non-political sites of governance like the bureaucracy and judiciary.

Note on Texts and Abbreviations

Where possible, I use English translations for foreign language texts, with occasional modifications noted in the footnotes. For German texts that lack English translations, I have provided my own.

No complete critical edition exists of the works of Thomas Carlyle. Where available, I cite the *Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle* with the following abbreviations:

Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, ed. M. K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin, and Mark Engel, vol. 1, 6 vols., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).	*Hero Worship*
Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books*, ed. Rodger L. Tarr and Mark Engel, vol. 2, 6 vols., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).	*Sartor Resartus*
Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. Chris Vanden Bossche, Joel J. Brattin, and D. J. Trela, vol. 4, 6 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).	*PP*
Thomas Carlyle, *Essays on Politics and Society*, vol. 6, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).	*EPS*

My remaining Carlyle citations refer to a range of editions, with abbreviations summarized below:

The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, 50 vols., ed. Ian Campbell and David Sorensen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1970--).	*CCL*
Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, ed. David R. Sorensen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).	*French Revolution*
Centenary Edition of the Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle, 30 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896-1899	*CCW*
Thomas Carlyle, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle: Latter-Day Pamphlets*, vol. 20, 30 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896).	*LDP*

Citations to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels primarily refer to the following editions:

Marx and Engels Collected Works, 50 vols., (New York: International Publishers, 1975-2004).	*MECW*
Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe 2, 114 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1975—).	*MEGA 2*
Marx-Engels Werke, 39 vols., (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1957-68).	*MEW*

Citations to Alexis de Tocqueville primarily refer to the following editions:

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012)	*DA*
Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).	*AR*

Citations to John Stuart Mill refer to the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill,* 33 vols., ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-91). Abbreviated as *CWM*.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I have profited from the advice of countless teachers, friends, and classmates over the years. Bryan Garsten and Isaac Nakhimovsky were the first to encourage me to pursue graduate study and have continued to offer support and guidance along the way. Patrick Quinn White introduced me to philosophy as a college freshman and has remained a dear friend and interlocutor ever since. Danielle Allen generously invited me to join her work on civic education and has helped me to reflect on the connection between academic scholarship and public-spirited citizenship. A special word of thanks must be given to Harvey and Anna Mansfield, whose generosity and hospitality fostered a community like no other I found at Harvard.

I am grateful, above all, to my dissertation committee. Eric Beerbohm brought much-needed discipline to my work, always in a spirit of kindness and enthusiasm. Richard Tuck embodies the intellectual curiosity and playfulness that drew me to academia. His combination of gaiety and seriousness is a sign of contradiction in our time of moralism and severity. Eric Nelson's scholarship has set a standard of erudition and excellence I can only aspire to meet. As my advisor, he has proven time and again that the most devastating questions are often the simplest.

Introduction

This dissertation is a study of a complaint: modern liberal societies have successfully abolished legally entrenched hierarchy and subordination, yet in so doing they have inaugurated new, impersonal forms of social control and domination. In a traditional tyranny, subjects stand at the mercy of the arbitrary will and power of a master. With the establishment of constitutional government, the market economy, and civil rights protections, modern citizens are liberated from that kind of personal oppression. The new threat is said to lie with "systems" or "structures" detached from the will of any specific human agent. Even our political leaders and wealthiest citizens find themselves powerless in the face of abstract, amorphous forces. The new domination, in other words, is that of slaves without masters, a tyranny without a tyrant.

Versions of this complaint constitute many of the master motifs of the twentieth century. Max Weber famously speaks of the new "iron cage" of modern capitalism and bureaucratization, a paradoxical unity of total rationality, absurdity, and control. The language of the "Kafkaesque" remains ubiquitous in contemporary life, drawing our attention to the familiar kind of degradation experienced by the unaccountable rule of a system. In the place of coercive violence and suffering, we find alienation and ennui, a bewildering experience of dependence and homelessness amid unprecedented material comfort and legal security. An amusing statement of the complaint can be found in the 1981 film, *My Dinner with André*, a depiction of the intellectual-artist's interior exile from and rebellion against modern life. To quote one of any number of similar lines from the film, the eponymous guest quotes an eccentric friend as follows:

> I think that New York is the new model for the new concentration camp, where the camp has been built by the inmates themselves, and the inmates are the guards, and they have this pride in this thing they've built—they've built their own prison—and so they exist in a state of schizophrenia where they are both guards and prisoners.

> And as a result, they no longer have—having been lobotomized—the capacity to leave the prison they've made or even see it as a prison.[1]

We hear in this language the furious denunciations of liberal, bourgeois society that abounded among the student New Left of the 1960s and were given their most influential articulation in Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*.[2] Influential versions of the complaint also can be found in the work of Hannah Arendt, who offers curiously similar descriptions of Nazi totalitarianism and post-war American liberalism. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt provides the following account of the difference between totalitarianism and earlier forms of tyranny:

> Totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within. In this sense it eliminates the distance between the rulers and the ruled and achieves a condition in which power and the will to power, as we understand them, play no role, or at best, a secondary role. In substance, the totalitarian leader is nothing more nor less than the functionary of the masses he leads; he is not a power-hungry individual imposing a tyrannical and arbitrary will upon his subjects. Being a mere functionary, he can be replaced at any time, and he depends just as much on the "will" of the masses he embodies as the masses depend on him. Without him they would lack external representation and remain an amorphous horde; without the masses the leader is a nonentity.[3]

The key claim here is that totalitarianism dissolves the distinction between ruler and ruled. Hitler, Arendt argues, was a mere epiphenomenon, the creation and agent of a pseudo-democratic ideology of mass will. The same analysis is reproduced in Arendt's "banality of evil" account of Adolf

---

[1] Wallace Shawn, *My Dinner with André: A Screenplay* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1981), 93.

[2] Marcuse's extraordinarily influential book is a study of the domination that emerges with the triumph of rational, technological, capitalist societies in the liberal West. As he puts it in one representative statement: "the society which projects and undertakes the technological transformation of nature alters the base of domination by gradually replacing personal dependence (or the slave on the master, the serf on the lord of the manor, the lord on the donor of the fief, etc.) with dependence on the 'objective order of things' (on economic laws, the market etc.). … The limits of this rationality, and its sinister force, appear in the progressive enslavement of man by a productive apparatus which perpetuates the struggle for existence and extends it to a total international struggle which ruins the lives of those who build and use this apparatus." Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 144.

[3] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979).

Eichmann and the holocaust: "the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men." Totalitarianism is thus simply an extension of "the rule of Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureau-cracy truly is."[4] By reinterpreting the most spectacular evil of the twentieth century as an expression of a pedestrian bureaucratic logic, Arendt suggests that Nazi totalitarianism was not, in fact, so different from the liberal regimes that defeated it. In later work, she expands her treatment of "the rule of Nobody" to include capitalism as well as bureaucracy:

> A complete victory of society will always produce some sort of "communistic fiction," whose outstanding political characteristic is that it is indeed ruled by an "invisible hand," namely, by nobody. What we traditionally call state and government gives place here to pure administration—a state of affairs which Marx rightly predicted as the "withering away of the state," though he was wrong in assuming that only a revolution could bring it about, and even more wrong when he believed that this complete victory of society would mean the eventual emergence of the "realm of freedom." To gauge the extent of society's victory in the modern age, its early substitution of behavior for action and its eventual substitution of bureaucracy, the rule of nobody, for personal rulership, it may be well to recall that its initial science of economics, which substitutes patterns of behavior only in this rather limited field of human activity, was finally followed by the all-comprehensive pretension of the social sciences which, as "behavioral sciences," aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal.[5]

The power of the popular mass that characterized totalitarianism has been replaced by a subtler but parallel triumph of "society." Society conditions and controls us without any form of conscious, personal authority or coercion. Arendt repeats the point in *On Violence*, describing bureaucracy as "the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without

---

[4] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 289.

[5] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 44–45.

a tyrant."[6] Some pages earlier, she writes that because it lacks a personal tyrant who could, in principle, be held to account, the bureaucratic "rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all" forms of despotism.[7]

Versions of these arguments are repeated constantly in contemporary laments of the "systemic" and "structural" oppression that is said to beset American life. Direct, juridical, subordination has largely been done away with. Nevertheless, the argument runs, our institutions remain suffused with pervasive if unconscious tyrannical tendencies. In their strongest form, these arguments suggest that American social life is just as oppressive today as it was in the era of legally entrenched racial, gendered, and class hierarchy.[8] When pressed, few are willing to state that extraordinary conclusion, yet as in the case of Arendt, it seems to be where such an analysis leads. Condemnations of this kind have become expected, routine, and perhaps even obligatory features of much contemporary political criticism and theory.[9]

This summary may betray a certain lack of sympathy with this family of complaints. A sober observer of sound mind need not succumb to a naïve Whiggish optimism to remain capable of recognizing the differences between fascist totalitarianism and liberal bureaucratism, between legal apartheid and a racial achievement gap. That such discrimination appears increasingly rare suggests a

---

[6] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), 81.

[7] Arendt, *On Violence,* 38-9.

[8] Consider a representative quip from Michelle Alexander's successful book: "We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 2.

[9] One of the most historically extreme articulations of the slaves-without-masters thesis is found in George Fitzhugh's 1857 defense of slavery. Fitzhugh argued that chattel slavery was no worse than northern wage labor—indeed it was positively more humane—and that emancipating the slaves would in no terms improve their condition. It is a curious sign of the times that much contemporary revisionist historiography of American racial domination post-Civil War comes close to agreeing, in substance, with the Fitzhugh thesis. See George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!: Or, Slaves without Masters*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

diminishing capacity to see and think clearly. Or, put in other terms, it serves as evidence for Alexis de Tocqueville's famous observation that as conditions in a democracy grow more equal, those inequalities that remain come to be felt all the more intolerable.

Nevertheless, various features of the slaves-without-masters critique of liberalism remain compelling. The argument is right to note the disappearance of the ruler-ruled relationship and to point to the emergence of impersonal, depoliticized, and rationalistic modes of power. The modern economy is controlled by neither the state nor a cabal of shadowy elites but is instead a product of anarchic yet irresistible market forces. Democratic politics rejects the language and practice of leadership and rule, preferring to offload responsibility to judicial and bureaucratic procedures that promise impartial, rational outcomes. Freedom of thought is not violently curtailed by state censorship, but it is bounded by the conformist power of public opinion. In domain after domain, society seems to be marked by an experience of impotence and powerlessness. There is a connection between that experience and the triumph of a kratophobic liberalism hostile to arbitrary will and drawn to the prospect of an impersonal means of ordering social life.

Liberalism's most acute critics—many of whom criticize liberalism to defend it—have long warned of a new servitude that threatens to take hold in a free, democratic society. The most powerful of these warnings remains that issued by Tocqueville in the concluding pages of *Democracy in America*. He writes there of the rise of a soft, tutelary form of democratic despotism, one that secures equality in servitude for a people who prefer passive administration to active liberty. That warning too is a version of the slaves-without-masters critique. Without embracing some of their more extravagant formulations, the aim of this dissertation is to take these arguments seriously.

The Complaint and the Feudal Foil

The great ambition and triumph of nineteenth-century liberalism was the abolition of the arbitrary rule of man and the establishment of the impartial rule of law. A commitment to formal equality and constitutional protections for a new category—the citizen—does away with traditional *de jure* inequalities across hierarchically ordered and separated subjects. The market system abolishes the feudal prerogatives of guilds and manors through the codification of clear private property rights and a sphere of contractual liberty. Freedom of thought is protected by law, not contingent on the discretionary determinations of an inquisitor. This hostility to the arbitrary rule of man and personal dependence remains a central preoccupation within contemporary liberal political philosophy. It is the animating core of the republicanism associated with Philip Pettit,[10] the classical liberalism of Friedrich Hayek,[11] and the relational egalitarianism inaugurated by Elizabeth Anderson.[12]

---

[10] Pettit identifies republican liberty with non-domination, a status of non-dependence on the arbitrary will of a master. Under this conception, Pettit writes, "no one is able to interfere on an arbitrary basis— at their pleasure—in the choices of the free person." Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17. Republicanism has proved extraordinarily influential in recent years. One major defender is Frank Lovett, who further develops the connection between republicanism and the rule of law. See Frank Lovett, *A Republic of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[11] Hayek describes his ideal of the rule of law as follows: "we do not serve another person's end, nor can we properly be said to be subject to his will … the law merely alters the means at my disposal and does not determine the ends I have to pursue." Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 221. Hayek connects the rule of law with the market society, for without a commitment to market institutions, the state will act as an arbitrary master: "the only alternative to submission to the impersonal and seemingly irrational forces of the market is submission to an equally uncontrollable and therefore arbitrary power of other men." *The Road to Serfdom*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 212. See also Hayek's treatment of catallaxy and his claim that any form of social-justice induced interference with the market violates the rule of law. *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), chap. 10.

[12] Anderson influentially criticized the post-Rawlsian tradition of what she termed "luck egalitarianism" for concerning itself more with questions of cosmic injustice and losing sight of the central task of egalitarian theory: the establishment of a society of equals. "What Is the Point of Equality?," *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287–337. In recent years, a number of relational-egalitarian theorists have developed Andersonian themes. One notable example is Niko Kolodny, who identifies democracy with a regime in which no person rules over any other. *The Pecking Order: Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023); "Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy?," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2014): 195–229; "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014): 287–336.

The slaves-without-masters critique is an implicit recognition of the triumph of the liberal project. Modern liberal societies genuinely have done away with juridical mastery. The new servitude is not a product of failing to abolish personal mastery, but a consequence of its disappearance. If impersonal forces have replaced arbitrary will, a full account of the nature and vices of the resulting order cannot rely on the traditional philosophical machinery of interpersonal subordination or hierarchy. To that end, we might distinguish four overlapping but distinct versions of the critique:

(1) *We are ruled by private masters*. A liberal society no longer contains public forms of personal, arbitrary rule, but relocates arbitrary dominion to the private sphere. The economic firm, for example, is the site of hierarchical domination at the hands of the boss. Consider Elizabeth Anderson's attack on "private government," which argues that within the workplace we find, hiding in plain sight, modern masters who exert direct domination over their workers.[13]
(2) *We are ruled by the dead*. This charge is levelled against inherited political institutions that appear to trap the living within constraints established by the distant past. Versions of this worry are famously articulated by Thomas Jefferson in his demand for regular constitutional conventions[14] and by progressive-era critics of the rigidity of the American constitution.[15] It also finds expression in Sheldon Wolin's hostility to constitutionalism and insistence that democracy must remain institutionally "formless" and "fugitive."[16]
(3) *We have internalized our oppression*. This anxiety is tied to the "ideology" tradition that emphasizes our enslavement to the fruits of our own creation. Marxist accounts of alienation and the Weberian psychology of modern capitalism serve as canonical examples. For Foucault, modern subjects are disciplined and oppressed by a bewildering array of diffuse forms of power.[17] More recently, Byung-Chul Han theorizes a modern form of "self-

[13] Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[14] In Jefferson's famous telling: "*the earth belongs in usufruct to the living'* … the dead have neither powers nor rights over it." Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789, in Thomas Jefferson and James Morton Smith, *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776-1826* (New York: Norton, 1995), 632.

[15] See, for example, Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1913).

[16] Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 11–25.

[17] For an uncharacteristically clear statement, see Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

exploitation" that induces achievement and burnout rather than discipline and marginalization.[18]

(4) *We are ruled by impersonal, abstract forces*. These forces might be public opinion, an ideological deference to rational proceduralism, or the structural power of global capital. By depending on these systems and forces, our range of individual and collective choice is constrained without any conscious command to that effect by political rulers. Versions of this argument have been advanced by champions of a more radical republicanism like Alex Gourevitch[19] and critics of structural domination like Iris Marion Young.[20]

These formulations often run together and are difficult to disentangle. That said, my dissertation focuses primarily on the final three. The first charge is not in fact a statement of having become slaves without masters, but a critique of a new, hidden master class that does not acknowledge or present itself as such. In that sense, it remains comfortably within the liberal tradition, maintaining a familiar focus on arbitrary, personal subordination. The final three statements focus more literally on the abolition of mastery, insisting that we understand power and domination within a liberal regime as of a fundamentally new nature. The problem is not that liberalism has failed to abolish mastery, but that it has succeeded. The promise of rule of law degenerates into the tyranny of systems.

To understand this critique, my dissertation turns to a surprising historical tradition: the recurring role of feudal nostalgia and the medieval imagination in nineteenth-century critiques of liberal political economy and society. This neomedieval turn is most apparent in its aesthetic

---

[18] Byung-Chul Han, *The Palliative Society: Pain Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021); Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[19] Alexander Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For a similar project, see William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). Both Gourevitch and Roberts attempt to expand the theoretical machinery of republicanism to include domination at the hands of impersonal forces. Pettit has resisted this expansion. While it is true that employers can dominate their workers, he is wary of the claim that the market itself is a source of domination. That would be like suggesting that the natural environment could be an agent of domination, he suggests. "Freedom in the Market," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 5, no. 2 (2006): 139. Niko Kolodny makes the same point in his description of hierarchy: "relations of inferiority are relations between individual, natural persons. They are not relations between an individual, natural person and an artificial person, collective, or force of nature." *The Pecking Order*, 89.

[20] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

manifestations. Champions of enlightenment liberalism favored a neoclassical art and architecture of clean, symmetrical order befitting a rational, watchmaker God. Romantic and reactionary critics of liberalism turned, by contrast, to the gothic past, typified by the dynamic, organic, frightening aesthetics of the high Middle Ages. Think here of the difference between Jacques Louis-David and Caspar David Friedrich, Edinburgh's Old Town and New Town, liberal Jefferson's University of Virginia and reactionary Friedrich Wilhelm IV's Cathedral of Cologne.[21]

In tandem with these artistic developments, we find leading thinkers of the period developing political arguments inspired by a feudal and medieval moral imagination. Many of these thinkers sought a return to a kind of medievalism. They lamented the disappearance of noblesse oblige and the rise of cash-contract, the decline of spiritual intensity, and the dissipation of the reciprocity and community found in the manorial, monastic, and guild-based feudal economy. More importantly as a theoretical matter, they saw in the juxtaposition of feudalism and liberalism the total contrast between a society structured by personal authority and will and one dominated by impersonal forces and procedures. It is this strand of the feudal revival I am most concerned with. Medievalism did not just serve as an ideal of moral communitarianism—*Gemeinschaft* against *Gesellschaft*. It modeled a society under conscious, human, political control.

Where liberal societies separate the private from the public, feudalism entailed a unity of political and economic authority. The feudal lord was both public ruler and private master. Wages and prices were not set by invisible hands and market forces but flowed from a consciously political

[21] Hegel described the Cathedral of Cologne in these terms: "In the Cathedral one vividly beholds in every sense a different dimension, a human world of a quite different sort, as also of another time. There is no question here of utility, enjoyment, pleasure, or satisfied need, but only a spacious ambling about enveloped by high halls that exist for themselves and, as it were, simply do not care whether people use them for whatever purpose. … We encounter here a tall forest, though admittedly a spiritual forest full of art, standing for itself, existing there regardless of whether people crawl around down below or not. It could not care less. What it is, it is for itself. It is made for itself." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 585.

and personal relationship between superior and inferior. Kings and nobles ruled medieval society, where liberal parliamentarism devolves into faceless bureaucratism and a slavish deference to public opinion. Catholic, episcopal spiritual authority suffused all features of political, economic, and social life in medieval Christendom, producing unity amid diversity. Protestantism and secularization, by contrast, privatize individual belief, giving rise to epistemological anarchy and brute violence as the sole means of maintaining international and domestic order.

It is tempting to think that the feudal imagination appealed primarily to reactionary critics of liberalism. A central aim of this dissertation, however, is to trace how ubiquitous neomedievalism was among not only reactionaries, but liberal romantics and even radical socialists as well. For those attempting to formulate a diagnosis and critique of the anarchic, impersonal liberal state, feudalism served as a common vessel for wildly divergent moral, religious, and political programs.

Clarifications and Methodological Asides

Before sketching a summary of the dissertation, I want to address a few methodological and conceptual questions raised by this project. The first concerns the relationship between the political appropriations of medieval feudalism I study and more contemporary appeals to feudal categories. Consider the titles of two recent books: Joel Kotkin's *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* and Yannis Varoufakis' *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*.[22] Varoufakis writes from the socialist left and Kotkin from the conservative right, but they offer similar assessments of Western political and social conditions. A new economic and technological elite has emerged to dominate our society. Wealthy, powerful, entitled, and detached, this oligarchic elite wields unchecked power over the lives of modern peoples. The new regime can be described as feudal

[22] Joel Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020); Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (London: The Bodley Head, 2023).

because it has re-established hardened, *de facto* class separations with a clear, agential ruling elite. Silicon Valley has replaced the Vatican as the nexus of spiritual-political authority.

There is an obvious reason for the appeal of such neofeudal polemics. Our time is marked by growing economic inequality, and we often find it difficult to distinguish between inequality and hierarchy. More deeply still, conspiracism can be a source of consolation.[23] If it is true that a new class of elites consciously manipulates our beliefs, controls our politicians, or rigs our economy, removing those elites from power presents itself as the simple solution. The situation is much more difficult if it turns out that there are no elites to be removed. In that case, we must look elsewhere for the sources of our problems. Many neofeudalists of the nineteenth century did propose to understand the industrial, capitalist rich as a new money aristocracy. But the deeper argument that guides this dissertation repudiates such analyses, insisting that modern life is not under the control of any ruling class. The problem of the modern world is anarchy, not aristocracy.

A second question concerns the connection between feudalism as a motif of nineteenth-century criticism and feudalism as it historically existed. These two questions are linked in one sense. The construction of feudalism as a historical category was always associated with the aim of better understanding the continuities and ruptures between medieval and modern regimes. Marx and his successors debated the nature of feudalism to clarify the nature of the capitalist mode of production.

---

[23] Consider, for example, much of the recent scholarship on neoliberalism, which often argues that the post-war capitalist economy was deliberately imposed on American and European societies by a specific set of liberal economists and politicians. Recognizing the instability of democratic politics, these elites—conspiring over decades in academic conferences—successfully forced through institutional reforms to legally entrench an unpopular and unchallengeable capitalist order. While it might seem that many liberal societies favored market institutions and voluntarily legislated them into being, in truth those beliefs were themselves the product of a concerted, well-organized, and well-funded program of mass manipulation. For examples of books making versions of that argument, see Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2023).

Liberal thinkers like David Hume, Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, and François Guizot turned to history to account for the origins and nature of modern liberty in political developments since the Middle Ages. Historical reconstruction and political critique have always been connected enterprises.

Today, many historians are uncomfortable with the language of feudalism on the grounds that it implies far greater systematicity and uniformity than can be found in the evolving and diverse conditions of medieval life.[24] Even those historians who insist on the usefulness of feudalism as a description do not agree in the least as to the nature of the phenomenon. Some offer a primarily political interpretation, emphasizing the parcelization of sovereignty as compared to the centralized modern state.[25] Others interpret feudalism as an essentially martial system of mutual reciprocity among the nobility.[26] Still others defend Marxist accounts of feudalism as an economic mode of production.[27] In his elegant study, Marc Bloch cautions against overgeneralization, but identifies the animating spirit of feudalism with a social order comprising overlapping webs of personal loyalty, homage, and obligation.[28] These debates are important, but they are, for our purposes, by the way. Feudalism attracted the thinkers I study because it served as a malleable means of articulating a critique. It was the neomedieval imagination, more than the actual conditions of the Middle Ages, that proved theoretically fruitful.

---

[24] For critics of the category, "feudalism" on the grounds that it abstracts and generalizes far too much and was a construct of much later historians, see Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," *The American Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (1974): 1063–88; Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). A more moderate view that defends the usefulness of the category is articulated by Thomas N. Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[25] Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 2013).

[26] François Louis Ganshof, *Feudalism*, trans. Philip Grierson (London: Longmans, Green, 1952).

[27] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002).

[28] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

Finally, a few words about the method of this dissertation are in order. As is apparent, I am driven by two interests. The first is the peculiar historical trajectory of the idea of feudalism in nineteenth-century debates over liberalism. The second is the theoretical charge that liberal modernity has produced a condition of slaves-without-masters. While these two themes could be dealt with separately, bringing them together, I hope, enriches both the intellectual history I tell and the theoretical grievance I reconstruct. More specifically, it draws our attention to the charge that liberalism's impersonal rule of law dissolves into the anarchic tyranny of impersonal systems. In its most philosophically serious form, the appeal to medieval feudalism was not meant to underwrite a moralistic or communitarian demand for thicker social solidarity. It identified the disappearance of concrete relations of rule and obedience as essential for understanding the experience of disorientation and powerlessness that accompanied the rise of the liberal state and market economy. Feudalism proved to be such a popular motif because it constituted in every respect the total opposite of the liberal order.

In my historical reconstruction, I focus on three thinkers: Thomas Carlyle, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Karl Marx. I draw attention to other figures who made use of neofeudal arguments, but there are good reasons to restrict my core study to these three. The most obvious reason is that these thinkers are historically contemporaneous and consequential: Carlyle lived 1795—1881, Tocqueville 1805—1859, and Marx 1818—1883. Writing in the shadow of the French Revolution and through the emergence of a new liberal state and economy, they were preoccupied with the character, nature, and trajectory of liberalism. All three found in the imaginative power of feudalism a means of articulating their wariness of the impersonal power the constitutional state and market economy threatened to bring about. Unlike many other neofeudalists, Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville were committed to philosophies of history that rejected any attempt to return or restore the Middle

Ages. There nevertheless remains something instructive in the juxtaposition between feudalism and liberalism, even as they jointly recognize the obsolescence of the old world.

Though I highlight points of contact across these thinkers, the intellectual history I sketch is not a story of influence and genealogy, but of patterns and homology. It is important that my main subjects emerged from different traditions and engaged with different interlocutors. Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville are the master figures of three utterly incompatible political programs. In Carlyle, we find a reactionary hatred of capitalist democracy that would prove seductive to communitarians and fascists alike, in Marx the world-historical representative of radicalism and communism, and in Tocqueville a tortured, conservative liberalism that remains influential today. That three thinkers with such different visions of human nature and the good society were exercised by such similar worries is itself evidence of a vulnerability in the liberal embrace of impersonality and the rule of law.

The family of arguments I summarize under the label slaves-without-masters represents one of the most serious challenges to liberalism. This intellectual history is thus straightforwardly presentist in motivation. That confession requires me to say a word about what I mean by liberalism. Contemporary political philosophy is overwhelmed with restatements, histories, critiques, exorcisms, apologies, and defenses of the liberal tradition. Over the past half century, two related lines of attack have proved especially prominent. The first is the communitarian critique that liberal individualism tends toward atomistic isolation. The second is the moral critique that the liberal repudiation of high questions of human flourishing and excellence produces a deracinated, managerial, neutral scheme of politics. Both of those objections—in their familiar radical and conservative forms—were readily deployed by the neomedievalist critics of liberalism in the nineteenth century.

The core of the argument I treat, however, does not primarily operate along those lines. In Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville we find a central concern with the affinity between liberal political economy and a drift toward depersonalized power. That is the dimension of liberalism I hope to trace in this dissertation. A liberal economy and polity downplay the role of conscious human authority in directing the formation and development of a common life, turning instead to modes of rational and impersonal governance. The market economy provides a means of establishing order without design. The fragmentation of power in constitutional government and later the deference toward bureaucratic proceduralism make it difficult if not impossible for a clear "will of the people" to direct social life. The feature of liberalism at question here is the drift toward unconscious and unwilled modes of social cooperation. A society without rulers is, for a particular kind of liberal, the essence of a free society. To be free is to be autonomous, a self-legislator under the rule of none. D.H. Lawrence summarized the American spirit with the commandment: "Whatever else you are, be masterless."[29] The power of the slaves-without-masters critique—both in the nineteenth century and in our own time—helps us to understand a theoretical weakness within that project. Taken too far, the aversion to arbitrary rule can incline toward anarchy, leaderless government, and helplessness at the hands of impersonal, unaccountable, and uncontrolled social forces.

---

[29] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16. Lawrence doubts the coherence of this spirit. The Americans face a choice—shall they remain a nation of "escaped slaves," or shall they make of themselves "new whole men?" Lawrence continues: "The real American day hasn't begun yet. Or at least, not yet sunrise. So far it has been the false dawn. That is, in the progressive American consciousness there has been the one dominant desire, to do away with the old thing. Do away with masters, exalt the will of the people. The will of the people being nothing but a figment, the exalting doesn't count for much. So, in the name of the will of the people, get rid of masters. When you have got rid of masters, you are left with this mere phrase of the will of the people. Then you pause and bethink yourself, and try to recover your own wholeness." *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 19. That peroration is better put by Bob Dylan: "you're gonna have to serve somebody."

Chapter Overview

The first chapter of this dissertation documents the extraordinary diversity of neomedieval and neofeudal critiques of liberalism in the decades following the French Revolution. It begins with the tradition of English republicanism and its identification of feudalism with tyrannical personal dependence. Following the French Revolution, the idea of medieval feudalism underwent a transformation, no longer standing in for despotism, but now serving as a critique of the cold, mechanical, coercive nature of the constitutional state and market economy. I show how common this historical interpretation was in the early nineteenth century, tracing its deployment by German romantics like Friedrich Schlegel, reactionaries like Adam Müller and Karl Ludwig von Haller, radicals like William Cobbett, and English Tories like Robert Southey and the Young Englanders. Several recurring motifs unite these different figures. I show, for example, how Adam Smith came to stand in for mechanical, inhumane liberalism and Edmund Burke for an organic, spiritual medievalism. I also emphasize these thinkers' common commitment to historical restoration—they all sought to recover features of medieval feudalism and to reintroduce them in the modern world. Sometimes those efforts meant straightforward religious revival or the establishment of new monastic institutions, and sometimes they meant economic reform to recover the principles of guild-based reciprocity or a new spiritual clerisy.

The next three chapters offer readings of Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville. While sharing many of the theoretical grievances canvassed by the figures discussed in chapter one, these thinkers offer an unrelenting view of historical progress and obsolescence. There can be no return to medieval feudalism. However instructive an idealized past could prove as a foil for liberal constitutional government and economics, the future must be of an altogether new character. These thinkers depart from those discussed in chapter one in another respect. Neomedieval critics like

Cobbett, von Haller, and Müller warned that the new liberal order has established a new aristocracy. No longer bound to the land and civilized by Catholic faith, the emerging money elite is unconcerned with the wellbeing of its subordinates. It has become a vicious leadership class, an oligarchy that controls society for private profit and power. Carlyle, Marx and Tocqueville reject the new aristocracy thesis, articulating instead the slaves-without-masters critique of liberal impersonality.

Chapter two takes up Thomas Carlyle's critique of the liberal "age of mechanism" and his turn to the "most perfect feudal ages" as an alternative. Carlyle remains notorious today for his defense of slavery and disgust for democracy. Central to both those judgments was a contempt for the "No-rule" established by laissez faire capitalism and liberal parliamentarism. He rebukes modern Britain for obeying empty formulas and retreating from guardianship and authority. Medieval feudalism, by contrast, was suffused with religious devotion and human obedience to heroic rulers. I contrast Carlyle with two superficially similar critics of liberal laissez-faire, Auguste Comte and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Chapter three turns to the young Marx and his description of medieval feudalism as the "democracy of unfreedom." Marx's treatment of feudalism can clarify his early understanding of democracy and his famous invocation of "human emancipation." Feudalism represents a human alternative to bourgeois capitalism and liberalism not simply in instantiating a reciprocal, solidaristic, or communal property regime. More fundamentally, feudal humanity centers on the reality of concrete chains of human authority. As Marx puts it, where the medieval world proclaimed, "*nulle terre sans seigneur* [There is no land without its lord]" the bourgeois age replies "*l'argent n'a pas de maître*, [Money knows no master]." The transition from the rule of the lord to the rule of money entails

"the complete domination of dead matter over man."[30] In like manner, medieval feudalism offers a partial image of democracy insofar as it consisted in the transparent integration of political, economic, and religious life. That is the kind of integration communism will restore in radicalized form. To highlight how distinctive Marx's political interpretation of medievalism is, I contrast his treatment with that of Hegel, who, consistent with the typical historiography of the time, identifies feudalism as a system of private domination rather than political authority.

Chapter four treats Tocqueville's account of aristocratic feudalism, focusing on his discussion of the way liberal democracy reconfigures social relations. Tocqueville is well known for drawing on Montesquieu and arguing that a free society must be marked by pluralistic, overlapping, mediating institutions. Medieval France before the rise of the centralized state remains the guiding example of such liberty, and Tocqueville finds in America's localism and vibrant civil society a democratic substitute for the same condition. My emphasis in the chapter is not on this more familiar argument, but on Tocqueville's pessimistic description of the way a democratic belief in equality transforms social relations. An aristocratic society can acknowledge and dignify personal subordination and dependence. A democratic society is unable to find that vocabulary and consequently reconceptualizes objective hierarchical relationships into nominally egalitarian ones. The result, Tocqueville observes, is not genuine equality and emancipation, but an ideological, depersonalized, tutelary form of servitude.

Chapters two through four develop interpretations of these thinkers, with occasional references to their contemporaries to draw out the distinctiveness of their accounts of medieval feudalism and corresponding critiques of liberalism. My hope in these chapters is to capture each thinker's distinctive vision of politics, and so I remain close to their own language and voice.

---

[30] Karl Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.287.

Through my reconstructions, my goal is to communicate the power of their assessments of the anarchy that afflicts the modern world.

In chapter five, I provide a more schematic and conceptual treatment of Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville. I contrast the different accounts they offer of the sources and character of the new impersonal servitude. Those differences at the level of diagnosis give rise to even more radical divergences at the level of prescription. I trace the parallel programs that flow from their feudal-inflected critiques of the liberal state and market economy. For Marx and Carlyle, if the problem of the modern world is anarchy, the solution must be the establishment of mastery. Marx identifies the universal proletariat as the agent of a future, conscious, collective dominion over social life. In so doing, he finds in the proletariat a reconciliation of three motifs: a Promethean demand for authoritative control, a humanist demand for freedom, and a rational demand for a scientifically ordered economy. For Carlyle, a new class of masters—the captains of industry—must rise to command a disciplined, soldier-like mass of laborers. Echoes of his enthusiasm for mass discipline can be found in early twentieth-century liberals, reactionaries, and radicals alike. Tocqueville, in contrast to both, rejects the ideal of mastery, whether collective or elitist. He insists on the need to establish nodes of functionally aristocratic hierarchy rendered legitimate through democratic forms. I offer my assessment of these programs, commenting on what remains instructive for our time and what must be rejected.

The final substantive chapter draws on the themes of the intellectual history I reconstruct to speak more directly to contemporary political theory. I argue that the slaves-without-masters tradition helps us to better comprehend the persistent cry that modern liberalism has brought about "depoliticization." Going through rival conceptualizations of depoliticization, I provide some theoretical clarifications, showing that many of our common uses of the term range from the trivial

to the philosophically unattractive. Identifying a liberal hostility to arbitrary rule and a preference for impersonal systems points to a more compelling account of depoliticization. From a healthy desire to minimize the role of will and elevate the institutionalization of reason, liberal politics tends to offload responsibility to the market economy and to non-political sites of governance like the bureaucracy and judiciary. While recognizing an important place for such delegations, I return to the philosophy of Publius and the American constitution, which offer a decidedly more political vision of liberalism than do many contemporary theorists.

This dissertation studies a complaint to highlight its origins, its affinity with the feudal political imagination, and its relevance for a contemporary drift toward depoliticization. Liberals have good reasons to be skeptical of political will and the specter of arbitrariness. But when they depoliticize, they must remember that such depoliticization is a choice society should be free to revisit in the future. The deep dissatisfaction many feel with a society that seems to run on auto-pilot and is incapable of redirection is the latest manifestation of the warning issued by the subjects of this study.

I conclude with a brief invocation of the American Progressives, who lamented the rise of "leaderless" and anarchic government and hoped to establish new modes of democratic mastery over society. As their own example teaches—and as is shown through the critiques of Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville—the deepest formulations of the slaves-without-masters critique are spiritual rather than institutional. That explains, most fundamentally, the power of medieval feudalism as an imaginative foil for liberal modernity. The Middle Ages did not just offer an alternative constitutional or economic structure, but a wholly different animating ethos. As one of the most sophisticated progressive thinkers, Herbert Croly, came to see, institutional reforms are insufficient for overcoming the new servitude. Reflecting on the failure of the progressive program in 1920,

Croly turns back once again to Catholic, medieval feudalism, hoping to find there a model of spiritual revitalization for modern America. It is not obvious that the Middle Ages do, in fact, offer a promising path forward. But the power the medieval imagination held over the minds of so many thinkers speaks to what remains the deepest difficulty for a liberal society: the problem of disenchantment.

Chapter One: Radical, Romantic, and Reactionary Feudal Nostalgia

The aim of this chapter is to trace the emergence of feudal and medieval nostalgia in early nineteenth-century critiques of liberal politics and economics. In the hands of radicals, reactionaries, and romantics alike, feudalism was deployed to defend, among other ideals, aristocratic chivalry, spiritual devotion, economic justice, hierarchical reciprocity, international peace, patriotic nationalism, agrarian solidarity, and even political freedom. This chapter canvasses a few influential representatives of this neomedieval turn to highlight the homologous (if often incompatible) critiques that were articulated by means of imaginative appeals to a lost feudal age.

Of particular theoretical importance are a few conceptual patterns that recur across the thinkers treated below. The first is that feudalism is deployed as a means of marshalling a moral critique of liberal politics and bourgeois economics. These thinkers are, for the most part, relatively uninterested in the structural character and tendencies of a commercial, liberal society. With the exception of Adam Müller, they have little to say about the connection between free trade, industrial development, and state capacity. Their emphasis, rather, is on the harmful, dehumanizing consequences of economic development, and their appeals to the imagined solidarity of feudal medievalism is meant to offer a vision of a more just, intimate, and reciprocal mode of life. Their unwillingness to consider seriously reason of state, the power of the emerging middle and laboring classes, and the necessities of international competition, render their critiques poignant but their prescriptions naïve.

In like manner, the thinkers treated in this chapter turn to feudal nostalgia to critique the conduct of the ascendant bourgeois elite. Europe has not succeeded in abolishing economic and political hierarchy, these thinkers argue. Instead, the emerging liberal, constitutional governments have established a new feudalism no longer humanized by the civilizing forces that directed and

restrained the medieval nobility. The appeal to the ethic of chivalry is meant to highlight the egoism of modern bureaucrats and capitalists. The charity and hospitality of the medieval monastery is a rebuke of the cold, Malthusian tendencies of the modern politician. And the Catholic church's spiritual direction of medieval kings underwrites an attack on the militaristic and despotic character of modern rulers, elected or otherwise.

Finally, the thinkers treated below turn to the feudal foil as a means of encouraging a retrieval of certain medieval practices and institutions. William Cobbett and Adam Müller offer very different assessments of the landed aristocracy, but they both hope to restore feudalism's flexible, reciprocal property regime. Friedrich Schlegel and Robert Southey stand on opposite sides of the Catholic question, yet both favor a revival of medieval Christendom, be it in the form of the spiritual primacy of the visible church over international politics or the role of monasteries in social life. The ubiquitous demand for restoration of *noblesse oblige* offers the most evident illustration of the sense in which all these figures are committed to a kind of nostalgia. They do not just use the ideal of medievalism to diagnose the ills of liberal, secular, commercial modernity, they seek to reconstitute certain medieval institutions in their own times.

The chapter begins with a survey of the widespread hostility to feudalism and medievalism in the republicanism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Feudalism served as the embodiment of arbitrary, despotic government, even as many republicans diverged markedly on the historical character of feudalism and the nature of a free state. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the symbolic valence of feudalism grew more contested. The divergence of Adam Smith and Edmund Burke's reception serves as an instructive synecdoche for the new debate. Smith was read as a representative of a liberal politics defined in opposition to feudalism, while Burke was taken as a romantic, neomedieval critic of a utilitarian, commercial, and mechanical society. The second section

takes up the parallel and overlapping critiques offered by political reactionaries and romantics of a spiritless liberal economics and a despotic liberal state. The third section turns to Britain, where Gothic, medieval revival would leave a lasting imprint on nineteenth century cultural and artistic production. Again highlighting the diversity of those who took up the cause of feudalism, I show how radicals and Tories alike sought to restore various features of the medieval order to rebuke the corruption and frivolity of the modern, bourgeois elite.

1. Liberty under Law against Feudal Despotism

The constitution of Massachusetts, written by John Adams, articulates what remains a core aspiration of the liberal tradition: the establishment of "a government of laws, and not of men."[1] At the heart of this familiar maxim lies a rejection of arbitrary authority and an embrace of a rational, impartial, and impersonal mode of government. As his great-grandson Henry Adams put it almost a century later, the founding generation was animated by an abiding fear of uncontrolled, unaccountable power:

> The great object of terror and suspicion to the people of the thirteen provinces was *power*; not merely power in the hands of a president or a prince, of one assembly or of several, of many citizens or of few, but power in the abstract, wherever it existed and under whatever name it was known.[2]

John Adams identified the arbitrary rule of man with the personal subordination and subservience to king, lord, or priest. The rule of law established by the American constitutions was defined in opposition to the tyranny typified by the feudal, Catholic Middle Ages. One of Adams' earliest political works—written in 1765 and published in response to the Stamp Act—contrasts the spirit of

[1] *Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, (1780), Part The First, Article 30. Accessed at: https://malegislature.gov/Laws/Constitution.

[2] Henry Brooks Adams, "The Session," *The North American Review* 111, no. 228 (1870): 30.

American liberty with the oppression of medieval Europe. The "canon and feudal law," Adams writes, constitute the "two greatest systems of tyranny" in recent history.[3] These two forces held the great mass of the western world in a condition of "cruel, shameful, and deplorable servitude" to the episcopacy and "a state of servile dependence on their lords."[4] Since the settlement of the Puritans, the American people have "detested all the base services and servile dependencies of the feudal system."[5]

1.1 Republicanism against Feudalism

Adams' scorn for feudalism is typical of republican political thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[6] Political liberty, religious toleration, and scientific progress were celebrated as triumphs over feudal oppression, violent persecution, and Catholic superstition. Yet despite this widespread contempt for medievalism, republican thinkers did not share a common understanding of what feudalism consisted in. The category—like the "medieval" dark ages itself—was a polemical construction meant to serve as a foil for modern liberty and progress. Feudalism thus constituted a symbolic object of contempt. It was deployed as a common vessel for a range of critiques, many of which implied incompatible positive programs.

One such tradition—that which informed the young Adams' attack on the canon and feudal law—can be identified with what J.G.A. Pocock termed the "common law mind" of British

---

[3] John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," in *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 22.

[4] Adams, "Dissertation," 22-3.

[5] Adams, "Dissertation," 26. In his repudiation of feudalism, Adams favorably cites Lord Kames and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

[6] For a study of French anti-feudalism, see J. Q. C. Mackrell, *The Attack on "Feudalism" in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1973). More recently, Tom Pye has argued that Scottish Enlightenment theorists defined their project of improvement in direct opposition to the inherited feudal law. "The Scottish Enlightenment and the Remaking of Modern History," *The Historical Journal* 66, no. 4 (September 2023): 746–72.

republican theory. Whig historians and lawyers of the seventeenth century identified liberty with an immemorial ancient constitution. The appeal of ancient constitutionalism, Pocock argued, lay in its refutation of arguments for princely sovereignty. If the English constitution was not willed into being by a king, no king could claim the authority to subvert it. The power of this historical tradition was tethered to "the almost universally respected doctrine that law should be above will."[7] In the tradition of the authoritative common lawyers—Edward Coke and Matthew Hale—the legitimacy of the English law derived from its embodiment of an experience and wisdom that surpassed the natural reason of any individual jurist or ruler.

In the hands of more radical thinkers, the ancient constitution tradition ceased to be a source of skeptical traditionalism and became a language of critique. National mythology was deployed to attack the British government for abandoning its ancient principles. According to the Levellers and later radicals, primeval Saxon liberty had been subverted by the Norman Conquest and its imposition of a new feudal law. With William the Conqueror came a regime of princely and baronial despotism. A representative statement of this national myth of ancient Saxon freedom against feudal Norman tyranny can be found in the opening pages of Walter Scott's 1819 classic, *Ivanhoe*:

> The situation of the inferior gentry … who, by the law and spirit of the English constitution, were entitled to hold themselves independent of feudal tyranny, became now unusually precarious. If, as was most generally the case, they placed themselves under the protection of any of the petty kings in their vicinity, accepted of feudal offices in his household, or bound themselves by mutual treaties of alliance and protection, to support him in his enterprises, they might indeed purchase temporary repose; but it must be with the sacrifice of that independence which was so dear to every English bosom … A circumstance which greatly tended to enhance the

[7] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century: A Reissue with a Retrospect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 51.

> tyranny of the nobility, and the sufferings of the inferior classes, arose from the consequences of the Conquest by Duke William of Normandy.[8]

This passage sets the scene of Scott's great novel, which takes place in twelfth-century England before the baronial civil war that would yield the Magna Carta. On his typical formulation, the ancient liberties of the independent, Saxon gentry had been replaced by the tyrannical oppression of a new feudal nobility. Pocock's reconstruction of the historiography that formed the backdrop of Scott and Adams' historical imagination contributed to a resurgence of interest in seventeenth-century republican constitutionalism. One conceptual thread that unites much of this work is the identification of feudalism and the Norman yoke with oppression and arbitrary power.

Quentin Skinner's theorization of a "neo-Roman" critique of personal dependence has proved particularly influential on this theme. For Skinner, English republican thinkers drew on Renaissance retrievals of Roman law categories to define personal dependence as a condition of slavery. The slave's "lack of freedom" does not derive from formal constraints on their sphere of action. More deeply, unfreedom "derives from the fact that they are subject to the jurisdiction of someone else."[9] Drawing on Skinner's historical work, Philip Pettit theorized and popularized an understanding of freedom as "non-domination." That is, unfreedom consists in being dependent on the arbitrary will of a superior.[10]

The danger of arbitrary dependence constituted a preeminent political concern for the republican and proto-liberal thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Adams' description of the new Massachusetts government is itself a quotation of James Harrington's

---

[8] Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. Graham Tulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 16.

[9] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41.

[10] Pettit, *Republicanism*.

declaration in the opening pages of his 1656 classic, *Oceana*, that a free commonwealth is "a government of laws and not of men."[11] For republicans like Harrington and the young Adams, a government by law consists in a balanced constitution with a powerful popular element. Yet the same normative ideal—the hostility to arbitrary dependence typified by feudalism—could also ground a wholly distinct program: an appeal to powerful, centralized, and even monarchical government.

Scottish Enlightenment thinkers—embodying what Duncan Forbes called a "scientific" or "skeptical" Whiggism—rejected the mythology of a primeval ancient constitution.[12] Drawing on Stuart historiography, they argued that the Saxons did not enjoy a regime of liberty subverted by Norman, feudal conquest. This did not mean the ideal of liberty as non-dependence fell out of favor. Instead, this turn in British political thinking reflected a debate over the institutional forms that might best realize liberty. Rather than return to a mythical system of parliamentarism or primitive democracy, a more sober historical perspective insisted that liberty emerged with the establishment of an empowered monarchy that could crush the power of a rapacious clergy and aristocracy.

David Hume's *History of England* was among the most influential statements of this scientific history, and precisely because of its sympathy for monarchism it was condemned by Thomas

---

[11] James Harrington, *"The Commonwealth of Oceana" and "A System of Politics"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 35. Thomas Hobbes lampoons that ideal in *Leviathan*, attributing it to an error of Aristotelian philosophy: "And therefore this is another Errour of Aristotles Politiques, that in a wel ordered Common-wealth, not Men should govern, but the Laws. What man, that has his natural Senses, though he can neither write nor read, does not find himself governed by them he fears, and believes can kill or hurt him when he obeyeth not? Or that believes the Law can hurt him; that is, Words, and Paper, without the Hands, and Swords of men?" *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 471.

[12] Duncan Forbes, "Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce, and Liberty," in *Essays on Adam Smith*, ed. Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 179–201.

Jefferson as a work of Tory propaganda.[13] Hume's portrayal of Charles I was so evocative that Louis XVI turned to it for consolation upon receiving his own death sentence.[14] Hume famously described himself as committed to "Whig principles" and "Tory prejudices," and so his *History* and political thought more generally attempt to synthesize a belief in historical progress and a wariness of enthusiastic and fanatical reform.[15] He detested the barbarism of medieval feudalism, lamented the Magna Carta for retarding monarchical centralization, and celebrated the modern state for its defeat of destructive, feudal mediating institutions. Monarchy in particular, Hume suggests, is the surest means of curtailing tyranny: "It may now be affirmed of civilized monarchies, what was formerly said in praise of republics alone, *that they are a government of Laws, not of Men*."[16] These civilized modern monarchies are contrasted with medieval feudalism's patchwork of barbarous princely rule, which Hume terms "a government of will, not of laws."[17]

As Eric Nelson has shown, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and certain American founders draw on Stuart historiography to articulate this repudiation of feudal tyranny and embrace of centralized royalism.[18] Even John Adams, whose earlier views inclined toward pure parliamentarism, would emerge as a defender of presidential power in the American constitutional debates of the

---

[13] Laurence L. Bongie, *David Hume, Prophet of the Counter-Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), viii.

[14] David Wootton, "David Hume: 'The Historian,'" in *Cambridge Companion to David Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 466–67.

[15] Andrew Sabl, "When Bad Things Happen from Good People (and Vice-Versa): Hume's Political Ethics of Revolution," *Polity* 35, no. 1 (2002): 73–92.

[16] Hume, "Of Civil Liberty," *Essays: Moral; Political; and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 94.

[17] David Hume, *The History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, ed. William Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 2.174. Cf. Neil Mcarthur, "Laws Not Men: Hume's Distinction between Barbarous and Civilized Government," in *David Hume*, ed. Richard Whatmore and Knud Haakonssen (Routledge, 2013).

[18] Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); "'Barons' Wars, under Other Names': Feudalism, Royalism and the American Founding," *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 2 (2017): 198–214.

1780s and 1790s.[19] Oppression, on this royalist republican view, arose from the weakness, not the strength, of the monarch. In the words of the *Federalist Papers*, "tyranny in the head"—a powerful central government—is less worrying than "anarchy among the members"—a decentralized, feudal aristocracy.[20]

One way to conceptualize these debates is through the classical taxonomy of governments, described most famously by Aristotle. Regimes may be divided into the rule of the one, the few, or the many. Radical republican theorists identified feudalism with both the rule of the few (aristocracy and clericalism) and the rule of the one (monarchism). They argued, consequently, for a mixed or popular form of government to resist the arbitrary power of the one or the few. The scientific or royalist republicans replied that feudalism was essentially the tyranny of the few, and that its hallmark was monarchical weakness. Before the rise of centralization, England was tyrannized by the church and baronial aristocracy, not the king.

Disagreements over the history and nature of feudalism thus persisted beneath the surface of apparent republican agreement that feudalism was the paradigmatic site of arbitrary, tyrannical government. In their shared repudiations of feudalism—whatever it meant—republicans differed dramatically as to which institutional arrangements bring tyranny and which secure liberty. Harrington and the young Adams feared the power of both the feudal aristocracy and the feudal monarch. Hume and the mature Adams retained a rejection of the feudal aristocracy but welcomed

---

[19] For a discussion of Adams' mature defense of the American presidency and his belief that monarchical power is consistent with a republican government see Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution*, 205–10.

[20] Publius, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. James McClellan and George Wescott Carey (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, 2001), 18.89. This discussion continues throughout paper 19, with specific critical reference to the instability and political weakness of feudal Europe. William Selinger has traced a development of this argument concerning the connection between monarchical centralization and liberty as formulated by Jean Louis de Lolme and influential among nineteenth-century liberals like Francois Guizot. William Selinger, "The Monarchical Origins of Modern Liberty: The Norman Conquest and the English Constitution Revisited, 1771–1861," *History of European Ideas* (forthcoming).

an empowered monarchy as a guarantor of liberty. As a symbolic matter, however, feudalism, whether understood as monarchical or aristocratic power, remained to the republican mind the antithesis of a government by law.

1.2 Adam Smith and Edmund Burke: System vs. Inheritance

Historiographical disagreements over feudalism served as a proxy for rival visions of political reform. Yet the overlap between substantive political commitments and historical interpretation was not perfect. That is made clear by a comparison of the thought and reception of Edmund Burke and Adam Smith. If Burke, as Pocock puts it, is a representative of the traditional "common-law mind," Smith is the champion of a progressivism more indebted to Stuart than Whig historiography.[21] Where Burke identifies liberty with an ancient constitution and the priority of parliamentary government, Smith identifies medievalism as an age of "feudal anarchy," and welcomes the triumph of the monarchy over the baronial lords. Burke celebrates Magna Carta as one of the great evolutionary steps toward liberty, while Smith is wary of it as a triumph of the rapacious aristocracy over the ascendant monarchy.

Despite these divergent interpretations of the ancient constitution, Smith and Burke share much in common. Gregory Collins argues that Smith and Burke were in full agreement on most of the fundamental principles of political economy.[22] Work on what Donald Winch termed the "Burke-Smith Problem" often begins with a quotation attributed to Smith by Burke by an early biographer: "Mr. Smith, [Burke] said, told him, after they had conversed on subjects of political economy, that

[21] J. G. A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution—a Problem in the History of Ideas," *The Historical Journal* 3, no. 2 (1960): 125–43.

[22] Gregory M. Collins, *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 139–41.

he was the only man, who, without communication, thought on these topics exactly as he had."[23] From the America question, to the rights of minorities, to the importance of trade liberalization, the two figures were in broad agreement on many of the controversial questions of the day.[24]

This commonality casts some doubt on the conventional account of the two figures' respective roles in the history of ideas. Where Adam Smith is taken to be the father of capitalism, Edmund Burke remains commonly acknowledged as the father of conservatism. Recent scholarship has done its best to overturn these genealogies. Burke biographers and scholars insist that the Irish statesman is far more liberal than is generally accepted, and that his later adoption by conservatives was not so much a matter of principle but a contingent development in response to debates over the Irish question.[25] Scholars have insisted with equal vehemence that Adam Smith bears little resemblance to the classical liberals and libertarians who later took him up as their champion. Emphasizing Smith's sensitive treatment of inequality, a cottage industry of "left-Smithians" have advanced interpretations of a more progressive and even potentially social democratic Smith.[26]

---

[23] Robert Bisset, *The Life of Edmund Burke, Volume II* (G. Cawthorn, 1800), 429. Winch reasonably laments that the authenticity and context of this quip is far too questionable to serve as the load-bearing evidence for which it is typically deployed. "The Burke-Smith Problem and Late Eighteenth-Century Political and Economic Thought," *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 1 (1985): 231–47.

[24] Of particular importance is Burke's 1795 "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity," published posthumously in 1800, which perfectly recapitulates a Smithian defense of free trade and hostility to state intervention. Edmund Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke: Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. Francis Canavan, vol. 4 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 51–92.

[25] Richard Bourke, *Empire & Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830-1914: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[26] See for example Elizabeth Anderson, "Adam Smith on Equality," in *Adam Smith: His Life, Thought, and Legacy*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 157–72; Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Dennis Rasmussen, "Adam Smith on What Is Wrong with Economic Inequality," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 2 (May 2016): 342–52; Glory M. Liu, *Adam Smith's America: How a Scottish Philosopher Became an Icon of American Capitalism* (Princeton: University Press, 2022).

There remains an important truth, however, in the conventional interpretations of Smith and Burke, and that truth was not lost on their early readers. Even if their concrete political positions were more often aligned than opposed, Smith and Burke manifest two wholly different ways of thinking about politics. In Smith we find a confident spirit of rational improvement. In Burke, we find a pious spirit of deference to inherited practices. Even if in the debates of the 1770s and 1780s these rival approaches did not yield practical disagreement, the two thinkers would come to serve as representatives of two sides in a deep debate over the essence of liberal, commercial political economy.

The original ancient-constitution debates began as juridical disputes over the balance of political authority across king, lords, and commons. Over the course of the eighteenth century, this legal-historical discourse would expand into a more general treatment of the connection between personal rule, the rule of law, and civic liberty. Feudalism, after all, was not merely a constitutional arrangement but an economic system. The decentralized regime that marked medieval Europe was bound up with a decentralized order of hierarchically nested duties of labor. Smith offers one of the clearest examples of this expanding critique of feudalism. No longer simply a shorthand for tyrannical political authority, Smith attacks feudalism as a backward and oppressive mode of economic production. The "commercial society" Smith champions is an attempt to institutionalize the rule of law not only with respect to political authority, but with respect to economic life more broadly.

Like Hume, Smith has no patience for mythologized appeals to an idealized ancient constitution of parliamentary liberty. Modern liberty did not flourish in the forests of Germany but is instead an achievement of a highly centralized system of government. The condition in which Europe fell with the collapse of the Roman Empire constituted "the lowest state of poverty and

barbarism," an age "of feudal anarchy."[27] There is a connection, for Smith, between medieval political oppression and primitive economic development. Absent a system of regular law and under constant threat of feudal political conflict—what Smith calls the "oppression of civil government"—medieval subjects had no ability to improve their lands or engage in productive economic activity.[28] Feudal political economy was trapped in a stable but dysfunctional equilibrium. More extended commercial integration and exchange was needed to undermine the economic and therefore political power of the feudal aristocracy, but commerce could not emerge without a more centralized political regime. As he summarizes:

> The nobility necessarily fell to ruin as soon as luxury and arts were introduced. Their fall everywhere gave occasion to the absolute power of the king … this indeed must always be the case; the power of the nobles has always been brought to ruin before a system of liberty has been established … the people therefore never can have security in person or estate till the nobility have been greatly crushed. Thus the government became absolute, in France, Spain, Portugal, and in England after the fall of the great nobility.[29]

Britain's success, Smith argues, is due to a fortuitous combination of political centralization and the evolution of a powerful system of judicial independence.[30] The emergence of monarchical power and an established legal tradition coincided with and depended on the weakening economic base of baronial political power. To that end, Smith welcomes land clearances—the sixteenth century enclosures and the Highland clearances underway toward the end of his life—that transformed the

---

[27] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), III.ii.1, III.ii.7. Henceforth *WN*.

[28] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), LJ(B) 285. Henceforth *LJ*.

[29] Smith, *LJ(A)*, iv.164-6. I have developed this argument in greater length in "Adam Smith on the Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Commercial Society," *History of Political Thought* 41, no. 4 (2020): 622–47.

[30] Paul Sagar, "On the Liberty of the English: Adam Smith's Reply to Montesquieu and Hume," *Political Theory* 50, no. 3 (2022): 381–404.

aristocracy from feudal masters of men into bourgeois managers of estates.[31] To bring down the oppressive barons, Smith favors a combination of political consolidation and economic seduction. A powerful monarch can allow for the spread of commerce and therewith luxury consumption. Long identified as a source of moral corruption by the republican tradition,[32] luxury is celebrated by Smith as the means of inducing the feudal aristocracy to redirect its resources from the mastery of men to the consumption of frivolities:

> what all the violence of the feudal institutions could never have effected, the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures gradually brought about. These gradually furnished the great proprietors with something for which they could exchange the whole surplus of their lands, and which they could consume themselves without sharing it either with tenants or retainers. All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind. As soon, therefore, as they could find a method of consuming the whole value of their rents themselves, they had no disposition to share them with any other persons. For a pair of diamond buckles perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless, they exchanged the maintenance, or what is the same thing, the price of the maintenance of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them.[33]

---

[31] Smith, *WN* III.iv.13.

[32] Feudal lords retained political power by using their wealth to maintain a class of dependents. With the arrival of commerce, the lords sacrifice that power by spending their wealth on luxury consumption rather than supporting their dependents. Smith celebrates this development as an advance for human liberty and economic progress. Rousseau laments this transformation of feudal masters into bourgeois consumers: "formerly the poor nobility in Poland attached themselves to Grandees who gave an education and subsistence to their retinue. That is a truly great and noble luxury, the inconvenience of which I feel perfectly, but which at least, far from debasing souls, raises them up, gives them feelings, resilience … I doubt that a luxury of that sort leaves a lot of room for the luxury of trinkets; and at least its example will not seduce the poor. May the Great in Poland return to having only this sort, perhaps divisions, parties, quarrels will result from it, but it will not corrupt the nation." Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland and on its Planned Reformation," trans. Christopher Kelly, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau Volume 11*, ed. Christopher Kelly (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005), 179.

[33] Smith, *WN*, III.iv.10. Edward Gibbon offers a similar defense of the role of commerce in weakening feudal economic power and encouraging more productive land cultivation: "Such refinements, under the odious name of luxury, have been severely arraigned by the moralists of every age; and it might well be more conducive to the virtue, as well as happiness, of mankind, if all possessed the necessaries, and none the superfluities, of life. But in the present imperfect condition of society, luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means that can correct for the unequal distribution of property. The diligent mechanic, and the skilful artist, who have obtained no share in the division of the earth, receive a voluntary tax from the possessors of land; and the latter are prompted, by a sense of

Together, these institutional developments allow for the overthrow of feudal power and the establishment of what Smith calls the "system of natural liberty."[34] Monarchical power allows for commerce to emerge, commerce tempts the vain aristocracy to sacrifice political power over men for greater consumption, feudal estates are thereby emptied of tenant populations, allowing for more productive economic improvement. Political centralization, commercial expansion, luxury consumption, and the collapse of feudal tenant-landlord relationships all coincide.

There is an elegant systematicity to this Smithian model of political and economic development. That too is a crucial feature of Smith's political project. Commercial societies find themselves in a precarious situation. A prosperous and free society requires a powerful central government, yet a powerful central government threatens to undermine the property rights that secure economic prosperity and liberty. Federalist 51 offers a canonical formulation of this difficulty: "you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."[35] Smith has little to say about institutional mechanisms to restrain the powerful central government whose emergence is necessary for establishing a system of commercial liberty. He is sensitive to the dangers, however, and he rebukes the French physiocrats for celebrating despotism as the means of maintaining a prosperous economic regime. In response to this worry, Smith offers a curious psychological prescription. Rulers must become enthralled by the "political machine" of a commercial society. Bewitched by the "perfection of the machine," they must cease

---

interest, to improve those estates, with whose produce they may purchase additional pleasures." *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Volume I*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Press, 1994), 80.

[34] Smith, *WN* IV.ix.51.

[35] Publius, *Federalist Papers* 51.269.

to think of themselves as masters of the society—the physiocrat's despotic model—but instead as the caretakers of a self-correcting system more powerful than political will:

> if you describe the great system of public police which procures these advantages, if you explain the connexions and dependencies of its several parts, their mutual subordination to one another, and their general subserviency to the happiness of the society; if you show how this system might be introduced into his own country, what it is that hinders it from taking place there at present, how these obstructions might be removed, and all the several wheels of the machine of government be made to move with more harmony and smoothness, without grating upon one another, or mutually retarding one another's motions . . . He will, at least for the moment, feel some desire to remove those obstructions, and to put into motion so beautiful and so orderly a machine.[36]

Smithian statesman, consequently, lose sight of the fact that they are in fact rulers.[37] Smith calls for the emergence of a commercial society that can operate as a kind of self-motion machine. While certain political and economic pre-requisites may be required for the abolition of feudal predation—a centralized government and a more rationalized model of estate management—that active political role comes to be concealed to the leadership class itself.

Smith redeploys the familiar, Enlightenment hostility to feudalism to champion a program of state-building, land clearances, and rationalized economic production. Burke, on the other hand, is most famous for his polemic against Enlightenment rationality. Giving poetic voice to a reaction that emerged across Europe in response to the French Revolution, Burke synthesizes romantic aesthetics and anti-rationalist politics. As Burke puts it in a well-known critique of abstract reason:

> In this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally

[36] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), IV.I.11.

[37] I have more fully developed this interpretation in "Adam Smith's Four Invisible Hands and the Problem of Political System," *History of Political Thought* 44, no. 2 (May 31, 2023): 338–68.

> they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them.[38]

Against naked reason, Burke defends prejudice and inheritance as the means by which free institutions can be transmitted from one generation to the next. He identifies that conservative mode of politics with the feudal practice of entail: "from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our Constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers."[39] This mode of argument is typical of the "common law mind" theorized by Pocock. Burke himself is no political Tory, and he articulates an argument for evolution that is consistent with an earlier generation of Whig ancient constitution theorists. In his hands, however, this established discursive tradition is transformed into a conservative creed.[40] The abstract, speculative, rationalistic politics that characterizes Enlightenment politics is identified with a cold, spiritless, mechanism: "the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever."[41]

For Burke, politics must not be understood as a contractual arrangement for the protection of individual rights. As he famously puts it, if we must understand society as a contract, it must not

---

[38] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in Edmund Burke, *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, ed. Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90.

[39] Burke, *Reflections*, 34.

[40] Pocock's interpretation of Burke is far too deflationary. He is right to see that Burke is channeling the common-law discourse of an earlier generation. But he fails to acknowledge the radical transformation of that discourse under the direction of Burke's powerful rebuke of the French Revolution and therewith a tradition of social contractarian political philosophy. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution—a Problem in the History of Ideas."

[41] Burke, *Reflections,* 78.

be classified as "nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other low concern." The covenantal contract of civil society must be revered as:

> A partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society.[42]

Critics of the *Reflections* immediately identified a connection between Burke's aesthetic sensibilities and his conservative apology for the feudal *Ancien Regime*. Thomas Paine charged that Burke "pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird. Accustomed to kiss the aristocratical hand that hath purloined him from himself, he degenerates into a composition of art."[43] An aesthetic defense of the medieval aristocracy drives his mad repudiation of political reform, Paine claims. Mary Wollstonecraft likewise mocks Burke's enthusiasm for "Gothic gallantry," which constitutes an ideological apology for the "condescension of a Baron."[44] Burke's defense of *noblesse oblige* comes at the expense of the people's welfare:

> I perceive, from the whole tenor of your Reflections, that you have a mortal antipathy to reason; but, if there is any thing like argument, or first principles, in your wild declamation, behold the result:--that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience: nay, that if we do discover some errors, our *feelings* should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days. These are gothic notions of beauty—the ivy is

---

[42] Burke, *Reflections,* 100–101.

[43] Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 72. In both that text and even more clearly in *Common Sense*, Paine recapitulates a familiar radical interpretation of Britain's ancient constitution as a system of republican liberty subverted by Norman feudal tyranny.

[44] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (London: J. Johnson, 1790), 32.

> beautiful, but, when it insidiously destroys the trunk from which it receives support, who would not grub it up?[45]

Burke's rebuke of abstract reason is fueled by a conservative theory of evolution, an epistemological rebuke of speculative reason, and a moral critique of the cold, egoistic character of the social contractarian tradition. Paine and Wollstonecraft's polemical responses exaggerate and mischaracterize Burke's politics—Burke understood the failings of the *Ancien Regime*, his purplish apology of Marie Antoinette notwithstanding—but they aptly recognize his synthesis of an established ancient-constitution legal tradition and a neomedieval romanticism.

Where the rationalist *philosophes* favor nature, abstract principles, and universality, Burke turns to culture, inherited prejudice, and particularity. The failure of modern philosophy and politics consists in its attempt to strip down social life to a set of basic principles. So doing does not represent an advance of reason, Burke argues, but an arrogant, presumptuous neglect of inherited wisdom. By tearing off the "decent drapery of life"—the aristocratic and feudal forms that marked the *Ancien Regime*—Enlightened reformers and revolutionaries destroy the delicate forms of cultivation embodied in historical practice and prejudice: "All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion."[46]

2. The Romantic Reaction

Burke's critique of the cold, utilitarian premises of Enlightenment philosophy and politics would become a ubiquitous lament in the mouths of romantic and reactionary critics of liberal

---

[45] Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 9-10.

[46] Burke, *Reflections*, 79.

modernity. For these critics, medieval feudalism represented a humane, spiritual, and organic mode of life. In schematic terms, we can summarize certain recurring motifs of these critics as follows:

- A rejection of reason and nature and a turn to history and organicism
- A skepticism of constitutional innovation and an embrace of inherited institutions
- A critique of "spiritless" Protestantism in contrast to the mysticism of medieval Catholicism
- A hostility to commerce, industry, and the division of labor, and an embrace of agriculture, reciprocity, and the guild economy
- An anxiety that the modern nation state will engender permanent conflict, and an idealization of Christendom as a model of international concord

There are earlier precedents for all these worries. More's *Utopia* warned of the rise of a new pauper class produced by the land enclosures and abolition of feudal economic reciprocity. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* offered a culturally sensitive approach to political development, rejecting abstract theory for an appreciation of the national particularities of different peoples. Rousseau's biting attack on commercial society and the division of labor remains the most powerful indictment of a modern, mechanical, atomizing social spirit. Justus Möser rejected the Enlightenment *tout court*, defending feudal life and repudiating meritocracy and mobility. Adam Ferguson and before him Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun warned of the waning of civic virtue in an age of commerce.

With the French Revolution, however, these anxieties took on new power through the movements we now term romanticism and reaction. Political conservatives most directly took up the Burkean critique of Enlightenment reason. Joseph de Maistre, for example, radicalized Burke's hostility to innovation, converting common-law skepticism into a more sweeping providentialism. Quoting Burke on the impossibility of designing a constitution *a priori*, de Maistre's 1809 *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* takes as its maxim: "*man cannot create a constitution; and no legitimate constitution can be written*."[47] Regimes have a divine origin and are not constructed by human

[47] Joseph Marie de Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* (Little and Brown, 1847), 89–90; 116.

will. The French medieval constitution evolved under the direction of providence to suit the character of the French people.[48] Liberals imagine they can derive a sound constitution from an abstract list of the rights of man. To this enthusiasm, de Maistre famously replies: "there is no such thing as man in the world. In my lifetime I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc. … But as for *man*, I declare that I have never in my life met him; if he exists, he is unknown to me."[49]

De Maistre favors the authority of institutions and symbols developed under providential direction. The papacy, for example, is defended as the institution it has become, not as it was understood in the primitive church. Protestants who argue that the Vatican is a corruption of its original form suppose that the way to understand the man is to study "an infant in swaddling clothes."[50] De Maistre compares the evolution of spiritual and temporal authorities to the evolution of language—a thing learned and discovered, not invented and imposed. When men try to impose names, they make a mockery of substance: "if the name is imposed by an assembly; if it is established by previous deliberation, so that it precedes the thing … we may be sure the name and the thing will disappear in a very little while."[51] Where rationalist Protestantism is communicated through technical treatises, the Catholic creeds are lovingly sung: "Reason can only *speak*; it is love which *chants*; therefore we chant our symbols; for *faith* is only a *belief, through love*."[52] For the same

---

[48] Joseph Marie de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, ed. Richard Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 62–76.

[49] De Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 53.

[50] De Maistre, *Generative Principle*, 75.

[51] De Maistre, *Generative Principle*, 157-8.

[52] De Maistre, *Generative Principle*, 56.

reason de Maistre rejects *sola scriptura* for making an idol of the "*image of the Word*," while failing to grasp its meaning as dictated by the tradition and living authority of the church.[53]

The catastrophe of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars led conservatives to look beyond the modern state for a model for international peace. It was in this context that de Maistre develops his ultramontane political theology—especially in *Du Pape*—as a response not only to the decline of Catholicism, but to the corruption of the European nobility and the Erastian tendencies of the Gallican church.[54] Where de Maistre looked for a new epoch of papal primacy, other conservatives looked back to medieval Christendom. Augustus Rehberg, for example, proposes a revival and reform of the medieval Ständegesellschaft (society of orders), as an alternative to liberal constitutionalism.[55] Friedrich von Gentz, personal secretary to Klemens von Metternich, was taken by de Maistre's *Du Pape*, yet he too turned to medieval organicism rather than ultramontane papalism.[56] In his translation of Burke's *Reflections*, Gentz defends his medievalism not as a repudiation of reason, but as a critique of the excesses of modern rationalism. Associating Burke with Rousseau's idealization of primitive man, Gentz argues that neither sought to abandon the achievements of modern civilization, but rather deploy these foils to diagnose the distinctive vices optimistic Enlightenment rationalists fail to recognize.[57]

---

[53] De Maistre, *Generative Principle*, 72.

[54] Carolina Armenteros, *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794-1854* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 115–55.

[55] Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism*, 1764 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 547–94.

[56] Raphaël Cahen, "The Correspondence of Frederick von Gentz: The Reception of *Du Pape* in the German-Speaking World" in Carolina Armenteros and Richard Lebrun, eds., *Joseph de Maistre and His European Readers: From Friedrich von Gentz to Isaiah Berlin* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

[57] Jonathan Allen Green, "Friedrich Gentz's Translation of Burke's Reflections," *The Historical Journal* 57, no. 03 (September 2014): 639–59.

2.1 Adam Müller

One of the most systematic and theoretically impressive re-interpretations of feudalism was developed by Adam Müller in his 1809 lectures, *The Elements of Statecraft*. A leading figure of Prussian conservatism and a convert to Catholicism, Müller took as his task a wholesale critique of "mechanical" liberal political economy, both in its theoretical formulation and its institutional implementation. By replacing the feudal estate structure with stringent property rights and political centralization, the modern state abandons "life, law, balance, and freedom," producing instead "a legislative and administrative machine, an ultimate police chief."[58] Liberal constitutionalism aims to cleverly balance power across competing interests, mitigating social conflict to secure peace and material productivity. In so doing, however, it abandons the organic, holistic vitality that marked the Christian Middle Ages. With this contrast, Müller sketches a critique of the new commercial and democratic elite, which he argues governs society with less moral concern and greater tyrannical authority than the feudal aristocracy and clergy ever had.

Müller identifies mechanical liberalism with Montesquieu and Smith, whom he accuses of neglecting the "living law" and separating the theory of politics and the practice of statecraft. He rejects, for example, Montesquieu's celebrated treatment of the British constitution: "What Montesquieu places such great value on, the mechanical division of powers, the artificial limitation of sovereignty for the sake of freedom, is, in our experience, completely impractical, a curiosity, an antique."[59] Burke is superior for grasping that which is "eternal and imperishable" in the laws and the state, that which relates "more to the complete and eternal nature of the feeling of justice in

[58] Adam Müller, *Die Elemente Der Staatskunst* (Berlin: J.D. Sander, 1809), Band II, 97. (henceforth II.97).

[59] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.xviii.

man, than to worldly success."[60] Burke, according to Müller, is the perfect combination of theory and practice, a figure for whom the living experience of the state is not subordinated to an ornate, abstract philosophy of politics.[61]

Where Burke recognized the state to be a living totality—a partnership in all virtue and perfection—Smith reduces politics to a matter of material production and institutional arithmetic. Against Smithian liberalism, Müller argues that modern statesmen must learn "*not to exclude the spiritual needs of people and their inner actions from the state*."[62] The Smithian celebration of the division of labor and the emphasis on national wealth treat the living community as a deadened factory:

> Everyone knows Adam Smith's example: a worker who is supposed to perform the entire business alone, with the utmost diligence, can produce at most twenty pins in one day; ten people who have divided the individual tasks of the business among themselves can produce around 48,000 daily: production is thus increased by 2400 times through division. However, no matter how delighted the state accountant may be with these numbers, where is the civic sense of the business and the connection to the community, which was continuously maintained through the guild system, where each masterful individual was focused on the whole? Compare a workshop according to the guild constitution with a modern factory … in the new factory, a cold, calculative entrepreneur stands at the top, focused on pure income. In general, the science [political economy] conceives of princes as state entrepreneurs: the manufactory entrepreneur stands like the emperor over an absolute third estate of machine-like wage workers—and they call such a dead entity: *Freedom*! Not I.[63]

Müller denies that he is a blind "idolater" of the Middle Ages.[64] It is impossible, Müller insists, to fully restore the old medieval society. Müller insists, moreover, that we be clear-eyed about the

---

[60] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.xiii.

[61] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.26.

[62] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.50-1.

[63] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.141-2.

[64] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.vi.

failings of the *Ancien Regime*'s aristocracy. They abandoned the sacred duties of reciprocal human concern, and so they defended not the true spirit of medievalism, but a deadened form of brute economic privilege. Both the second and third estates, he argues, were spiritually dead by the time of the French Revolution.[65]

Nevertheless, Müller identifies in feudalism a brilliant, organic, and living community. The feudal order died with "the abolition of all personal service relationships, their transformation into monetary contributions, dismemberments, etc." Feudalism has become impossible today because "no one understands how to serve or rule anymore."[66] Accordingly, Müller's aim is the recovery of the spirit that animated the medieval world. The "essence" of this spirit, he explains, is "the idea of the reciprocity of all relations of life."[67] Müller turns to feudalism to critique three loci of modern liberalism: (1) A spiritless state that aims only at material comfort and deals only in coercion; (2) A rigid (Roman) system of property rights that abandons the reciprocity between the great and weak; and (3) A privatized religion that renders impossible the harmony of a Catholic Christendom.

Müller's central argument in these lectures is that the social contract tradition produced a mechanical state, one that promises liberty and prosperity but delivers tyranny and alienation. He summarizes the assumptions of the contractarian tradition as follows:

> 'the state is a useful invention, a mere institution for the common good, a human expedient to prevent various inconveniences, a mutual security insurance, without

---

[65] "The individual masses that reacted against each other in the French Revolution were both equally corrupted and lifeless: they were all alike in seeking life in dead possessions. Those who defended feudalism or inequality relied on a right that became a dead right in their hands; those who attacked feudalism and desired equality demanded dead right and lifeless property." Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.73.

[66] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.78. Some pages later Müller writes that in place of "the lofty ideas of 'personal service, sovereignty, and fief," Smithian political economy elevates '"monetary payments, secular sovereignty or coercion, and strict ownership.' Anything that could not be subjected to calculation and the balance had to be excluded." Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.96.

[67] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.134-5.

> which man, in case of need, though less comfortably and agreeably, could still live quite well. The statesman now stands outside his state, like the carpenter outside the furniture he manufactures, and the buyer, the needy nation, comes and chooses from among all these political furnishings the most suitable, comfortable, and modern ones; for he, the statesman, builds in advance, catering to every taste.'[68]

When the state is conceived of in this manner—an artificial construction fabricated to deliver security and comfort—the statesman sees himself as a mechanic, free to rework the gears of the state at will. Müller rejects this conceit—the state is not a tool nor are the members dead gears. Unlike these "calculator-statesmen,"[69] who become "burglers, world improvers, or projectors and alchemists, as Burke calls them,"[70] Müller prefers the analogy to medicine. The doctor does not merely consider the isolated functions of individual organs but treats the health of the living whole. In like manner the statesman must not reduce the state to individual mechanical components to be manipulated at will, but must focus instead on the "whole life-phenomenon of a state."[71] There is a connection, according to Müller, between an unduly narrow view of the purpose of the state and this arrogant, artificial approach to statecraft. When the state is concerned merely for material wellbeing or physical safety, politicians become arrogant and dangerous in their willingness to rework its constitution. Lowering the aims of the state paradoxically produces a greater tyranny.

Echoing Burke, Müller critiques contractarian state theory as follows: "the state is not merely a manufacture, estate, insurance institution, or mercantile society; it is *the intimate connection of the entire physical and intellectual needs, the entire physical and intellectual wealth, the entire inner and outer life of a nation,*

---

[68] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II. 37.

[69] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.242-3.

[70] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.54

[71] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.12. He offers another statement of the medical analogy for statecraft at I.254-5.

into a great energetic, infinitely moving, and living whole."[72] Man is both material and spiritual, and so the state must deal "with morals [*Sitte*] as much as with law; the sovereign must incite the great union just as much as compel it together."[73] This was the achievement of the medieval estate system, which sought a harmonious reciprocity among the different classes. Such mutual concern was preserved by the feudal nobility, which inherited a familial sense of duty and service to the state. Having done away with chivalric aristocracy, the "new Leviathan" state deals in brute coercion with an eye toward mechanical balance.[74] Modern constitutional representation relies on "calculation" to balance interests against one another, and thereby constitutes an inferior substitute for the organic, variegated holism found in the medieval estate system.[75]

The clearest expression of this liberal, mechanical, atomizing spirit can be found in modern economics, which rests on methodologically individualist forms of contract and consent. Müller identifies the modern economic regime with Roman law, which cements stringent private property rights that cut the possessor off from the community. Property becomes merely a matter of owning *things*, and it ceases to serve as a bond between *persons* as it had under the feudal order:

> All our legislations have been corrupted by the delusion that there is an absolute barrier between *persons* and *things*; the most heinous attacks on the holiest rights have been motivated in our days through that distinction one sought to establish between the mere person and their presumed pure rights, and the thing itself; the personal character that a family estate assumes over centuries, which can also be observed in the well-managed capital of a business over a long period, was not further recognized. According to that strict intellectual distinction, capital and family estate were nothing but dead things and that sublime fusion of things and persons, which

---

[72] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.51.

[73] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.46.

[74] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.62. Müller argues that medieval corporate representation is a truer embodiment of the Rousseauian general will than is majoritarian democracy.

[75] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.267-8.

> we find in all truly happy states and which is labeled as *feudalism*, was once and for all detested as a crime against reason.[76]

Feudalism, scorned by liberal economists, held property rights to be a social trust. The rights of feudal property regimes captured "the true living nature of property," and the Christian Middle Ages were responsible for discovering the "mystery of the reciprocity of all relations of life."[77] Where Roman law reified a "*strict absolute private property*," the essence of the feudal system is summarized as follows: "There is only usufruct, but no unconditional ownership … something personal, inalienable, and sacred was granted to landed property, the exchange: *ownership for services*."[78] Müller offers the example of marriage to juxtapose feudal and modern property arrangements. Medieval marriage was not merely a contract between consenting adults, it was rather a union of persons.[79] Feudalism declared in every domain the primacy of reciprocity "between the ruling and the serving, between the overlord and the vassal; [] between the property and the proprietor." Roman law, triumphant in Napoleonic Europe, destroys that which was "mutual, beautiful [and] interlocking" under feudalism.[80]

Deploying a now-familiar contrast between negative and positive liberty, Müller claims that under the influence of Roman law, we have come to identify freedom as "mere *non-slavery*, or non-dependence." He rejects that deflationary view, arguing that liberty must be understood as "a *positive*, living, clearly defined, actively ruling freedom within its circle."[81] Such a positive ideal was realized in

---

[76] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.221.

[77] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.236.

[78] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.79-80.

[79] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.239-40.

[80] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.80.

[81] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.142.

the feudal guilds, which "vividly mediated the freedom of the individual with the freedom of the community" and "societally stamped the civic entity onto each individual citizen in the specific material of his particular activity."[82] Modern market society is unable to comprehend this positive vision of freedom. It identifies liberty with competition, and thus it views guild institutions as an unjust encroachment on human freedom.[83]

Müller offers a third line of critique against the modern state. An early champion of German nationalism, Müller finds in medievalism a healthier balance of national identity and universal comity.[84] Medieval Christendom cultivated national development bound by the unity of the visible Catholic church. Christianity alone was enthroned above the competing and warring principalities of Europe.[85] The clergy connected rival states, guaranteed the priority of charity, restrained the pride of the nobility, and upheld "the spirit of a certain moral equality and Christian reciprocity in all civil relations."[86] The Reformation destroyed that unity. Waging war against the church visible and the sacramental clergy, the reformers turned faith into an affair of the private heart. Religion was "*deprived of its public character, its legal and international significance, and turned into an exclusively domestic private matter*."[87]

No longer bound by spiritual unity, the nations of Europe now seek peace through mechanical or coercive means. Müller rejects the fantastic proposals for a "*universal monarchy*" or a

---

[82] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.143.

[83] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.144.

[84] This is the reason for Müller's prominence in Meinecke's intellectual history of German nationalism. Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

[85] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.293.

[86] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.105.

[87] Müller, *Die Elemente*, II.109.

"*universal republic*" on the grounds that such chimeric proposals will destroy the living growth and competition that the individual states struggling against one another foster.[88] At the same time, he rejects the attempt to achieve a balance of power within Europe. Such an approach—characterized by the weighing of interests and unprincipled forms of power-based compromise—cannot restore the harmony of Christendom. Aiming at mere peace, such an international legal arrangement leaves states "in no other relationship with each other than mutual support, the leaning of the mighty masses on each other, with no further result than that of peace, general standstill, and the inevitable decay and sinking of states into themselves."[89] As with modern constitutional theories of representation, the international balance of power promises an artificial, mechanical, and spiritless substitute for the organic, Catholic unity found in medieval Christendom.

2.2 Karl Ludwig von Haller

Adam Müller deploys an idealization of medieval feudalism to (1) critique a mechanical liberal constitutionalism that aims only at securing material political ends; (2) critique the cash-nexus market economy that rests on rigid rather than reciprocal property rights; and (3) critique a new international politics that replaces Catholic unity with violent balance. In so doing, he charges the new money aristocracy with abandoning the poor and the new bureaucratic state of tyrannizing society to a degree unmatched by the medieval regime.

Another reactionary deserves mention in this context. Karl Ludwig von Haller, a Bernese conservative and convert to Catholicism, sketches one of the more peculiar reinterpretations of medievalism. In his critique of the social contract tradition and his defense of the feudal nobility, he

[88] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.282-3.

[89] Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.284.

echoes a familiar attack on liberal political philosophy. Yet his positive vision is itself curiously individualistic, reducing all bonds of hierarchy to an individual exchange of obedience for protection. Like Müller, his critique of the new political and commercial elite consists in its abandonment of noblesse oblige and a corresponding increasingly despotic mode of political-military coercion. Yet unlike Müller, he locates the true foundation of authority in natural superiority. He thereby rejects abstractions like the "state" and political sovereignty and theorizes all bonds in terms of private, quasi-contractual debt and service.

Haller's magnum opus, the *Restoration of Political Science*, develops a thoroughgoing critique of the social contract tradition. Hobbes, Locke, Pufendorf, Grotius, Rousseau, and Sieyes are subjected to Haller's brusque, extended, and redundant abuse. Like Müller, he turns to the Middle Ages as a corrective for the mistaken liberal political assumptions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His defense of the feudal "patrimonial" state was influential in its day, though today it is best remembered as the target of one of Hegel's lengthy asides in *The Philosophy of Right*.[90]

Haller joins Müller in praising the Catholic church for establishing spiritual unity that could direct and civilize the fractious politics of Christendom:

> In a spiritual sense, has not [the church] caused the boundaries of states and nations to disappear, so that amid all external differences adorning and beautifying the earth, wherever the name of Christ was revered … one did not step out of the common homeland, did not go among strangers, but among fellow citizens and spiritual brothers, finding the same law, the same faith again? You desire a state within states, a so-called world-citizen state: who realizes it better than the Christian Church?[91]

---

[90] Hegel singles out Haller for critique because his *Restoration* is uniquely consistent in developing a critique of public law and sovereignty. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 279–81.

[91] Karl Ludwig von Haller, *Restauration Der Staats-Wissenschaft Oder, Theorie Des Natürlich-Geselligen Zustands Der Chimäre Des Künstlich-Bürgerlichen Entgegengesetz.*, Second Edition, vol. 4 (Winterthur, 1822), xvii. (henceforth IV.xvii).

A visible church led by a sacramental clergy and apostolic episcopacy is needed to maintain Christian peace above the conflicts of temporal princes. Like Müller, Haller insists on an apparent paradox: The liberal, constitutional state ostensibly lowers its political ambition. It seeks to justify itself as an expression of consenting free, equal citizens, not as a naturalized form of hierarchy. Yet that theoretical grounding justifies a more totalizing grant of state power than did the aristocratic, patrimonial state of the Middle Ages. The modern contractarian theory flatters the pride of citizens who wish to regard themselves as "master or co-master." The consequence is "the death of all true legal freedom … it surrenders all private will, all private power, all private judgment, property, and individuals to a non-existent common being for eternity."[92]

The distinctiveness of Haller's critique of modern liberalism is his repudiation of *any* form of "public" authority. The contractarian tradition argued that legitimacy derived from popular consent. Rulers, consequently, are reconceptualized as "*public officials, servants of the state* or the people, and remain accountable to them as their fictional lord." The rights and duties of these officials are determined by a "*Constitution of the state*," which in turn is "nothing more than a large *political machine*, a public institution established by the nation to realize its purposes, promote its interests, and, above all, secure the freedom of each individual citizen."[93] Having been willed into being by the people, the constitution can be re-ordered or reconfigured at the will of the sovereign.

In theory, the contractarian constitution is designed to preserve freedom and limit arbitrary tyranny. Yet because of the totalizing character of sovereignty, there remain no fundamental limits on what the leviathan may do. Embarrassed by the old vocabulary that distinguished ruler and ruled, contractarian theorists speak of abstractions like "government." On the older view, "government"

---

[92] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.170.

[93] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.24.

referred to an extension of the private rights of the ruler. But now taken as a delegated site of sovereign popular authority, no limits can be attached to its power:

> this false expression also leads to dangerous practical confusions; on the one hand, it necessarily leads all princes and republics to despotism, as they, because of the name, imagine they must govern all possible things and private matters … on the other hand, it makes these authorities hated by the subjects, because nothing is more intolerable to human feeling than the thought of being governed in everything and everywhere, and precisely those who propound such doctrines are the first to complain about their implementation.[94]

Cloaked with a language of limited governments and popular sovereignty, the contractarian theory is a brute system of unjust coercion, "which, from prince to beggar, robs every person of their rights."[95] Modern philosophers condemn slavery and serfdom, but they forget, Haller claims, that pre-modern servitude was more intimate, humane, and reciprocal than is the slavery of the modern, liberal state: "the serf enjoyed a property for his subsistence, the slave himself found food and clothing, housing and care; it was still a relationship between man and man, and love mitigated much that seemed harsh in origin or form." Enthusiastic liberals reject natural dependence and servitude, yet their principles justify a more totalizing mode of coercion under the "so-called rational state." Modern philosophers "have invented the word 'state' to beautify [slavery] and still mock the misfortune, calling their subjugated slaves free citizens."[96]

Haller offers a simple alternative foundation for authority: Natural superiority. The "great and indestructible law of nature" demands that "only the superior, the more powerful, rules, or to express it more precisely: where power and need come together, a relationship arises in which the

---

[94] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.479.

[95] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.xii.

[96] Von Haller, *Restauration*, III.228-9.

former gets the dominion, and the latter receives dependence or servitude."[97] The claim that natural superiority grounds authority appears to justify the arbitrary rule of the strong over the weak. But Haller dismisses that worry, arguing that it stems from a characteristically liberal tendency to conflate power with tyranny, and that it fails to distinguish two separate questions: (1) What is the ground of authority; and (2) What is the morally appropriate exercise of that authority.

His repudiation of the contractarian tradition—and his repudiation therewith of any form of public law—is meant to answer the first of those questions. Nothing but natural superiority can constitute the source of authority. This universal law, he repeats, must manifest itself in every social relationship. But the authority that flows from superiority must remain tethered to a natural law of moral right. The contractarian, he remarks, will frivolously object as follows:

> Just because the more powerful reign everywhere, does that mean everything is permitted to the powerful? Will the strong man crush the helpless infant, the father thrust a dagger into the chest of his own children, and, because he rules over them, mistreat, prostitute, rob them of life and property, the master expose his servants, whom he should nurture and protect, to misery and hunger, even command them to commit crimes? Can the doctor poison his patients, the teacher deceive and mislead his trusting disciples instead of imparting truth and knowledge?[98]

The mistake in these hypotheticals lies in a failure to recognize the role of moral law in guiding and directing the conduct of the superior. This law is found in the hearts of men, but it must be made manifest through moral habituation, catechesis, and ultimately the fear of God. No human artifice—clever constitutional design or the separation of powers—can serve as a substitute for this primeval natural law.[99]

---

[97] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.359.

[98] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.388-9.

[99] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.391.

It is in this context that Haller turns to feudalism as a foil. A military aristocracy melded with patrimonial suzerainty, feudalism constitutes a more honest expression of the natural, personal basis of authority. Tempered by the Christian moral law, feudalism simultaneously entailed greater liberty and mutual concern than does liberal constitutionalism with its arithmetic checks-and-balances. The feudal system established "a common bond of unity between [the people] and the king," and operated as a form of "truly paternal rule."[100] Moreover feudal hierarchy was marked by loving reciprocity in part because it consisted not in a singular locus of public sovereignty, but in a range of overlapping nodes of loyalty:

> Almost everyone was a master on one side and a servant on the other, meaning they were the vassals of one and had similar vassals under them. This entirely natural subordination based on gifts and contracts was later called the *feudal constitution*, in contrast to the purely military one, fundamentally more despotic, where no such hierarchy of power and freedom prevails, and all subjects stand at equal distance from the sovereign, and he has authority over all in the same extent.[101]

Modern thinkers declaim against the feudal system as a site of anarchy, slavery, and misery. Yet Haller claims that it established greater freedom than any modern constitutional system. Liberal sophistry has destroyed feudalism's natural bonds of reciprocal concern under the "pretext of freedom and equality." Rather than deliver those ideals, liberal reformers and revolutionaries have scattered the people "like shepherdless sheep, thereby depriving the weaker ones of any protection, and exposing them all to the arbitrariness or arrogance of the first wolf."[102]

Though Haller sets his reactionary politics in the tradition of pre-liberal Catholic and classical political theory, it is worth emphasizing how his patrimonial vision of authority breaks with

---

[100] Von Haller, *Restauration*, III.258-9.

[101] Von Haller, *Restauration*, III.255.

[102] Von Haller, *Restauration*, III.263.

the Aristotelianism of the medieval scholastics. Two ruptures are particularly notable. First, Haller insists that his is a general theory of all social relations. It is a mistake to mark out the state as a special form authority requiring distinctive justification:

> While the outward forms may change, the essence of the matter remains the same; for, whether here or there, natural superiority is the basis of everything called authority, and greater need is the basis of all dependence or servitude. Thus, nature extends the bonds of human society, intertwining them beyond the narrow circle of an individual family.[103]

The authority of husbands over wives, fathers over sons, masters over apprentices, doctors over patients, and princes over subjects derive from the same law of natural superiority. Aristotle, on the contrary, begins his *Politics* by distinguishing these various forms of authority, highlighting the distinctiveness of the architectonic political art.[104] More fundamental still, Haller rejects Aristotle's account of the final cause of the state. In rejecting the contractarian *telos* of politics—the securing of peace and the protection of individual rights—Haller is at home with a familiar set of critics. But Haller goes further, rejecting not only liberal ends but *any* account of the final purpose of the state. Recurring to his understanding of political authority as a species of private right, a free submission of the inferior to the superior, he insists that there can be no common good of the political community "but only a multitude of very different private purposes, all of which can ultimately be traced back to living and living pleasantly."[105] In this regard, Haller breaks with Müller, whose romanticism is incompatible with such a deflationary and privatized theory of politics. Indeed the

---

[103] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.302.

[104] These distinctions are laid out in the very first pages of the *Politics*. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1252–55.

[105] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.471. Haller devotes a full chapter to the common natural basis of all authority. The patriarchal family, he argues, is the model of the patrimonial principality. II..20-60.

whole basis of the Hallerian theory of authority is at odds with Müller's account, who repudiates the Calliclean mistake of reducing authority to the will of the stronger.[106]

One especially striking tension characterizes Haller's apology for the rule of the superior. He critiques the contractarian tradition for abandoning the recognition of natural authority, suggesting that the new "machine" state emerges from a repudiation of true, private hierarchy. He also insists, however, that this law of natural superiority cannot be overcome. All regimes—whatever their stated justifications—ultimately consist in the rule of the strong. Aristocracy is indestructible. Even if a society were to succeed in killing or expelling the elites, "others would step into their places at the same moment."[107] He takes this to be the lesson of the French Revolution. Though promising a radically new form of politics, the revolution gave rise to Napoleon, a natural superior whose personal power formed the basis of his authority.[108] With Napoleon emerges a new feudalism, one no longer bound by the Church, directed by Christian morals, and distributed across variegated sites of authority:

> the crown placed on the head by the Emperor himself, the so-called National Sovereign, transformed the philosophical republic back into a patrimonial state. Since then, we have seen the introduction of a new, much more extensive *feudal system*, stricter in its conditions or services, the establishment of a *legal nobility* (while the old one was natural) with hereditary titles that no longer correspond to any corresponding offices.[109]

Feudalism of a kind is inevitable. Haller takes the modern machine state to be a feudal hierarchy of its own, though of a distinctively despotic, immoral, and militaristic variety. When Haller praises

---

[106] Müller critiqued liberal states for achieving in practice what Haller favors in theory, law as "nothing more than the law of the stronger systematized." Müller, *Die Elemente*, I.245.

[107] Haller, *Restauration*, III.282.

[108] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.267.

[109] Von Haller, *Restauration* I..271.

medievalism, he does so to emphasize the necessity of tutoring and distributing authority in accordance with the natural right of princes, guilds, and communities. Liberal theorists attempt to imitate medievalism by limiting power through institutional means. For Haller, such "artificial" measures "are not possible, not necessary; they would only make the evil worse."[110] He favors a return to natural law as taught by the Church. As he summarizes, "restoration can only consist in the strengthening of throne and altar and in the friendship between both."[111] What Haller finds instructive about medieval feudalism is a spirit of chivalry, fidelity, and humility nowhere to be found among the *de facto* masters of modern Europe.

The contrast between Müller and Haller demonstrates how diverse the idealization of feudalism was even among reactionaries. Medieval feudalism provided a vehicle to critique the egalitarian, contractarian assumptions of modern politics, but did not model a common vision of positive reform. Müller emphasizes the reciprocity of feudalism, highlighting the Germanic forms of property rights that underwrote a regime of mutual concern and organic harmony. Feudalism for him is a model for understanding the essence and purpose of the nation as a spiritual and political community. Haller, on the contrary, has no interest in the nation—precisely the kind of abstraction he associates with the public law thinkers of the Enlightenment. He defends patrimonial government as a clear instantiation of personal superiority, and he praises medieval Christendom for cultivating Catholic feudal masters who justly ruled their private dependents.

2.3 Romantic Medievalism

Müller and Haller's repudiation of liberal "mechanism" is typical of a larger romantic reaction to the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Often this critique came from sometime

---

[110] Von Haller, *Restauration*, I.411.

[111] Von Haller, *Restauration*, IV.xxxvii.

champions of republican reform. Friedrich Schiller stands as a particular prominent case. Awarded honorary citizenship in the French Republic for his literary attacks on the *Ancien Regime,* Schiller turned by 1794 toward a critique of modern Europe's mechanical, lifeless, atomizing individualism:[112] "Everlastingly chained to a single fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment … he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge."[113] While still committed to the Kantian philosophical project, Schiller warns that reason alone kills the human spirit. The light of reason must be paired with the warmth of beauty. Echoing Burke, Schiller attacks rationalism for leaving us cold and naked. He calls for a restoration of forms and conventions to cultivate human nature: "taste throws a veil of decorum over those physical desires which, in their naked form, affront the dignity of free beings; and, by a delightful illusion of freedom, conceals from us our degrading kinship with matter."[114]

Schiller's ideal is ancient Greece, which he characterizes as a polyp, a whole composed of wholes.[115] But medievalism would soon serve as an equally potent symbol for this critique. Romantics like August Schlegel contrasted the vision of self-sufficient human harmony found in the Greeks with a romantic, Christian vision of the soul. Moderns can no longer be satisfied with the balance and unity found in Greek art: "In the Christian view all this has been reversed: the contemplation of the infinite has destroyed the finite … the happiness for which we here strive is

---

[112] For a representative statement of Schiller's earlier Whiggish optimism and republican enthusiasm, see Schiller, "The Nature and Value of Universal History: An Inaugural Lecture," [1789] *History and Theory* 11, no. 3 (1972): 321–34.

[113] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). Letter 6, paragraph 7 (henceforth 6.7).

[114] Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 27.219.

[115] Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 6.31.

unattainable."[116] Medievalism and the gothic proved more appropriate for a Christian soul driven by a longing for the infinite.

Novalis, a master of German romanticism, took up this dissatisfaction with Enlightenment ideals of self-interest, commercial competition, and centralized administration. The modern state aims at sating its subjects with material comfort, but "would not that government be preferable for which a peasant ate mouldy bread rather than a roast, and for which he thanked God for the good fortune of being born in its land?"[117] The modern machine state is a factory, a "mechanical administration" that relies on egoism to maintain a simulacrum of unity.[118] The debate between modern republicans and monarchists is choice between two forms of despotism—that of a single master and that of a blind mass.[119] Under the influence of skepticism and materialism, Europe has become a "self-grinding mill," and it must be transformed into a "living autonomous creature."[120] Like Müller, Novalis offers marriage as a metaphor for politics—a union actuated by sacrificial love and devotion, not material advancement and contractual egoism.[121]

Though neither a conservative nor a Catholic, Novalis celebrates the spiritual unity of medieval Christendom, those "beautiful, magnificent times" in which all of Europe shared the bond of faith.[122] Modern Europe finds itself in a condition of national competition and violence, an

---

[116] August Wilhelm Schlegel, "Classical versus Romantic," in Lilian R. Furst, *European Romanticism: Self-Definition* (Routledge, 1980), 32.

[117] Novalis, "Faith and Love," in Frederick C. Beiser, *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 36. Henceforth *EGR*.

[118] Novalis, "Faith and Love," in *EGR*, 45.

[119] Novalis, "Political Aphorisms," in *EGR*, 56-7.

[120] Novalis, "Christianity or Europe," in *EGR*, 70; "Philosophical Studies" in *EGR*, 86.

[121] Novalis, "Philosophical Studies," in *EGR*, 90.

[122] Novalis, "Christianity or Europe," in *EGR*, 61.

anarchy Novalis attributes to the Reformation. Whatever their intentions, the reformers "separated the inseparable, divided the indivisible church, and impiously divorced themselves from the universal Christian union."[123] Rather than maintain a competitive peace through the equilibrating balance of power, Europe must establish a new Christendom subject to a "visible church without regard to national boundaries."[124] Novalis similarly praises the medieval state and its feudal economy for establishing a richer, spiritual form of community, a "macroandropos." The guilds and estates constituted the members and powers of the body politic, "the aristocracy was the moral power; the priests, the religious power, the intellectuals, the intellect, and *the king, the will*."[125] Burke, according to Novalis, developed the most potent critique of the rationalizing tendency of the Enlightenment and its inevitable culmination in the French Revolution. He alone had written "a revolutionary book against the Revolution."[126]

Friedrich Schlegel, whose conversion from radical republicanism to conservative Catholicism was steadied by his lasting romanticism, developed a more systematic treatment of the medieval imagination. In his early pre-Christian writings, he hoped that Europe might restore something of medieval Christendom without the corruption of the Catholic Church.[127] He too praised Burke's

---

[123] Novalis, "Christianity or Europe," in *EGR*, 65.

[124] Novalis, "Christianity or Europe," in *EGR*, 79.

[125] Novalis, "Philosophical Studies," in *EGR*, 87.

[126] Novalis, "Pollen," in *EGR*, 90.

[127] "The new Christianity must be *catholic* without any further ado, but old catholic, not the papacy." Schlegel, *Philosophical Apprenticeship* in *EGR*, 167.

study of the French Revolution[128] and celebrated the medieval spirit: "Never was there more freedom, equality, and fraternity than in the Middle Ages."[129]

In his mature writings, the Catholic Schlegel develops this celebration of medievalism, though with greater subtlety than is sometimes acknowledged. Rejecting the casual dismissal of the dark ages as "false, narrow-sighted, and unjust," he demands a renewed appreciation of the "inventive spirit of the middle age."[130] Particularly attentive to the importance of symbolism, he celebrates Gothic architecture for drawing man's attention up to the highest and holiest things.[131] Those who dismiss medievalism—Voltaire chief among them—adopt a bigoted view of feudalism, imagining it to be a site of tyranny and abuse.[132] Schlegel accepts that the unstable conflict between church and state often gave rise to despotic abuses.[133] He is critical, too, of the abuses of scholastic philosophy and the medieval church. Despite those failings, like Müller and Novalis, Schlegel is drawn to Christendom's aspiration to establish a spiritual union above temporal conflict. A revival of faith is preferable to either a world state or violent *realpolitik*:

> If then an absolute preponderance of a single state is hateful to all, and a dynamical balance of power in the general state-system is either inadequate for such an end [peace] or does not admit of application, is it not at least conceivable that a higher

---

[128] Schlegel, *Philosophical Apprenticeship*, in *EGR*, 161.

[129] Schlegel, *Philosophical Apprenticeship*, in *EGR*, 165.

[130] Friedrich von Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature: Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson and Son, 1818 [1812]). Volume I, 273-4 (henceforth I.273-4).

[131] Schlegel, *History of Literature*, I.337-8.

[132] Schlegel, *History of Literature*, I.339.

[133] Friedrich von Schlegel, *The Philosophy of Life, and, Philosophy of Language: In a Course of Lectures*, trans. A. J. W. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 [1827]), 183.

> principle of Christian justice might be substituted for these which are equally defective?[134]

The genius of Christendom was its separation of spiritual and temporal authority. The bishops and the clergy of the church provided a unity that disappeared with the "restless anarchical spirit" of modern times.[135] For Schlegel, the "essence of despotism" consists in the unity of spiritual and temporal power.[136] Christendom's Gelasian division of powers safeguarded a form of liberty that has been abandoned with the rise of a privatized Protestantism and purely secular political authority. Retracing a familiar debate, Schlegel offers the example of the Jewish people's demand for a king as a parallel for modern Europe's demand for liberty. In both cases the power of a "wild and tumultuous" expression of "public opinion" underwrote a "heathenish attraction to liberty" that led ultimately to separation from God and therewith temporal despotism.[137] Schlegel hopes to establish a "true theocracy," which will consist in a restoration of a spiritual authority that governs through moral appeal, not the sword.[138]

The familiar conclusion of this argument is the identification of the decline of medieval Christendom with two new forms of modern violence: International war among states and the spiritless despotism of modern machine-states.[139] Feudal political authority was tempered and civilized by Christian chivalry and nobility. Loyalty, fidelity, and fraternity constituted the basis of the

---

[134] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 316.

[135] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 304.

[136] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 172.

[137] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 331. Cf. Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 23–56.

[138] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 336-40.

[139] Friedrich von Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Modern History: To Which Are Added, Historical Essays on the Beginning of Our History, and on Caesar and Alexander* (H. G. Bohn, 1849 [1810]), 213.

"feudal constitution," whose decline coincided with an end to the "great and glorious effects which the spirit of chivalry produced."[140] Nobility constituted an ethic of conduct: "The characters and heroes of the middle age are mainly distinguished from those of antiquity by their whole life, and all their actions, being guided and ruled by the imagination, or by some great idea, rather than by any systematic plan of the understanding."[141] Having replaced faith and chivalry with calculation and egoism, modern politics has become a mechanism of brute coercion and material manipulation:

> The older political institutions and political science reposed more or less upon the foundation of religion, of national manners—in a word, upon moral springs of action. In the eighteenth century, a new political science arose, which calculated not upon the undefined working of moral springs of action, but altogether upon the development of material resources. It was believed that, by the skillful adjustment and careful application of these resources, the artificial mechanism of policy sprang chiefly out of commerce, whose influence now first began to be fully felt in Europe.[142]

Schlegel identifies constitutional representation with these same calculating, rationalistic, and atomistic foundations. Theories of institutional design treat the nation as a mass of atoms, not an "organic whole" of the type that characterized feudal estate-representation: "It is only when a state or nation historically lives on, further develops and vitally maintains itself in its organic members, i.e., in its several estates or essential corporations, that it can be said to form a living whole."[143] Again the contrast between Smith and Burke typifies this debate. Smith takes material welfare to be his "ruling and central principle," thereby rejecting any understanding the state as a spiritual

---

[140] Schlegel, *Modern History*, 34.

[141] Schlegel, *Modern History*, 107.

[142] Schlegel, *Modern History*, 300-1.

[143] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 286.

whole.[144] Favorably quoting Novalis on Burke's "revolutionary" repudiation of the French Revolution,[145] Schlegel praises Burke for recognizing the religious essence of politics:

> This man has been to his own country and to all Europe—in a very particular manner to Germany—a new light of political wisdom and moral experience. He corrected his age when it was at the height of its revolutionary frenzy; and without maintaining any system of philosophy, he seems to have seen farther into the true nature of society, and to have more clearly comprehended the effect of religion in connecting individual security with national welfare, than any philosopher, or any system of philosophy of any preceding age.[146]

Schlegel's articulation of the medieval ethic is remarkably balanced. He is critical, for example, of Scholastic philosophy, whose rationalism contributed to the present crisis.[147] Contemporary reactionaries like Bonald are similarly blamed for attempting to unduly rationalize Christian religion.[148] While he prefers monarchy, he is willing to accept a providential rise of republican government, so long as it remains regulated by a spirit of Christian justice and spiritual authority.[149] His fundamental criticism of the modern state, targets its elevation of egoistic freedom over chivalric nobility and a consequent transformation of harmonious authority into the iron hand of sovereignty.[150] The essence of medieval feudalism that must be restored is an ethos of fraternity and chivalry under the spiritual direction of the visible, Catholic Church.

---

[144] Schlegel, *History of Literature*, II.229.

[145] Schlegel, *History of Literature*, II.292.

[146] Schlegel, *History of Literature*., II.238.

[147] Schlegel, *History of Literature*, II.72. *Philosophy of Life*, 253.

[148] Schlegel, *History of Literature*, II.236. Interestingly, Schlegel offers sympathetic interpretations of Kant and Bacon for setting out the limits of reason.

[149] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 292.

[150] Schlegel, *Philosophy of Life*, 175.

3. British Neomedievalism

The continental romantic and reactionary reassessment of the feudal Middle Ages was mirrored by a dramatic turn to medievalism in nineteenth-century Britain. With the defeat of Napoleon, Britain stood as the model of liberal triumphalism. Yet immediately new anxieties arose in response to the rise of industry, commerce, and democracy. At times, these appeals to chivalry and nobility reached fantastic extremes, as in the 1839 Eglinton Tournament, which drew one hundred thousand spectators to watch reenactors replicate a medieval joust. Nevertheless, the new medievalism would leave a deep impression on Britain's literary and aesthetic culture throughout the century.[151] From the gothic novel to neogothic architecture, the Oxford Movement to the Pre-Raphaelites, many of Britain's most significant cultural achievements would be indebted to neomedieval inspiration. Yet as on the continent, this return to feudalism was not merely a subject of artistic sensibility, but served as a means for romantics, radicals, and reactionaries alike to critique the new liberal order.

The novels of Walter Scott capture with particular clarity the popularity of chivalric, feudal ideals in an age of economic industrialization and political democratization. Two characters in Scott's greatest novel, *Ivanhoe*, exemplify to comical extent the medieval spirit of chivalric loyalty. Wamba and Gurth, respectively the fool and serf of Cedric the Saxon, embody the balance of freedom and dependence imagined as characteristic of feudal social hierarchy.[152] When Cedric is imprisoned in the castle of Reginald Front-de-Boeuf, a rapacious Norman aristocrat, Wamba arrives

---

[151] For an astute study, see Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).

[152] For a remarkably over-theorized dialectical interpretation of the master-slave dynamics at play here, see György Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 49–50. Lukacs admires Scott's poetic telling of history, praising his anachronisms as evidence of an underlying realist interpretation of social life.

disguised as a priest nominally to deliver the prisoner last rites. Once in the cell, Wamba trades places with his master, allowing Cedric to escape while preparing to die in his place. Cedric at first protests, begging the fool free himself, but Wamba refuses. Cedric then asks that Wamba exchange clothes with another prisoner, Lord Athelstane, the heir of Alfred the Great and the rightful Saxon king of England. Wamba refuses again, insisting that he will only sacrifice himself for his master:

> "No, by St Dunstan," answered Wamba; "there were little reason in that. Good right there is, that the son of Witless should suffer to save the son of Hereward; but little wisdom there were in his dying for the benefit of one whose fathers were strangers to his."
>
> "Villain," said Cedric, "the fathers of Athelstane were monarchs of England!"
>
> "They might be whomsoever they pleased," replied Wamba; "but my neck stands too straight upon my shoulders to have it twisted for their sake. Wherefore, good my master, either take my proffer yourself, or suffer me to leave this dungeon as free as I entered."[153]

Wamba is moved by personal loyalty to his master and his family, not an abstract principle of legitimate sovereignty. Later in the novel, after Robin Hood's men have rescued the prisoners, Cedric offers freedom to Wamba and Gurth, the latter of whom fought bravely for his master despite earlier ill treatment. Wamba refuses again, insisting that his vocation consists in service to his master. Gurth, however, accepts his new freedom and responds: "Noble master! doubled is my strength by your gift, and doubly will I fight for you!—There is a free spirit in my breast."[154]

Wamba and Gurth represent two idealizations of fidelity—Wamba the serf who prefers to serve his master than live as a freeman, and Gurth the freedom-loving Saxon who devotes himself wholly to his master even after he is given independence.[155] These depictions highlight what Scott

---

[153] Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 212.

[154] Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 273.

[155] Chandler, *A Dream of Order*, 35–37.

took to be the reciprocal loyalty and love of the medieval feudal hierarchy, a bond that has been broken by atomized bonds of liberal individualism. This celebration of chivalry and honor highlight, as Leslie Stephen would later put it, the connection between Scott's feudal medievalism and his Burkean patriotism:

> He transferred to poetry and fiction the political doctrine of Burke. To him, the revolutionary movement was simply a solvent, corroding all the old ties because it sapped the old traditions, and tended to substitute a mob for a nation. The continuity of national life seemed to him the essential condition; and a nation was not a mere aggregate of separate individuals, but an ancient organism, developing on an orderly system—where every man had his rightful place … the revolutionary or radical view was hateful to him on account of its 'individualism.' It meant the summary destruction of all that he cherished most warmly in order to carry out theories altogether revolting to his common-sense. The very roots of a sound social order depend upon the traditions and accepted beliefs which bind together clans or families, and assign to every man a satisfactory function in life.[156]

Scott did not produce a systematic political writing, yet his novels and correspondence reveal a consistent discontent with industrial, commercial society. Breaking the feudal bond between employer and employee "has been attended with very fatal consequences," he wrote in an 1820 letter. The "superintendence of the workers considered as moral and rational beings" has become "totally unconnected with the employer's usual thoughts and cares."[157]

3.1 William Cobbett's Radical Traditionalism

William Cobbett offers a striking example of how ambiguous feudal nostalgia could be. In no ways a political conservative, Cobbett is among the most prominent and vociferous critics of the aristocracy and established church, and his arguments for parliamentary and social reform marked him among the leading figures of English radicalism. Nevertheless, we find in his writing a curious

---

[156] Leslie Stephen, *The English Utilitarians Volume II* (London: Duckworth and Company, 1900), 367–68.

[157] Walter Scott, *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott Volume II* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1894), 78.

combination of traditionalist nostalgia and reformist enthusiasm. As James Grande puts it, he can be described paradoxically as a "Burkean radical, who tried to imagine a radical, democratic politics that could incorporate ideas of local and national belonging."[158] This conservative radicalism would remain a permanent strand of the British left, finding later influential statements in the handicraft localism of William Morris, the patriotic radicalism of George Orwell, and the moral traditionalism of today's Blue Labor movement.[159] Marx, who praised Cobbett as the "greatest pamphleteer England has ever possessed," recognized this distinctive brand of nostalgic radicalism.[160] In an 1853 article, he described Cobbett in these terms: "He was at once the most conservative and the most destructive man of Great Britain—the purest incarnation of Old England and the most audacious initiator of Young England … revolution was not innovation, but restoration; not the creation of a new age, but the rehabilitation of the 'good old times.'"[161]

Cobbett's writings document and attack the devastation of English rural life left by the rise of industrialization, the Corn Laws, and the enclosures of public lands. They are guided by a recurring charge: With the dissolution of the monasteries and the destruction of the Catholic church, a new money aristocracy has arisen more abusive than that of the fifteenth century. Where priests,

---

[158] James Grande, *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate, 1792-1835* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

[159] Craig Calhoun, "Beyond Left and Right: A Cobbett for Our Times," in *William Cobbett, Romanticism, and the Enlightenment*, ed. James Grande and John Stevenson (London: Routledge, 2015), 157–71. Cobbett unsurprisingly appealed to Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991), 181–85.

[160] Marx, *MECW* 11.498.

[161] Marx, *MECW* 12.189.

lords, and king were on the whole humane and gentle, modern Britain is ruled by corrupt and greedy parsons, bureaucrats ("tax-eaters" and sinecures), and capitalists.[162]

As he recounts in his *Rural Rides*, mainly written and published in the 1820s, it is impossible to ignore the "*shocking decay*"[163] of the countryside, whose tenants have been cleared from common lands and are left with the choice between "*beggary* or *flight*."[164] Privatizing landholdings to establish efficient modes of production destroys the traditional subsistence cottage economy, making independent rural life impossible. This economic transformation has resulted, Cobbett argues, in a massive depopulation of England. Rebuking Malthusian warnings, Cobbett insists that the population of England was greater in the Middle Ages than it is in the 1820s. His evidence for this revisionist claim is relatively scant, coming primarily from a survey of the ruined churches and mansions of the English countryside. Either these buildings "were formerly made *without hands*; or England was, seven hundred years ago, *much more populous than it is now*."[165]

Unable to live as freehold farmers, the English peasantry has starved, left for America, or been reduced to a condition of wage-labor no better than that of chattel slaves. The "infernal system" of corn law protections and industrialization will soon make "all the labourers as much slaves as the negroes are, and subject to the same sort of discipline and management."[166] This

---

[162] It must be acknowledged that Cobbett regularly rebukes the new money aristocracy in straightforwardly antisemitic terms, taking the Jews to be representative of the new exploitation.

[163] William Cobbett, *Rural Rides: In the Counties of Surrey ... [Etc.] in the Years 1821, 1822, 1823, 1825, 1826, 1829, 1830 and 1832, with Economical and Political Observations Relative to Matters Applicable To, and Illustrated By, the State of Those Counties Respectively* (A. Cobbett, 1853), 59*. The asterisked paginations reflect the earlier edition of this 1859 expanded version of the work.

[164] Cobbett, *RR*, 107*.

[165] Cobbett, *RR*, 624. The only surplus population Cobbett is willing to acknowledge is that of the parsons, sinecures, and military pensioners, whom he accuses of idly consuming the wealth of Britain.

[166] Cobbett, *RR*, 79*.

comparison pairs with Cobbett's criticism of humanitarian abolitionists, who are happy to condemn brutal conditions on the other side of the Atlantic, while ignoring the condition of the laboring poor in their midst. Mocking one such abolitionist, Cobbett writes that if he "really wish to *free slaves*, let him go to Wykham in this country" where he will "find the labourers thin, ragged, shivering, dejected mortals" worse off than the slaves of the West Indies.[167] Those who "busy themselves with compassion for the negroes" while upholding a system that makes the English poor "beyond all measure more wretched, than any negro slaves are" deserve contempt, Cobbett writes.[168]

Cobbett's apparent indifference to chattel slavery is jarring for contemporary readers and exaggerates the reality of English labor conditions. The critique is most charitably read as an indictment of humanitarian hypocrisy. Cobbett's target is the lazy optimism of liberal political economists, particularly those who follow Smith, Hume, and Malthus. These "beastly Scotch *feelosofers*" appeal to an abstract vision of national wealth, which appears to mean the difference between total national product and that consumed by the poor. The implication of that definition, Cobbett argues, is that "the *fewer* poor devils you can screw the products out of, the *richer* the nation is."[169] Depopulation, forced emigration, and the abolition of holidays are praised for extracting greater wealth out of fewer producers and therefore contributing to greater national wealth.

The "Scotch *poleeteecal ecoonoomy*"—which Cobbett identifies with "the Edinburgh Review and Adam Smith," is a fraud, its practitioners "many tricky humbugs."[170] Hume and Smith seem to believe that the highest public good depends on "producing *individual misery*. They seem always to

---

[167] Cobbett, *RR*, 297-8.

[168] Cobbett, *RR*, 298.

[169] Cobbett, *RR*, 381.

[170] Cobbett, *RR*, 381, 487.

regard the people as so many cattle, working for an indescribable something they call 'the public.'"[171] These representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment insist that modern Britain is not only more wealthy but more free than it was in medieval times: "Hume and other historians rail against the *feudal*-system; and we, '*enlightened*' and '*free*' creatures as we are, look back with scorn, or at least, with despise and pity on the '*vassalage*' of our forefathers."[172] Dismissing Hume as a "malignant liar,"[173] Cobbett insists that contemporary Britain suffers under a form of feudal domination more wicked than anything experienced in the past. It is obscene to praise the British constitution and its liberty, when today the freedom of the poor consists in "the '*liberty*' to choose death by starvation quick or slow and death by the halter!"[174] True liberty, Cobbett writes, will not consist in abstract slogans, but "means *nothing else, the full and quiet enjoyment of your own property*. If you have not this … you may call yourself what you will, but you are a *slave*."[175]

Against Hume's *History*, Cobbett blames pauperization and slavery on the Reformation, the subject of a history he writes to defend Catholic emancipation. The English Reformation was:

> Engendered in beastly lust, brought forth in hypocrisy and perfidy, and cherished and fed by plunder, devastation, and by rivers of innocent and Irish blood … as to its more remote consequences, they are, some of them, now before us, in that misery, that beggray, that nakedness, that hunger, that everlasting wrangling and spite, which now stare us in the face, and stun our ears at every turn, and which the 'Reformation' has given us in exchange for the ease, and happiness, and harmony,

---

[171] William Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant "Reformation," in England and Ireland: Showing How That Event Has Impoverished and Degraded the Main Body of the People in Those Countries* (J. Duffy, 1869), 118–19. Henceforth *HPR*.

[172] Cobbett, *RR* 74.

[173] Cobbett, *HPR*, 72.

[174] Cobbett, *RR* 440.

[175] Cobbett, *HPR* 275.

> and Christian charity, enjoyed so abundantly, and for so many ages, by our Catholic forefathers.[176]

Acknowledging that his critique is not borne of theological conviction but is "altogether political," he defends Catholicism out of a sense of justice for his calumniated forefathers, "to whom we owe *all* those of our institutions that are worthy of our admiration and gratitude."[177] Cobbett defends, for example, the monastic institutions much detested by Hume. Far from serving the selfish interests of indolent monks, monasteries protected the rights of the poor, as their "rents flowed immediately back *amongst the people at large*."[178] Celibacy, another institution mocked by modern historians, allowed the clergy to devote itself to the people. Having abolished clerical celibacy, the Church of England now funnels the wealth of the poor to support the idle families of the parsons.[179]

Purporting to attack the rapacious catholic clergy, the dissolution of the monasteries redistributed wealth from the people to the king and aristocracy. It "despoiled the working class of their patrimony" and violated their imprescriptible rights, establishing a new class of paupers and a new regime of poor laws. Nominally aimed at alleviating the plight of the indigent and laboring poor, these laws constitute "a compulsory, a grudging, an unnatural mode of relief, calculated to make the poor and rich hate each other, instead of binding them together" as the Catholic monastic institutions had done.[180]

---

[176] Cobbett, *HPR*, 2-3.

[177] Cobbett, *RR* 499.

[178] Cobbett, *HPR*, 59

[179] Cobbett, *HPR*, 60.

[180] Cobbett, *HPR*, 66. This new class conflict is made manifest with the introduction of pews in the churches. Where Catholics worshiped as equals before God, the pews introduce class hierarchy within the church itself. Cobbett, *RR* 175-7.

The Catholic, feudal imbrication of spiritual life and economic reciprocity produced of charity and hospitality. It mitigated class divides and relaxed the rigidity of property rights to serve the interest of the community. Social solidarity was maintained by religious harmony, not coercively produced by the "trammels and terrors of law."[181] As Cobbett summarizes:

> when the Church had been plundered and destroyed; when the greedy leading 'Reformers' had sacked the convents and the churches; when those estates, which *of right belonged* to the poorer classes, had been taken from them … the *poor* (for poor there will and must be in every community) were left destitute of the means of existence, other than the fruits of begging, theft, and robbery … poor, once-happy, and free and hospitable England became a den of famishing robbers and slaves."[182]

Cobbett's medievalism underwrites a defense of traditional, rural life. He deploys feudalism and Catholicism to critique the enclosure of public lands—defended by Adam Smith as a means of rationalizing agrarian production—as well as the corruption of Britain's new feudal masters, the idle aristocrats, corrupt tax-eaters, reactionary parsons, and rapacious landowners.

3.2 Tories and Catholics

Cobbett's neomedieval radicalism is countered by an equally prominent English reactionary feudal nostalgia. Though they shared his contempt for the industrial economy and the new commercial elite, these conservatives were appalled by Cobbett's political radicalism. Most prominent here are the thinkers associated with the "Young England" movement led by Lord John Manners and the young Benjamin Disraeli. The most politically salient disagreement between radical and Tory neo-medievalism centered on the Corn Laws, a series of tariff restrictions on grain imports introduced at the end of the Napoleonic wars. Cobbett denounced these laws for raising the price of food beyond what the working classes could afford. The Young Englanders, on the contrary,

---

[181] Cobbett, *HPR* 115.

[182] Cobbett, *HPR*, 190.

celebrated trade restrictions as indispensable for maintaining the economic and social position of the landowning aristocracy. In 1843, Benjamin Disraeli, for example, defends the Corn Laws as part of a broader celebration of feudal *noblesse oblige*:

> we hear a great deal in the present day upon the subject of the feudal system. ... if we have any relics of the feudal age, I regret that not more of it is remaining. ... what is the fundamental principle of the feudal system, gentlemen? It is that the tenure of all property shall be the performance of its duties. ... The principle of the feudal system, the principle which was practically operated upon, was the noblest principle, the grandest, the most magnificent and benevolent that was ever conceived by sage, or ever practised by patriot."[183]

Disraeli would combine this defense of noblesse oblige with a political and constitutional interpretation of English constitutionalism. In his first major political writing, *A Vindication of the English Constitution*, he excoriates the rise of utilitarianism and its repudiation of the traditional, aristocratic character of English society. Utilitarian precepts justify government on its capacity to deliver the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Against this Benthamite program, Disraeli advances two objections. The first is that whatever its purported affinity with universal suffrage and republican government, the utility standard is agnostic regarding the best form of government. Whether the English constitution is superior to Napoleonic military despotism or Spanish catholic tyranny becomes an open, empirical question.[184]

More fundamentally, Disraeli rejects any abstract, philosophical principle of political legitimation. Echoing Burke, Disraeli turns to a politics of inheritance and prescription. He points to newly independent Latin American countries' failure to imitate the American constitution. Latin America has been plunged into revolution for the same reason that continental Europe cannot be

---

[183] Benjamin Disraeli, *Selected Speeches of the Late Right Honourable the Earl of Beaconsfield*, ed. T.E. Kebbel (London: Longmans, Green, and co, 1882), 50–51.

[184] Benjamin Disraeli, *Vindication of the English Constitution in a Letter to a Noble and Learned Lord* (Saunders and Otley, 1835), 17.

reformed in the model of Britain: imported philosophical constitutions were "not founded on the habits or the opinions of those whom it affected to guide, regulate, and control."[185] Abstract principles and elegant constitutional design is no substitute for a traditional, political culture and legal regime. The English state is successful not because of its philosophical purity, but because it has been developed organically in line with the legal institutions and character of the people.

This is the basis for Disraeli's critique of expanding suffrage, as had been accomplished in the recent Reform Bill of 1832. Corrupting English constitutionalism with utilitarian philosophical abstraction, Sieyesian reformers take the Commons to be the locus of sovereignty, neglecting the necessary authority of the landed aristocracy, monarchy, and church. These estates represented the true interest of the nation, whereas the Commons can only ever represent a faction. The abolition of rotten boroughs promises "to get rid of representation without election," but it will ultimately establish "election without representation."[186] Whig utilitarians would abolish the institutions necessary for making England a nation: the crown, church, nobility, and feudal corporations.

> A class of the subjects, indeed, might still possess the fruitless privilege of electing its representatives in Parliament, but without any machinery to foster public spirit and maintain popular power, the whole land a prey to the most degrading equality, the equality that levels, not the equality that elevates, we should soon see these mock representatives the mere nominees of a Prefect, and the very first to tamper with our privileges and barter away our freedom.[187]

Lord Manners defended the feudal spirit in even more extravagant terms. His neomedievalism is defined in total opposition to Cobbett's radicalism. A revival of traditional, Anglican religion, not political and economic reform, is needed to take care of the laboring poor: "neither the ballot nor an

---

[185] Disraeli, *Vindication of the English Constitution*, 57.

[186] Disraeli, *Vindication of the English Constitution*, 102.

[187] Disraeli, *Vindication of the English Constitution*, 182. Disraeli claims the English ancient constitution constitutes the truest form of democracy. Aristocratic, feudal privilege is the surest means of protecting the liberty and equality of the people.

extended suffrage will feed or Christianize the hungry and the unbaptized … What is wanted is an energetic and powerful application of the Church system."[188] Manners rails against liberal philosophy and political economy. "Free trade theories, nicely-balanced political systems, the cant about the rights of man, and the whole jargon of Liberal philosophy" lead to anarchy and class warfare. Only "the Church of Christ" can restore harmony and peace.[189] In a poem much-lampooned by reformers, Manners' reactionary, nostalgic neo-medievalism is displayed in pure form:

> Each knew his place—king, peasant, peer, or priest—
> The greatest owed connexion with the least;
> From rank to rank the generous feeling ran,
> And linked society as man to man
> Gone are those days, and gone the ties that then
> Bound peers and gentry to their fellow men.
> Now, in their place, behold the modern slave,
> Doomed, from the very cradle to the grave,
> To tread his lonely path of care and toil,
> Bound, in sad truth, and bowed down to the soil,
> He dies, and leaves his sons their heritage—
> Work for their prime, the workhouse for their age.
> Such is the boon that Independence brings,
> That most deceitful of all tempting things.
> …
> Must we then hearken to the furious cry
> Of those who clamour for "equality?"
> Have not the people learnt how vain the trust
> On props like that which crumble into dust?
> …
> Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die,
> But leave us still our old Nobility![190]

[188] John Manners, *The Monastic and Manufacturing Systems: By Anglo-Catholicus* (Painter, 1843), 36.

[189] Manners, *Monastic and Manufacturing Systems*, 37.

[190] John Manners, *England's Trust: And Other Poems* (J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1841), 23–24.

The choice, for Manners, is between a restoration of feudalism and the slavery of modern industry. The Young-England Tory group was brought down in part over the Catholic question, and in particular Robert Peel's decision in 1845 to increase funding for Ireland's Catholic seminary in Maynooth. Highlighting the theoretical instability of their reactionary neo-medievalism, some Young Englanders rejected Catholic toleration out of a commitment to their Anglican patrimony. For others, medievalism culminated in Catholic conversion. Taking the former position, Manners recommended a revival of monasticism, yet he insisted that such a measure in no way implied a return of popery.[191] Hurrell Froude, an Anglican priest and early leader of the Oxford Movement, defended a similar position. The posthumous publication of his *Remains* outlined a vision of high church Anglo-Catholicism and launched what Piers Brendon called an "an uninhibited assault" on Protestantism.[192] In a poem titled "Farewell to Feudalism," included in the *Remains*, Froude lamented the destruction of the feudal, patriarchal court and the rise of the rule of "proud empirics."[193] Recognizing the scandal this work would cause, John Henry Newman and John Keble—who with others published Froude's *Remains*—appended a preface to the work defending their friend from the charge of crypto-Romanism.[194] A few years later, Newman would become England's most prominent convert to Catholicism.

Another influential Catholic convert was Augustus Pugin, the leading figure behind Victorian England's gothic architectural revival. In his striking 1841 book, *Contrasts,* Pugin articulated a critique of the neo-pagan spirit of the renaissance and Enlightenment and its dominance over

---

[191] Manners, "Monastic and Manufacturing," 21-2.

[192] Piers Brendon, "Newman, Keble and Froude's Remains," *The English Historical Review* 87, no. 345 (1972): 697.

[193] Richard Hurrell Froude, *Remains of the Late Reverend Richard Hurrell Froude* (J. G. and F. Rivington, 1838), 429–30.

[194] Froude, *Remains*, ix-xxii.

modern architecture. Juxtaposing images of medieval and nineteenth century churches and towns, Pugin lamented the Reformation-induced spiritual decline of English society.[195] Where the fourteenth century town was marked by church spires, common lands, and hospitable monasteries, the nineteenth century industrial city is a scene of smokestacks, poor-houses, and panopticon prisons.

One of the most effusive of the Tory neo-medieval converts to Catholicism was Kenelm Digby, whose massive, four-volume *Broad Stone of Honor*, published between 1822 and 1829, offered a vigorous defense of medieval chivalry and a corresponding critique of modern rationalism. Through encyclopedic citations to church fathers, medieval romance literature, and contemporaneous Catholics including Friedrich Schlegel, Haller, and de Maistre, Digby offers an aesthetic critique of liberal culture, politics, and philosophy. As he puts it in one representative passage, modern liberals:

> Pretend, upon the data of refined selfishness, and by submitting the inducements of persons to the operations of arithmetic, to account for the development, and to explain the movements of human passions … Of music—they know the theory of vibrations, and by a mathematical process they can determine the exact relations of concordant and discordant sounds, but the internal harmony, the precious music of the heart, they have, they know, it not.[196]

Quoting Burke's lament of the death of chivalry, Digby turns to medieval romance literature as a source of "sublime instruction" in the true meaning of nobility.[197] Having done away with the gentle, symbolic, and religious feudal nobility, modern men must choose between a "military or legal

---

[195] Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, *Contrasts: Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day, Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (C. Dolman, 1841). Speaking of the cathedral of Salisbury, Cobbett wrote in *Rural Rides*: "I could not look up at the spire and the whole of the church of Salisbury, without feeling that I live in degenerate times. Such a thing could never be made now. We feel that, as we look at the building" *RR* 397

[196] Kenelm Henry Digby, *The Broad Stone of Honour: Goefridus*, vol. 1 (B. Quaritch, 1877), 38.

[197] Digby, *Goefridus*, 107, 191.

despotism" and that "still more extreme evil, being the state which results from the democratic doctrines."[198] The spiritless atheism of modern England has no right to denounce the "dungeons and chains in the castles of chivalry," whose abuses cannot compare with the "tales of misery and cruelty [that] are unfolded before the legal tribunals of the moderns!"[199] It is true, Digby acknowledges, that the Catholic church obstructed the industry, technology, and wealth of the modern world. Yet when "writers of Adam Smith's school" attack feudalism on these grounds, they forget that Catholicism's great achievement had been "to prevent all that is sacred and holy from being sacrificed at the shrine of national wealth."[200]

In Digby, we find a polemical collection of all the anti-liberal, anti-secular, anti-capitalist tropes associated with the neo-medieval critique of liberalism canvassed in this chapter. These motifs would be systematized more fully by Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Like their fellow Lake Poet, William Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge responded to the French Revolution by converting from radical republicanism to nostalgic Toryism. Southey's great rival, Lord Byron, lampooned this transformation in the opening lines of his suppressed dedication to "Don Juan:"

> Bob Southey! You're a poet—Poet-laureate,
> And representative of all the race;
> Although 'tis true that you turn'd out a Tory at
> Last—yours has lately been a common case[201]

Southey's clearest statement of his conservative (though still anti-Catholic) neo-medievalism is found in his *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, a dialogue with the ghost of St. Thomas More on

---

[198] Digby, *Goefridus*, 340-1.

[199] Kenelm Henry Digby, *The Broad Stone of Honour: Tancredus*, vol. 2 (Edward Lumley, 1846), 383.

[200] Kenelm Henry Digby, *The Broad Stone of Honour: Morus*, vol. 3 (E. Lumley, 1848), 282.

[201] Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works, Vol. 5: Don Juan*, ed. Jerome J McGann, vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

the decline of modern Britain.[202] More arrives to speak of "these portentous and monster-breeding times,"[203] and to prove that the modern enthusiasm for "improvement" has come at a great cost: "there may be more knowledge than there was in former times, and less wisdom … more wealth and less happiness … more display and less virtue."[204] More's chief contention in the dialogue is that modern society has become more atheistic and more inhuman than it was in the time of medieval Catholicism. Feudalism, he argues, entailed a condition of humane serfdom and dependence. With the enclosure movements, the dissolution of the monasteries, and the destruction of feudal reciprocity, Britain has seen the rise of a new pauper class, more abused and abandoned than the "feudal slave" had been: "The practical difference between the condition of the feudal slave, and of the labouring husbandman, who succeeded to the business of his station, was mainly this, that the former had neither the feeling nor the insecurity of independence. He served one master as long as he lived."[205] Whatever the abuses of the feudal times, "they were less injurious than these commercial ones to the kindly and generous feelings of human nature, and far, far more favourable to the principles of honour and integrity."[206]

Favorably citing Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun's proposal to reestablish slavery as a means of dealing with the vagabond poor, More offers a ruthless description of the industrial pauper class. Liberated from the superintendence of the Catholic clergy and feudal aristocracy, the modern

---

[202] Like Manners and the Oxford Movement, Southey insists that his defense of monastic medievalism should in no terms be read as a case for Catholic emancipation. Robert Southey, *Sir Thomas More: Or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, ed. Tom Duggett and Tim Fulford (New York: Routledge, 2018), lxxxv. I will treat Coleridge's more systematic political theory in the next chapter in conjunction with my treatment of Carlyle.

[203] Southey, *Colloquies*, 10. For More's actual discussion of the idle, shepherdless, pauper class, see Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan, trans. Robert Merrihew Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 19–20.

[204] Southey, *Colloquies*, 20.

[205] Southey, *Colloquies*, 37.

[206] Southey, *Colloquies*, 298.

proletariat "are like the dogs at Lisbon and Constantinople, unowned, unbroken to any useful purpose, subsisting by chance or by prey, living in filth, mischief and wretchedness; a nuisance to the community while they live, and dying miserably at last."[207] Like Cobbett, Southey argues that the modern wage slave is at least as badly treated as the modern chattel slave.[208]

Feudal serfdom established harmony, love, and solidarity even amidst poverty and inequality. This gentle obedience has been replaced by a modern "pride of independence," which is "suspicious, irritable, and ready to act aggressively upon the slightest pretext, or imaginary provocation."[209] Offering a familiar combination, Southey argues that the rise of wage-slavery in the commercial economy, atheism in modern spiritless religion, and mechanistic obedience to public opinion in politics are all of a piece.[210] Now ruled by egoism, pseudo-independence, and submission to the masses, modern Britain is less free, less beautiful, and less virtuous than it had been under the yoke of Norman kings and Catholic clerics.

Conclusion

My aim in canvassing these thinkers has been to highlight the power of feudal nostalgia as a means of expressing a range of discontents. On the continent and in Britain, feudalism offered an inspiration for reactionaries and radicals alike. Critiquing Adam Smith and celebrating Edmund Burke, these thinkers sought to recover the reciprocity, organicism, and chivalry destroyed by Enlightenment rationality and the commercial economy. In the hands of republican and Enlightenment thinkers, feudalism served as a symbolic vessel for all things tyrannical and arbitrary.

---

[207] Southey, *Colloquies*, 51.

[208] Southey, *Colloquies*, 93

[209] Southey, *Colloquies*, 283.

[210] Southey, *Colloquies*, 130, 360.

In the hands of a succeeding generation, that symbolic valence reversed, and medieval feudalism came to serve as an ideal for those lamenting the disappearance of spiritual depth, nobility, and humanity in the new liberal order.

As this survey has shown, the feudal critique masked rhyming if inconsistent laments. All found in feudalism an ethic of humanitarian concern, yet some marshalled that ethic to support the landed aristocracy, while others used it to advance the cause of more radical democratization. All found in feudalism a critique of industrialization, yet some sought a restoration of monastic support for the poor, while others deployed it to demand the repeal of protectionism and a wider spread of economic independence. Christendom served as an attractive synthesis of religious and temporal authority, yet some drew the conclusion that a restoration of Christianity was necessary, while others looked for new, non-Christian substitutes for an ethic of brotherhood. Feudal nostalgia, while evocative and powerful, proved theoretically unstable. That instability—and a corresponding historical naivete—explains in part why so many hoped to recover various features of feudal society. Not even the most strident reactionaries sought a wholesale restoration of medieval life, yet they all propose some kind of retrieval and imitation. They favor agriculture over industry, monasticism over poor laws, reciprocity over contract, and spiritual direction over national competition.

The nostalgic appeal of restoration will remain prominent throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My focus now shifts, however, to a different mode of appropriating the feudal ideal. The three thinkers I treat in the coming chapters—Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville—share many of the laments of the thinkers canvassed here. Yet they are more decisively committed to a philosophy of history that eschews the possibility of return. In different ways they embrace historical providentialism, and they look for modern means of resisting or overcoming the failings of liberal, bourgeois modernity.

Chapter Two: Carlyle on the "Age of Mechanism" and the "Most Perfect Feudal Ages"

Britain's leading liberal thinkers saw the turn to medieval feudalism and Catholicism as a rejection of progress and an obscene romanticization of arbitrary government. As a very young John Stuart Mill put it, these nostalgic appeals sought in effect to restore the "evils of feudal despotism and superstition" Britain had not yet fully eradicated:

> In the nineteenth century we are not infrequently called upon to pursue the course which was followed by those sages, our ancestors, in the eleventh and twelfth. But this appeal from the age of civilization to the age of barbarism is made, we may observe, by those and by those alone who now, as then, would wish to see the great mass of mankind subject to the despotic sway of nobles, priests, and kings.[1]

Mill celebrates the progress of civilization and the triumph of science over "feudal darkness."[2] Despite sharing his general reformist politics, he dismisses William Cobbett as a fool for claiming that industrialization has led to a decline in Britain's population.[3] Some years later, in a set of articles on the "Spirit of the Age" exhibiting the influence of Auguste Comte, Mill offers a more nuanced treatment of Britain in this post-feudal "age of transition." He remains critical of conservatives like Southey, who "carry their eyes in the back of their heads and can see no other portion of the destined track of humanity than that which it has already travelled."[4] He newly acknowledges, however, the new anxieties that have accompanied the dissolution of feudal social bonds. He even praises the Catholic clergy for providing progressive spiritual leadership during the Middle Ages.[5]

---

[1] John Stuart Mill, "The Utility of Knowledge" (1823), *CWM* 26.260-1.

[2] Mill, "Utility of Knowledge," *CWM* 26.257.

[3] Mill, "Population: Reply to Thirlwall" (1825), *CWM* 26.303.

[4] Mill, "Spirit of the Age I" (1831), *CWM* 22.229. Mill also recognizes the utility of studying romance novels in "keeping alive the chivalrous spirit … and keeping present to the mind an exalted standard of worth, by placing before it heroes and heroines worthy of the name." Mill, "Ware's Letters from Palmyra," (1838) *CWM* 1.460.

[5] Mill, "Spirit of the Age V part I" (1831) *CWM* 22.305-6.

Whatever the difficulties of this age of "intellectual anarchy," Mill nevertheless remains optimistic that a new elite will soon emerge to assert rational authority over society.[6]

A more strident response to medieval nostalgia can be found in Thomas Macaulay's 1831 review of Southey's *Colloquies*. Still remembered today—better than the *Colloquies*—as what Geoffrey Carnall termed a "monument of nineteenth-century optimism," Macaulay's review levels familiar, liberal rebukes of Southey's paternalism and nostalgia.[7] Where Southey defends agriculture, Macaulay praises industry, where Southey calls for moral cultivation by the government Macaulay favors free speech, and where Southey demands that the state take hold of the economy Macaulay celebrates the market.

Dismissing Southey as an inferior Burke—Burke made arguments where Southey relies on pure sentiment—Macaulay repudiates Southey's amateurish reconstruction of feudal England: "Mr. Southey has found out a way, he tells us, in which the effects of manufacture and agriculture may be compared. And what is this way? To stand on a hill, to look at a cottage and a factory, and to see which is prettier."[8] Modern Britain, Macaulay insists, is more wealthy, healthy, wise, and virtuous than at any earlier stage of its history. This progress is a product of the competitive, entrepreneurial spirit of a free people, and Macaulay warns that if successful, Southey's appeal to church and state

---

[6] Mill, "Spirit of the Age I," *CWM* 22.233.

[7] Geoffrey Carnall, *Robert Southey and His Age : The Development of a Conservative Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 180. John Clive argues that Macaulay's historical optimism is indebted to Scottish Enlightenment historians like Hume. *Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 105. Peter Ghosh casts some doubt on that line of influence, but the echoes in argument are unmistakable. "Macaulay and the Heritage of the Enlightenment," *The English Historical Review* 112, no. 446 (1997): 372.

[8] Thomas Babbington Macaulay, "Southey's Colloquies on Society," in *Critical and Historical Essays, Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848), 233, 218.

will restore oppression and poverty. In a concluding remark that could still serve as a statement of the classical liberal vision, Macaulay writes:

> It is not by the intermeddling of Mr. Southey's idol, the omniscient and omnipotent State, but by the prudence and energy of the people, that England has hitherto been carried forward in civilisation; and it is to the same prudence and the same energy that we now look with comfort and good hope. Our rulers will best promote the improvement of the nation by strictly confining themselves to their own legitimate duties, by leaving capital to find its most lucrative course, commodities their fair price, industry and intelligence their natural reward, idleness and folly their natural punishment, by maintaining peace, by defending property, by diminishing the price of law, and by observing strict economy in every department of the state. Let the Government do this: the People will assuredly do the rest.[9]

Macaulay's review highlights the deficiencies of the moralistic nostalgia exemplified by Southey and surveyed in the previous chapter. Depending on dubious empirical and historical claims, the sentimental critique of industrialization and the romantic idealization of *noblesse oblige* commands limited persuasive power.

Macaulay's liberal confidence is also a response to the pessimism of Thomas Carlyle, another implicit target of his review.[10] Carlyle is commonly read as the master representative of feudal nostalgia in nineteenth-century Britain. He is often characterized as a moral critic of industrialization in the vein Southey, Cobbett, and the like.[11] Closer study, however, reveals that Carlyle is in a sense more contemptuous of nostalgia than Macaulay is. His vision is not one of conservative return, but a

---

[9] Macaulay, "Southey's Colloquies," 269.

[10] On the relationship between Carlyle and Macaulay, see Owen Dudley Edwards, "Carlyle Versus Macaulay?—A Study in History," *Carlyle Studies Annual*, no. 27 (2011): 177–206.

[11] See, for example Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44–49; Gregory Claeys, "Non-Marxian Socialism 1815–1914," in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 542; John Morrow, "Romanticism and Political Thought in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 39–76.

prophecy of future revolution. Macaulay writes in his review that history shall be liberalism's vindication, for in a century's time Southey's sentimentalism shall be rendered absurd by the unprecedented prosperity of a fully industrialized Britain.[12] For Carlyle, these promised statistical proofs fail to answer the fundamental question:

> Can the labourer, by thrift and industry hope to rise to mastership? … How is he related to his employer; by bonds of friendliness and mutual help; or by hostility, opposition, and chains of mutual necessity alone? In a word, what degree of contentment can a human creature be supposed to enjoy in that position? With hunger preying on him, his contentment is likely to be small! But even with abundance, his discontent, his real misery may be great. The labourer's feelings, his notion of being justly dealt with or unjustly; his wholesome composure, frugality, prosperity in the one case, his acrid unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking, and gradual ruin in the other,--how shall figures of arithmetic represent all this?[13]

The problem of modern Britain is not just poverty. The rise of pauperism is indicative of a political failure. As Carlyle writes in the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, pauperism is "by no means a question of money only." Even if the state were to raise and distribute the funds needed to feed and clothe the paupers, that would not resolve the matter. Industrial poverty is "the general leakage through every joint of the ship that is rotten," it is the clearest evidence that statesmen have ceased to govern, that captains have ceased to command, and that teachers have ceased to teach. It is a symptom of anarchy.[14] A democracy committed to improving the plight of the poor can remain a site of anarchic laissez faire,

---

[12] "If we were to prophesy that in the year 1930 a population of fifty millions, better fed, clad, and lodged than the English of our time, will cover these islands, that Sussex and Huntingdonshire will be wealthier than the wealthiest parts of the West Riding of Yorkshire now are … that machines constructed on principles yet undiscovered, will be in every house, that there will be no highways but railroads, no travelling but by steam, that our debt, vast as it seems to us, will appear to our great-grandchildren a trifling encumbrance, which might easily be paid off in a year or two, many people would think us insane." Macaulay, "Southey's Colloquies on Society," 267.

[13] Carlyle, "Chartism" (1840), *EPS* 70.

[14] Carlyle, *LDP*, 157-8.

Carlyle argues, insofar as the governors of such a regime have abdicated their divine duty to rule, guide, and command the people.[15]

This chapter traces Carlyle's departure from the jeremiads of the romantic, reactionary critics surveyed in the previous chapter. His distinctiveness consists in developing a slaves-without-masters critique of liberal Britain. Modern drudges have become "*servants that can find no master*" but are instead ruled by abstract formulas and amorphous public opinion.[16] A new impersonal spiritual oppression accompanies that disappearance of political rule. Carlyle is serious when he defines anarchy as "the choking, sweltering, deadly and killing rule of No-rule."[17] Compared to the tradition of feudal nostalgia, his novelty can be summarized as follows: (1) Carlyle does not believe that modern Britain is ruled by a corrupt elite that must be re-moralized or re-Christianized. Modern Britain is anarchic, it has abolished rule and obeys mechanistic formulas; (2) Feudalism is instructive insofar as it showcases the connection between political authority and divine worship, a unity that has been replaced with modern atheism and laissez faire; and (3) Carlyle has no interest in return or restoration. He is contemptuous of those who attempt to shore up the vestiges of a dead, Christian, aristocracy. The symbolic power of feudalism animates a modernist program of industrial, spiritual heroism.

---

[15] In his classic study of Victorian critics of democracy, Benjamin Lippincott argues that Carlyle is mistaken in connecting democracy with anarchy and laissez faire. Recent history proves that democracy is capable and indeed likely to interfere with the market. Lippincott reads Carlyle as a moralistic critic of industrialization, and he takes anarchy to be a shorthand for unreglated working conditions. But that misses the deeper political and spiritual abdication of rule that Carlyle identifies as the source of the modern difficulties. Benjamin Evans Lippincott, *Victorian Critics of Democracy: Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Stephen, Maine, Lecky,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938), 6–53.

[16] Carlyle, *LDP* 42.

[17] Carlyle, *LDP*, 29.

This chapter begins by motivating the choice of Carlyle, who remains understudied by political theorists despite his spectacular influence in the nineteenth century. It then turns to Carlyle's critique of the modern ethos of "mechanism" that has replaced true spiritual and political rule. That diagnosis highlights a distinctive account of the connection between reverence and authority, which is made clear by turning to Carlyle's treatment of feudalism and in particular the monastery in *Past and Present*. Though he shares a familiar romantic and reactionary appreciation of traditional chivalry, Carlyle is more drawn to the model of monastic discipline as an expression of prayerful obedience through labor. The chapter concludes by contrasting Carlyle to the two contemporaries who come closest to his theoretical diagnosis and program—Coleridge and Comte.

1. Carlyle in the History of Political Thought

In recent years most major scholarship on Carlyle comes out of English departments, while philosophers and political theorists have had little to say about his work and influence.[18] This omission is due in part to Carlyle's distinctive style, which lapses into bouts of prophetic delirium. Style follows substance, for one of Carlyle's master hatreds is the methodical, scientific approach to philosophy, history, politics, and the arts characteristic of post-Enlightenment Britain. The attempt, consequently, of systematizing Carlyle or reconstructing any Carlylean "theory" straightforwardly violates the spirit and aim of his work.

Carlyle himself summarizes this difficulty in his description of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (God-born devil-dung)—the subject of his 1831 *Sartor Resartus* and a recurring commentator throughout his corpus. *Sartor* affects to be an English editor's introduction to Teufelsdröckh's recent

[18] See, for example Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958); Chris Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991); John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

work on the philosophy of clothes. Teufelsdröckh, a professor at the University of Weissnichtwo (know-not-where) passes between clear, astute insight and incomprehensible, mystical nonsense. *Sartor* is partly a satire of the obscurantist style of German philosophy, but it is also a quasi-autobiographical vehicle for Carlyle to articulate his deepest concerns. In a passage that provides a sense of Carlyle's style, the English narrator voices the frustration many readers find with Carlyle himself:

> Of the innumerable multitude that started with us, joyous and full of hope, where now is the innumerable remainder, whom we see no longer by our side? The most have recoiled, and stand gazing afar off, in unsympathetic astonishment, at our career: not a few, pressing forward with more courage, have missed footing, or leaped short; and now swim weltering in the Chaos-flood, some towards this shore, some towards that. To these also a helping hand should be held out; at least some word of encouragement be said.
>
> Or, to speak without metaphor, with which mode of utterance Teufelsdröckh unhappily has somewhat infected us,--can it be hidden from the Editor that many a British Reader sits reading quite bewildered in head, and afflicted rather than instructed by the present Work? Yes, long ago has many a British Reader been, as now, demanding with something like a snarl: Whereto does all this lead; or what use is in it?[19]

The editor apologizes for the professor's style, noting, however, that the work lays out a new philosophy of all subjects of consequence, while more modestly provoking "innumerable inferences of a practical nature … To say nothing of those pregnant considerations, ethical, political, symbolical" Teufelsdröckh takes up.[20] This is the promise Carlyle offers his readers.

Carlyle's stylistic difficulties are matched with the extraordinary range of subjects with which his corpus is concerned. Alongside the perplexing setting of *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle's most influential

---

[19] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 197. In later editions, Carlyle published an appendix containing excerpts with critical reviews of his impenetrable and pompous prose: *Sartor Resartus*, 221-226.

[20] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 198-9.

works include his poetic, epic histories of the French Revolution, Oliver Cromwell, Frederick the Great, and Norse Kings, translations and commentaries on German poets and philosophers, polemical essays on the social question, universal suffrage, and slavery, and reviews and commentaries on virtually all notable contemporaneous men of letters. This is not a body of work that admits of straightforward reconstruction.

The greatest reason, however, for Carlyle's absence in contemporary political theory is his unapologetic reactionary politics and notorious racism. Carlyle is fueled by a disgust for equality unmatched by any thinker in the canon but Nietzsche. His treatment of the "negro question" goes far beyond the prejudices typical of Victorians. More fundamental than that, Carlyle's unremitting hero worship has more than mere affinity with fascist critiques of liberalism in the twentieth century. It was for good reason that Hitler and Goebbels turned to Carlyle's *Frederick the Great* in their final days. As Hugh Trevor-Roper put it—summarizing an almost universal assessment—"in the intellectual pedigree of Nazism, Carlyle cannot be refused a place."[21]

However disqualifying that may be for contemporary readers, there is no question that Carlyle stood out as perhaps the single most influential British man of letters of the nineteenth century.[22] One crude measure of that influence is simply a list of the neologisms Carlyle contributed

---

[21] Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 242. There are too many arguments linking Carlyle to fascism to count. One particularly striking genealogy is Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946). For an overview of Carlyle's connection with and reception by fascists, see David R. Sorensen, "'The Great Pioneer of National Socialist Philosophy'?: Carlyle and Twentieth-Century Totalitarianism," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 45, no. 1 (2012): 43–66; Jonathan McCollum, "The Nazi Appropriation of Thomas Carlyle: Or How Frederick Wound Up in the Bunker," in *Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle's Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Paul E. Kerry and Marylu Hill (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010).

[22] It is notable that these obstacles have not discouraged the study of Nietzsche's political philosophy.

to the English language.[23] More fundamental still is the widely shared judgment that Carlyle articulated with unique power an enraged, primal protest against the spirit of modernity. That protest would be immediately contagious among his readers and admirers, among whom we can count John Ruskin, George Eliot, Giuseppe Mazzini, Charles Dickens, Ralph Emerson, and a young Gandhi. As Walt Whitman put it, the nineteenth century without Carlyle would be "like an army with no artillery." His voice was "the last heavy roar so dear to the ear of the train'd soldier, and that settles fate and victory."[24]

To take one example, Carlyle coins the description of economics as the "dismal science," a formulation that sets the discipline against the "gay science" of the medieval troubadour.[25] The complicated history of that coinage is itself a synecdoche of Carlyle's generally surprising appeal. Today the term continues to be deployed by critics of the apparently cold and instrumentalist premises of modern social science. A discipline that thinks merely in terms of the production and distribution of wealth, of nudges and rational expectations is accused of an indifferent, materialistic scientism. We hear in contemporary criticisms of "neoliberalism" echoes of Carlyle's tirade against the liberal economism of his time:

> The Social science,--not a 'gay science,' but a rueful,--which finds the secret of this Universe in 'supply and demand,' and reduces the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone, is also wonderful. Not a 'gay science,' I should say, like some we have heard of; no, a dreary, desolate, and indeed quite abject and distressing one; what we might call, by way of eminence, the *dismal science*.[26]

---

[23] Among the pedestrian examples, we can credit Carlyle with establishing the modern meanings of "environment," "unconscious," "visualize," "dualism," "self-help," "manhunt," and "chit-chatting." Of more specifically political contributions, we can credit Carlyle with "captain of industry," "whiff of grapeshot," "windbag," and "dismal science."

[24] Walt Whitman, "Death of Thomas Carlyle" in *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1891), 169.

[25] The influence on Nietzsche's famous title is clear. Though Nietzsche was contemptuous of Carlyle, the influence likely runs through Emerson, Carlyle's disciple and Nietzsche's muse.

[26] Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question," (1849), *CCW* 29.353-4.

This description—invoked regularly by contemporary critics of laissez-faire—comes from Carlyle's defense of chattel slavery and his rebuke of the abolitionism championed by Victorian economists.[27] Going beyond Cobbett's charge of humanitarian hypocrisy, Carlyle attacks abolitionism as the faddish frivolity of an English "rosepink Sentimentalism."[28] The core of his polemic is a defense of permanent bonds of labor (slavery and serfdom) against temporary contractual wage labor: "In all human relations *permanency* is what I advocate; *nomadism*, continual change, is what I perceive to be prohibitory of any good whatsoever."[29] Unsurprisingly, Carlyle drew heated responses from the leading lights of abolitionism, including a rebuke from his sometime friend, John Stuart Mill.[30]

Carlyle was swiftly picked up by American apologists for chattel slavery. His defense of permanence against nomadism complemented the "mudsill" theory of labor popularized by James Hammond and John C. Calhoun, which held that all civilizations are built on an enslaved underclass.[31] The only difference between the American north and south, southern apologists argued, is that the latter is honest about its slaves, while the former pretends its laborers are free and equal citizens. Linking Carlyle to Aristotelian natural slavery, George Fitzhugh articulated the most

---

[27] For a study, see Alexander Jordan, "Thomas Carlyle and Political Economy: The 'Dismal Science' in Context," *The English Historical Review* 132, no. 555 (2017): 286–317.

[28] Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse," *CCW* 29.351.

[29] Carlyle, "Occasional Discourse," *CCW* 29.367.

[30] Mill, "The Negro Question," in *CWM* 21.87-95. The two broke completely in response to the 1866 Eyre controversy. As colonial governor of Jamaica. Eyre ordered the ruthless suppression of Jamaican freedmen involved with the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion. Mill led the campaign for Eyre's prosecution, while Carlyle led the campaign for his defense. The debate offers a window into a crucial cleavage of Victorian political debate. Joining Mill were such luminaries as Charles Darwin, T.H. Green, John Bright, and A.V. Dicey. Following Carlyle, we find Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, and Charles Dickens. For an overview, see Bernard Semmel, *Jamaican Blood and Victorian Conscience: The Governor Eyre Controversy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963).

[31] For an influential study, see Hofstadter's description of Calhoun as the "Marx of the Master Class" in Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948), 87–118.

systematic version of this thesis, arguing that white, northern wage slaves are in fact worse off than black, southern chattel slaves.[32]

The description of free labor conditions as a kind of slavery was familiar to nineteenth century reformers. What is particularly striking, however, is that many progressive reformers also drew on Carlyle to formulate their critiques of wage labor. In his widely read essay on "The Labouring Classes," a critical review of Carlyle's, "Chartism," Orestes Brownson predicted in 1840 that slavery will be replaced by a system of wage labor that is "no improvement upon the one it supplants."[33] As Jonathan Rose has documented in his study of the British working class, well into the nineteenth century reformers, radicals, and feminists found Carlyle to be among the most penetrating critics of modern political economy.[34]

Part of Carlyle's appeal came from the brilliance of his denunciation of industrial labor conditions, but that does not fully account for his significance. Reviewing *Past and Present*, Engels wrote that of all the recent work of English social criticism, "Carlyle's book is the only one which strikes a human chord, presents human relations and shows traces of a human point of view."[35] Carlyle's reactionary critique of modernity allowed him to see the brutality of industrial conditions

---

[32] Fitzhugh quotes Carlyle to insist that free, industrial workers "labor under all the disadvantages of slavery, and have none of the rights of slaves." *Cannibals All!*, xxi.

[33] Orestes Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," (1840) in Orestes Augustus Brownson, *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, ed. Patrick W. Carey (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000).

[34] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 41–50. E.P. Thompson offers a mixed assessment of Carlyle in this vein. Despite his reactionary cruelty, Carlyle's writings "are among the greatest quarries of ideas in the first half of the nineteenth century, shot through with occasional gleams of the profoundest revolutionary insight." *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955), 29. Christopher Lasch offers a similar defense and interpretation of Carlyle. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, 226–43. He seconds Raymond Williams' observation that "paradoxical figures" like Carlyle better grasped elements of the "social crisis" than did many on "the approved list of progressive thinkers." Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (Verso Books, 2015), 106.

[35] Engels, "The Condition of England, *Past and Present* by Thomas Carlyle," (1844) *MECW* 4.444.

more clearly than his rival Whig liberals. But more specifically, Engels recognizes the significance of Carlyle's twin critiques of the "gospel of Mammon" (the cash-nexus economy) and the "gospel of dilettantism" (the disappearance of rule).[36] He does not merely lament prevailing economic conditions or clamor for moral renewal. Unlike most critics, he recognizes that anarchy lies at the root of modern economics, and atheism at the root of anarchy.

2. The Critique of Mechanism

Like Southey and Cobbett, Carlyle rejects the triumphalist historiography characteristic of the Enlightenment. "Philosophical historians" like Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon write so contemptuously of the feudal past that it becomes impossible to think clearly about the catastrophic liberal present. According to these historians:

> Your Norman Conquerors, true royal souls, crowned kings as such, were vulturuous, irrational tyrants; your Becket was a noisy egoist and hypocrite … A godless century, looking back on centuries that were godly, produces portraitures more miraculous than any other. All was inane discord in the Past; brute Force bore rule everywhere; Stupidity, savage Unreason, fitter for Bedlam than for a human World! Whereby indeed it becomes sufficiently natural that the like qualities, in new sleeker habiliments, should continue in our own time to rule.[37]

Carlyle's diagnosis of the age centers on his critique of "mechanism." We have seen versions of that critique from the pen of Novalis, Schiller, and Müller among others—and Novalis in particular is one of Carlyle's great influences. Yet Carlyle takes the critique a step further. "Mechanism" for him is not simply the opposite of "organicism," and Carlyle is less interested than those critics in depicting a romantic vision of balanced community. Mechanism for Carlyle is the watchword of anarchy and atheism.

---

[36] Engels, "The Condition of England," *MECW* 4.451.

[37] Carlyle, *PP*, 237-8.

2.1 Outward and Inward Machinery

Carlyle's 1829 essay, "Signs of the Times," begins with a paradox of modern politics. On the one hand, society seems to be in a condition of frenzy. Theirs is an age of class agitation, revolutionary sanscoullotism, and the twin prophecies of millenarian Christianity and Millian utilitarianism: "The one announces that the last of the seals is to be opened… and the other assures us that 'the greatest-happiness principle' is to make a heaven of earth, in a still shorter time."[38] Modern men all look with hope or dread toward some approaching apocalypse. At the same time, modern life appears to be locked in a condition of stasis:

> Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to ends.[39]

The outward manifestations of mechanism are obvious enough. Technological revolutions and industrial production have done away with the handicraft economy. In lamenting literal machinery, Carlyle voices a familiar wariness of industrialization and the uprooting of traditional life. Carlyle is more focused, however, on the inward manifestation of mechanism, the internalized tyranny of rational calculation over all aspects of modern life: "the mechanical genius of our time has diffused itself into quite other provinces. Not the external and physical alone, but the internal and spiritual also."[40] He attacks the rise of systematic "method" in all our ventures: "men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand."[41] The age of mechanism, Carlyle declaims, is an age of

---

[38] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 5.

[39] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 5-6.

[40] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 6.

[41] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 8.

"spiritual paralysis." It is a product of the skeptical eighteenth century, which established intellectual and moral doubt. The tree—a divinized representation of the cosmos in pagan Norse mythology—is replaced by the steam engine.[42]

Throughout "Signs of the Times" and an 1831 companion essay, "Characteristics," Carlyle points to the ubiquity of mechanism. Education is no longer that "mysterious communing of Wisdom with Ignorance," it is now the science of pedagogy, proceeding through bureaucratized Lancastrian methods.[43] The solitary genius of a Newton no longer propels scientific discovery, which has come to be housed in royal academies with set methodical procedures for investigation. Poetry and literature have given way to treatises on taste. The book review has replaced the book, and "view-hunting" succeeds silent inspiration.[44] Even religion has been mechanized:

> Instead of heroic martyr Conduct, and inspired and soul-inspiring Eloquence, whereby Religion itself were brought home to our living bosoms, to live and reign there, we have 'Discourses on the Evidences,' endeavouring, with smallest results, to make it probable that such a thing as Religion exists. The most enthusiastic Evangelicals do not preach a Gospel, but keep describing how it should and might be preached … to describe how Faith shows and acts, and scientifically distinguish true Faith from false.[45]

---

[42] Carlyle consistently contrasts the Norse Yggdrasil cosmos-tree and the modern disenchantment by the machine. In *Hero Worship*, for example, he writes: ""Tree' and 'machine:' contrast these two things. I, for my share, declare the world to be no machine! I say that it does *not* go by wheel-and-pinion 'motives' self-interests, checks, balances; that there is something far other in it than the clank of spinning-jennies, and parliamentary majorities; and, on the whole, that it is not a machine at all! The old Norse Heathen had a truer notion of God's world than these poor Machine-Sceptics: the old Heathen Norse were *sincere* men. But for these poor Sceptics there was no sincerity, no truth. Half-truth and hearsay was called truth. Truth, for most men, meant plausibility to be measured by the number of votes you could get." Carlyle, *Hero Worship*, 147.

[43] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 6.

[44] Carlyle, "Characteristics" (1831) *EPS*, 39. Teufelsdröckh describes "view-hunting" as follows: "Poets of old date, being privileged with Senses, had also enjoyed external Nature; but chiefly as we enjoy the crystal cup which holds good or bad liquor for us; that is to say, in silence, or with slight incidental commentary: never, as I compute, till after the Sorrows of Werter, was there man found who would say: Come let us make a Description! Having drunk the liquor, come let us eat the glass!" Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 116.

[45] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS* 38.

Modern life is dominated by "isms" and sloganeering—what Carlyle calls the "formula." The formula is not imposed by the state but is enforced by the all-encompassing power of public opinion: "We must act and walk in all points as it prescribes; follow the traffic it bids us, realise the sum of money, the degree of 'influence' it expects of us, *or* we shall be lightly esteemed … free in hand and foot, we are shackled in heart and soul with far straiter than feudal chains."[46]

A symptom of the formulaic spirit of modern life is our fixation with self-reflection. "Characteristics" is a vindication and application of the physician's maxim: "The healthy know not of their health, but only the sick."[47] That so much of modern life is spent theorizing the nature of art, philosophy, literature, and health proves the decay of the same. A free nature proceeds from intuition and spontaneity. It does not begin by theorizing what a flourishing "system" consists in, diagnosing the present condition's failure to realize the system, and proposing drug-like remedies to restore healthy functioning. This point is made particularly clear in Carlyle's treatment of modern philosophy: "Virtue, when it can be philosophized of, has become aware of itself, is sickly, and beginning to decline."[48] Instinctive goodness is swallowed by rationalistic precepts. The modern world is fixated with narcissistic self-diagnosis:

> What, for example, is all this that we hear, for the last generation or two, about the Improvement of the Age, the Spirit of the Age, Destruction of Prejudice, Progress of the Species, and the March of Intellect, but an unhealthy state of self-sentience, self-survey; the precursor and prognostic of still worse health? … what Treatises on the Social Contract, on the Elective Franchise, the Rights of Man, the Rights of Property, Codifications, Institutions, Constitutions, have we not, for long years, groaned under! Or again, with a wider survey, consider those Essays on Man, Thoughts on Man, Inquiries concerning Man; not to mention Evidences of the Christian Faith, Theories of Property, Considerations on the Origin of Evil, which

[46] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 20.

[47] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS* 27.

[48] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS* 28.

> during the last century have accumulated on us to a frightful extent. Never since the beginning of Time was there, that we hear or read of, so intensely self-conscious a Society.[49]

A self-conscious society aims to discover the perfect "system" of wellbeing. It matches diagnosis with prescription, offering a medical fix for all problems: "doctor after doctor appears with his nostrum, of Cooperative Societies, Universal Suffrage, Cottage-and-Cow systems, Repression of Population, Vote by Ballot."[50] This drug-like approach is analogized to the rise of the "Morrison Pill," a quack-medical promise for miracle cures.

2.2 Cash Nexus and Nomadism

Political economy provides the paradigmatic expression of the modern tyranny of mechanism. Much of politics, Carlyle acknowledges, is mechanical and ought to be treated as such. The danger comes when the "Machine of Society" ceases to be a metaphor and hardens into a reality. The sign of political mechanism comes with the undue prioritization of "*mere political arrangements*," a reduction of political life to institutional design. The political mechanic proclaims:

> Give us a reform of Government! A good structure of legislation, a proper check upon the executive, a wise arrangement of the judiciary, is *all* that is wanting for human happiness. The Philosopher of this age is not a Socrates, a Plato, a Hooker, or Taylor, who inculcates on men the necessity and infinite worth of moral goodness, the great truth that our happiness depends on the mind which is within us, and not on the circumstances which are without us; but a Smith, a De Lolme, a Bentham, who chiefly inculcates the reverse of this,--that our happiness depends entirely on external circumstances… It is no longer the moral, religious, spiritual condition of the people that is our concern, but their physical, practical, economical condition as regulated by public laws.[51]

---

[49] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS* 35-6.

[50] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS* 36.

[51] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 11.

When politics consists in institutional design, the measure of its success is no longer the cultivation of a noble spirit, but the efficient equilibrating of egoistic interests. Modern political economy speaks in the language of "checks and balances" and "Profit and Loss," lowering the human domain to the realm of the merely visible.[52] Rejecting as patriarchal and inegalitarian the feudal servitude and obligation that characterized the medieval past, liberal political economy seeks to replace duty and obedience with freedom and consent. The result in economics is the rise of the cash nexus as the sole bond linking man to man. As Carlyle puts it in a passage that would be immortalized in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*:

> For, in one word, *Cash Payment* had not then grown to be the universal sole nexus of man to man; it was something other than money that the high then expected from the low, and could not live without getting from the low. Not as buyer and seller alone, of land or what else it might be, but in many senses still as soldier and captain, as clansman and head, as loyal subject and guiding king, was the low related to the high. With the supreme triumph of Cash, a changed time has entered; there must a changed Aristocracy enter.[53]

The rise of the cash nexus is linked to another of Carlyle's favorite metaphors: the nomadism of the working class. Social bonds built on contract are of their nature temporary. The workers are given no permanent source of employment, riding the fortunes of the business cycle and drifting from employer to employer. What Marx will later call the industrial reserve army is depicted by Carlyle in his description of this directionless mass of men, armed only with the pseudo liberty of contract:

> The Nomad has his very house set on wheels; the Nomad, and in a still higher degree the Ape, are all for 'liberty;' the privilege to flit continually is indispensable for them. Alas, in how many ways, does our humour, in this swift-rolling, self-abrading Time, shew itself nomadic, apelike; mournful enough to him that looks on it with eyes! This humour will have to abate; it is the first element of all fertility in human things, that such 'liberty' of apes and nomads do by freewill or constraint abridge

[52] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS*, 12.

[53] Carlyle, "Chartism," *EPS*, 97.

> itself, give place to a better. The civilized man lives not in wheeled houses. He builds castles, plants lands, makes lifelong marriage-contracts; … Lifelong marriage-contracts: how much preferable were year-long or month-long—to the nomad or ape![54]

Though he is animated by the degrading condition of the working class, Carlyle is not content with the solutions proposed by reformers. The contemporary crisis, Carlyle insists, has less to do with the alienating nature of the division of labor and more to do with the abolition of rule. Chartist reform to expand suffrage therefore constitutes a misguided and predictable palliative. What must be overcome is the cash-nexus ideology of modern life—the formulas of mechanism. Reforming electoral procedures and introducing greater poor relief will not destroy that ideology. What is needed, Carlyle claims, is a true aristocracy. Only by establishing the rule of the wise will human bonds replace contractual ones.

2.3 Sham Politics and Democratic No-Rule

The very formula of "laissez faire" reveals what Carlyle takes to be the essential connection between capitalism and democracy. They are both regimes of "no-rule," axiomatically built on a rejection of command and obedience. This connection is most extensively developed in two of Carlyle's most influential writings on the social question, "Chartism" and *Past and Present*. Together, these texts established the "Condition of England" question as the foremost subject of debate in 1840s Britain. At the heart of both liberal economics and democratic politics, Carlyle insists, is the abolition of authority: "It is the consummation of No-government and laissez-faire."[55]

Modern society is devoted to what Carlyle calls the gospels of Mammon and Dilettantism. The Gospel of Mammon teaches that the capitalist is a contractual equal with his employee. His

---

[54] Carlyle, *PP*, 272-3.

[55] Carlyle, "Chartism, *EPS* 95.

duties of care end with the payment of a market wage. Despite the language of cooperation and "mutual helpfulness," this system of competition is in fact a regime of "mutual hostility. We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that *Cash-payment* is not the sole relation of human beings; we think, nothing doubting, that *it* absolves and liquidates all engagements of man."[56] The Gospel of Dilettantism produces a "Governing Class who do not govern, nor understand in the least that they are bound or expected to govern."[57] Taken together, these two false gospels undermine, Carlyle declaims, man's most sacred right: the right to be ruled by the wise.

In this critique of Victorian politics, Carlyle repudiates the landed aristocracy, the rising middle class, and democracy's basic tendency to replace leadership with quackery. The aristocracy of England has become an "unworking aristocracy." More concerned with game hunting than ruling, the aristocracy is unwilling and unable "to furnish guidance and governance to England."[58] As in the case of the Young Englanders, the relic "Phantasm-Aristocracy" scorns the middle class and its liberal economic philosophy.[59] But this protest is another sham, for like the idle "French Donothing Aristocracy," the landed Tories no longer serve a purpose and will soon collapse: "A High Class without duties to do is like a tree planted on precipices; from the roots of which all the earth has been crumbling."[60]

Carlyle's contempt for the aristocracy is most clear in his treatment of the *Ancien Regime* in his 1837 *The French Revolution: A History*. Mill notes in his review that this is not a standard work of

---

[56] Carlyle, *PP*, 148-9.

[57] Carlyle, *PP*, 152.

[58] Carlyle, *PP*, 177.

[59] Carlyle, *PP*, 142.

[60] Carlyle, *PP*, 179. Tocqueville uses a similar metaphor to describe the French aristocracy. The roots of the great trees have been destroyed, leaving the trees at the mercy of the winds.

history, but an "epic poem" in prose.[61] Rather than deal with analytic causes or recount a "Dryasdust"[62] chronicle of events, Carlyle depicts Jacobinism and Sansculottism as the crazed furies of the abandoned poor, devouring the corrupt aristocracy before devouring itself.[63] Mill's review, which consists primarily in long excerpts to provide a sense of the frenzied mood captured by Carlyle's frenzied style, summarizes well Carlyle's core interpretation of the Revolution: "it was the breaking down of a great Imposture: which had not always been an Imposture, but had been becoming such for several centuries."[64]

The great "Lie" of the *Ancien Regime*, according to Carlyle, was the conceit that the church, nobility, and aristocracy were willing or capable of ruling the nation. Even critics of the French Revolution acknowledged the failings of the pre-revolutionary regime, but none come close to matching Carlyle's hatred. We find in his history none of Burke's sympathy for aristocratic formality and delicacy.[65] In Carlyle's assessment of France's decadence: "Belief and Loyalty have passed away, and only the cant and false echo of them remains; and all Solemnity has become Pageantry; and the Creed of persons in authority has become one of two things: an Imbecility or a Machiavelism."[66] Carlyle's interpretation of the Revolution is given its clearest illustration in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, prefaced with Dickens' acknowledgment that "no one can hope to add anything to the

---

[61] Mill, "Carlyle's French Revolution," *MCW* 20.133. Famously, Mill's maid accidentally burned the original manuscript of the book, an embarrassment perhaps Mill hoped to recover from with his ecstatic review.

[62] "Dryasdust," which originates in Scott's preface to *Ivanhoe*, is another of Carlyle's recurring imaginary characters.

[63] As Carlyle's disciple, James Froude, put it in his biography of Carlyle, the book is "an Aeschylean drama composed of facts literally true, in which the Furies are seen once more walking on this prosaic earth and shaking their serpent hair." James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 88.

[64] Mill, "Carlyle's French Revolution," *MCW* 158.

[65] Lord Acton observed that Carlyle's *History*—whatever its scholarly failings—successfully "delivered our fathers from thraldom to Burke." *Lectures on the French Revolution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1910), 309.

[66] Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 18.

philosophy of Mr. Carlyle's wonderful book."[67] The wicked aristocracy and demonic sans-culotte are perfectly depicted by the Marquis St. Evrémonde and Madame Defarge.

For Carlyle, the Revolution was not caused by an unbalanced change in the forces of economic production, rationalist philosophizing, or mismanaged reform. The Revolution was brought on by the apostasy of the great and the vengeance of the many. Do not blame the anti-clerical Enlightenment philosophers, Carlyle writes:

> Wo rather to those that made the Holy an abomination, and extinguishable; wo to all men that live in such a time of world-abomination, and world-destruction! Nay, answer the Courtiers, it was Turgot, it was Necker, with their mad innovating… it was every scoundrel that had lived, and quacklike pretended to be doing, and been only eating and misdoing, in all provinces of life, as Shoeblack or as Sovereign Lord, each in his degree, from the time of Charlemagne and earlier. All this (for be sure no falsehood perishes, but is as seed sown out to grow) has been storing itself for thousands of years; and now the account-day has come. And rude will the settlement be: of wrath laid up against the day of wrath. O my Brother, be not thou a Quack! Die rather, if thou wilt take counsel; 'tis but dying once, and thou art quit of it forever.[68]

The Revolution was divine retribution for decadence and falsity. It was the triumph of "disimprisoned Anarchy" over "corrupt worn-out Authority."[69] Carlyle comes close to celebrating the ferocity of Sanscoulottism. He prefers the Jacobins to the Girondins, for the former wished to purge the world of all falsehood, while the latter hoped to replace one set of dead formulas with another. Representing the cause of the "respectable washed Middle Classes," the Girondins hope the revolution might "settle down into a reign of Law and Liberty … the volcanic lava-flood, bursting up in the manner described, will explode and flow according to Girondin Formula and pre-

---

[67] Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Penguin, 2003), x.

[68] Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 56.

[69] Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 173.

established rule of Philosophy."[70] In truth, they bring a new despotism of Mammon-worship, in some ways more hateful than that they have replaced. Carlyle's contempt for the bourgeois monarchies of France and Britain is a testament, in a sense, to the Girondins' temporary success: "Aristocracy of Feudal Parchment has passed away with a mighty rushing; and now, by a natural course, we arrive at Aristocracy of the Moneybag. It is the course through which all European Societies are, at this hour, traveling. Apparently a still baser sort of Aristocracy?"[71]

The landed aristocracy of France and England have been replaced by middle-class quacks and Mammon worshipers. Committed to laissez-faire, British parliamentarians are unwilling to rule their inferiors. The crime they commit against the poor is not just hunger, exploitation, or unemployment, for those, Carlyle claims, are not man's worst fate. The deeper crime is the anarchy of proletarian suffering: "to live miserable we know not why: to work sore and yet gain nothing; to be heart-worn, weary, yet isolated, unrelated, girt-in with a cold-universal Laissez-faire."[72] Injustice is not a matter of inequality or unfreedom, but is another name for "*dis*order, for unveracity, unreality … the real smart is the soul's pain and stigma, the hurt inflicted on the moral self."[73] Democracy and its sham leaders produce bewilderment. Formulas of liberty as non-interference and the sanctity of contract justify neglect: "Liberty, I am told, is a divine thing. Liberty when it becomes the 'Liberty to die by starvation' is not so divine!"[74]

---

[70] Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 560-1.

[71] Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 713.

[72] Carlyle, *PP*, 209.

[73] Carlyle, "Chartism," *EPS* 84

[74] Carlyle, *PP*, 210.

Instead of finding true superiors to rule, democratic reformers offer the false miracle cure of an expanded suffrage, as if "a man's liberty consists in giving his vote at election-hustings, and saying, 'Behold, now I too have my twenty-thousandth part of a Talker in our National Palaver."[75] The "Mock-Superiors" selected by election are no substitute for the paternal guardianship typified by the bond between Cedric and Gurth.[76] Nor does democratic election have any connection to a true aristocracy of talent.[77] Parliamentarians are elected for their ability to speak not their capacity to govern. The "apt debater" must be assumed to be an incapable administrator, for he spends his time polishing sentences rather than preparing for the work of governing.[78] This line of attack—the contrast between a talking and a working parliament—proves to be one of Carlyle's most influential rebukes of parliamentary government.[79] "Sir Jabesh Windbag"—modeled on Robert Peel—serves as Carlyle's representative parliamentary leader. Windbag believes in no God, but only "that Force of Public Opinion." Blown about by the winds of changing sentiment, Windbag can steer the nation to no new destination, arriving instead "infallibly ... at that same country of NOWHERE."[80] He mistakes the giving of speeches for governing the nation. Parliaments full of these "Ministries of Windbag" produce nothing and govern no one.

---

[75] Carlyle, *PP*, 216.

[76] Ibid., 24.

[77] In the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, Carlyle develops his most sustained attack on democracy's mediocrity. Parliament is a "Talking Apparatus," home to eloquent but unperformed speech. Carlyle, *LDP*, 91, 181, 194.

[78] Carlyle, *LDP*, 115-6.

[79] Bagehot, for example, praises the parliament as a deliberative institution. Like many nineteenth-century liberals, he favors the rise of public opinion as the motive force in politics. William Selinger and Greg Conti, "Reappraising Walter Bagehot's Liberalism: Discussion, Public Opinion, and the Meaning of Parliamentary Government," *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 2 (2015): 264–91. Weber, in contrast, follows Carlyle in warning that a merely talking parliament becomes irresponsible and must be balanced by a strong executive.

[80] Carlyle, *PP*, 220.

For this reason, too, democratic politics is bound up with modern literary culture. Journalists and printers have replaced the three traditional estates that comprised Parliament: "Literature is our Parliament too. Printing, which comes necessarily out of Writing, I say often, is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable. … the nation is governed by all that has tongue in the nation."[81] The power of public opinion makes newspaper men the true princes—though their power too comes not from shaping public views but flattering them. As Teufelsdröckh puts it: "The Journalists are now the true Kings and Clergy: henceforth Historians, unless they are fools, must write not of Bourbon Dynasties, and Tudors and Hapsburgs; but of Stamped Broad-sheet Dynasties."[82]

This condemnation of the old Tory and new Whig elites resonated with radical critics of class-biased parliamentary government. Carlyle celebrates the spirit of the Chartists, just as he stood in awe of the Jacobins, but Carlyle has no faith that a more thorough democratization of political life would offer a reprieve from the "no-rule" of the mediocre.[83] He places his hope in the emergence of a new "aristocracy of talent" to overthrow the idle landed nobility and the new middle-class parliamentarians. This new meritocracy shall be comprised of the "captains of industry," a working aristocracy capable and willing to rule.

The consequences of mechanism, nomadism, and no-rule are summarized by a particularly amusing anthropological treatment in *Sartor* of the two nations in England: The nation of dandies and the nation of drudges. The Dandy is "a Clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office, and

---

[81] Carlyle, *Hero Worship*, 141-2.

[82] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 34.

[83] Carlyle scorns the optimistic hope that democracy will soon establish a regular, competent system of government. Deploying Plato's classic metaphor, he warns that this faith in democracy is as foolish as making decisions on board a ship by means of voting. *LDP* 16.

existence consists in the wearing of Clothes."[84] He substitutes the appearance of the thing for its substance, dressing well instead of governing well. Practically an atheist, the Dandy worships himself, enjoying vain amusements and devoting himself to correct sartorial presentation. Beneath this nation of Dandies labors "the *Drudge* Sect," which might also be described as the "*White-Negroes*."[85] These men appear to be bound by the two monastic vows of poverty and obedience—though not chastity. They live off potatoes and water and seem to practice a peculiar form of earth worship, for "they dig and affectionately work continually in her bosom." Like the Jacobins, they are liable "to outbreakings of an enthusiasm rising to ferocity."[86] Between these two sects we find rising hostility. Things do not bode well for the Dandies, for soon virtually the entire population of Britain will find itself among the Drudges.

3. The Most Perfect Feudal Ages

For Carlyle, the pre-revolutionary *Ancien Regime* and the landed English aristocracy are fraudulent reproductions of the chivalric heroes that ruled the "most perfect Feudal Ages" of medieval Christendom.[87] Carlyle's greatest book, *Past and Present*, is an extended comparison of the feudal and industrial ages.[88] Unlike the quack, mock-superiors of bourgeois Britain, the feudal aristocracy deserved its position:

> That Feudal Aristocracy, I say, was no imaginary one. To a respectable degree, its *Jarls*, what we now call Earls, were *Strong-Ones* in fact as well as etymology; its Dukes *Leaders*; its Lords *Law-wards*. They did all the Soldiering and Police of the country, all

[84] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus,* 200.

[85] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 205.

[86] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 206.

[87] Carlyle, "Chartism," *EPS* 97, 99.

[88] Lord Acton thought that *Past and Present* constituted "the most remarkable piece of historical thinking" in the English language. *Lectures on the French Revolution*, 309.

> the Judging, Law-making, even the Church-Extension; whatsoever in the way of Governing, of Guiding and Protecting could be done. It was a Land Aristocracy; it managed the Governing of this English People, and had the reaping of the Soil of England in return.[89]

Carlyle's defense of the feudal spirit accompanies a repudiation of "dilettantish" attempts to appropriate or resurrect medievalism. Tory nostalgia manifests itself more in a commitment to architectural reform than in a seriousness about moral or political transformation. Against attempts to restore monasticism, Carlyle insists that history has rendered such institutions obsolete: "no Monk of the old sort is any longer possible in this world."[90] Against conservative antiquarianism, Carlyle's interest in the past consists solely in the inspiration it provides for transforming the present. As he puts it in a letter to Emerson, "There is no use in writing of things past, unless they can be made in fact things present: not yesterday at all, but simply today and what it holds of fulfilment and promises is *ours*."[91]

What he finds impressive about twelfth century Britain is the unity of sacred awe and political mastery, a combination no longer possible with the deadened Christianity and aristocracy of the nineteenth century. The medieval church found, cultivated, and elevated those with noble spirits. Regardless of background, the pious could find a career in the church, where they would find a life of "pious reverence, self-restraint, annihilation of self,--really to human nobleness in many most essential respects." The priesthood provided a path to divine heroism, and the church served as "the

---

[89] Carlyle, *PP* 242.

[90] Ibid., 47.

[91] Carlyle, Letter to Emerson, July 19, 1842. *CL* 15.229.

living lungs and blood-circulation of those old Feudalisms."[92] The clergy and episcopacy, selected and cultivated only for divine nobility, stood above the kings and princes of Europe.

In his review of *Past and Present*, Brownson recognizes, with Carlyle, the impossibility of restoring the Middle Ages, but points to what is instructive about the foil:

> If we would not reconstruct the old feudal and Catholic society, we would have what feudalism and medieval Catholicity sought to realize; and to some extent though in a rude and imperfect manner, it may be, *did* realize. We would have men *governed*, and well governed, let who will be the governors, or what form adopted there may be for selecting them. God's curse and humanity's curse also do and will rest on the no-government schemers. Satan himself was the chief anarch, and all anarchs are his children. Men need government, nay, have a *right* to demand government.[93]

For Carlyle, political rule must be connected to sacred obedience. Everything in the Middle Ages was united—literature, religion, labor, and authority—and therefore society operated with an unconscious health and liberty that has been lost in the fragmented and competitive present. Bound through the sacred tie of the faith, medieval men "were animated by one great Idea; thus all efforts pointed one way, everywhere there was *wholeness*.[94] An age of Mechanism, Carlyle insists, misunderstands human nature, thinking that institutionalized egoism—the cash nexus—can animate society: "It is not by Mechanism, but by Religion; not by Self-interest, but by Loyalty, that men are governed or governable."[95] Only a restoration of religion—in both the people and the aristocracy—can re-establish such authority. Institutions of government are only the "outward SKIN of the Body

---

[92] Carlyle, *LDP* 132. Without the Church or any real substitute, modern Britain has become "a society *without* lungs, fast wheezing itself to death, in horrid convulsions; and deserving to die." *LDP* 133.

[93] Brownson, "The Present State of Society" in Orestes Augustus Brownson, *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson: Religion and Society*, ed. Henry F. Brownson (T. Nourse, 1883), 4.456.

[94] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS* 345.

[95] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS*, 374.

Politic, holding the whole together and protecting it." The true blood of society is religion, "the inmost Pericardial and Nervous Tissue, which ministers Life and warm Circulation to the whole."[96]

By religion, Carlyle does not mean church-creeds or articles of faith. He refers to "the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough *without* asserting it even to himself, much less to others; the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there … That is his *religion*."[97] The practical atheism of the Age of Mechanism consists in an ignorance of and disinterest in "the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion."[98] These are the forces that flourished in the feudal ages.

3.1 The Aristocratic Ideal

Carlyle's assessment of medieval history is more sober than we might expect. He acknowledges that the "Ideal of Aristocracy nowhere lived in vacant serene purity as an Ideal, but always as a poor imperfect Actual, little heeding or not knowing at all that an Ideal lay in it."[99] His description of St. Edmundsbury—his longest illustration of the feudal idyll—is full of corrupt lords, knights, and monks. He scorns Henry of Essex, a haughty and unjust Earl who used his power to imprison his innocent rivals and Geoffrey the archbishop of York, illegitimate son of King Henry II.[100] He writes of rowdy knights who preferred drink and fight to prayer and devotion.[101] Their turn

---

[96] Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 159.

[97] Carlyle, *Hero Worship*, 4.

[98] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times" *EPS* 12.

[99] Carlyle, "Chartism" *EPS* 99

[100] Carlyle, *PP* 109-112.

[101] Carlyle, *PP*, 113-4.

toward dilettantish amusements and game hunting occasioned the rise of Robin Hood.[102] Many of the monks at St. Edmundsbury lead lives of dissipation, recalling caricatures drawn up by Chaucer or Bocaccio. Most notably, Carlyle rebukes an Abbott of the monastery, Hugo, who is jealous of his inferiors, imprudent with the community's wealth, and more concerned with his power than his vocation.[103]

Even though few medieval men were saints and heroes, the aristocratic ideal remained alive. This was still a world capable of recognizing, elevating, and revering heroism. The feudal aristocracy, Carlyle notes, found its origin in the martial warlords of the dark ages. Under the influence of the chivalric ideal of the time, even violence could be elevated to a standard of divinity. Two connected qualities distinguished the martial virtue of the old aristocracy. The first is that they fought not for interest but for causes, and the second is that they were guided by a belief in providence. In fighting for a purpose, the martial aristocracy is a testament to one of Carlyle's perplexing and recurring motifs: The unity of Might and Right: "All Fighting, as we noticed long ago, is the dusty conflict of strengths each thinking itself the strongest, or, in other words, the justest;--of Mights which do in the long-run, and forever will in this just Universe in the long-run, mean Rights."[104] As with his treatment of Sanscoulottism, we find in Carlyle a faith that Justice comes through the triumph of the strong. There is no use cataloguing the "rights" of the working poor. Just entitlement is coincident with that which may be seized by force, for that demand is itself the "common stamp of manhood."[105] Carlyle's faith in the right of the strong parallels Karl Ludwig von Haller, and though

---

[102] Carlyle, *PP*, 69.

[103] Carlyle attacks Hugo for relying on Jewish bankers for financial support. The antisemitism that runs throughout the book—a motif we have already seen in Cobbett and others—is especially sharp in this description of medieval Jewry.

[104] Carlyle, *PP* 190.

[105] Carlyle, "Chartism" *EPS* 84.

no evidence documents direct influence, Leon Kellner was correct to find a remarkable similarity between the two on this subject.[106]

Like Haller, Carlyle can be rescued from the company of Callicles through his appeal to providence. It was for this reason, perhaps, that Nietzsche accused Carlyle of being a light-hearted atheist, unable to free himself from the weakness that infects faith.[107] As Carlyle puts it in one statement of this providentialism:

> Any given thing either *is* unjust or else just; however obscure the arguings and strugglings on it be, the thing in itself there as it lies, infallibly enough, *is* the one or the other. To which let us add only this, the first, last article of faith, the alpha and omega of all faith among men, That nothing which is unjust can hope to continue in this world. A faith true in all times, more or less forgotten in most, but altogether frightfully brought to remembrance again in ours! Lyons fusilladings, Nantes noyadings, reigns of terror, and such other universal battle-thunder and explosion; these, if we will understand them, were but a new irrefragable preaching abroad of that. It would appear that Speciosities which are not Realities cannot any longer inhabit this world.[108]

This faith in providence distinguishes the chivalric aristocrat from the thug or buccaneer: "deep in the heart of the noble man it lies forever legible, that, as an Invisible Just God made him, so will and must God's Justice and this only, were it never so invisible, ultimately prosper in all controversies and enterprises and battles whatever."[109] Carlyle does not claim that all feudal aristocrats held to this faith, but the faith was sufficiently powerful that it allowed for the emergence of heroes.

---

[106] Leon Kellner, *Die englische Literatur im Zeitalter der Königin Viktoria* (B. Tauchnitz, 1909), 125–30.

[107] Nietzsche excoriates Carlyle in *Twilight of the Idols* for being "basically an English atheist who stakes his honour on *not* being one." *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 198. He criticizes Carlyle in similar terms in "The Anti-Christ." Referring to Carlyle's choice between the everlasting yes and the everlasting no set forth in *Sartor*, Nietzsche writes: "the need for faith, for some unconditional yes or no, Carlylism if you will excuse the expression, is a need of the *weak*." "The Anti-Christ" in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, 54.

[108] Carlyle, "Chartism" *EPS* 90.

[109] Carlyle, *PP* 190-1.

3.2 Abbott Samson

The god-fearing martial aristocracy is important, but by far the most significant testimony to feudal heroism is found in the monastery. Between its polemical rebukes of modern quackery, *Past and Present* offers a remarkable description of the Benedictine abbey of St. Edmundsbury and the rise therein of Abbott Samson. Book two consists in a commentary on a medieval chronicle written by a monk, Jocelyn of Brakelond—the Boswell to Samson's Johnson. Through Jocelyn, Carlyle finds a depiction of England in 1200 as "no chimerical vacuity or dreamland, peopled with mere vaporous Fantasms, Rymer's Foedera, and Doctrines of the Constitution; but a green solid place."[110] He is drawn to Jocelyn's record because it does not dress the age in the exaggerated language of high romance—the appeal to Digby and others. It captures, on the contrary, the real human beings who peopled the monastery.

The hero of the narrative is the humble monk Samson. His is a faith of silent prayer and obedience, very unlike modern religious rationalism, disputative apologetics, or emotive enthusiasm: "our Religion is not yet a horrible restless Doubt, still less a far horribler composed Cant; but a great heaven-high Unquestionability, encompassing, interpenetrating the whole of Life."[111] Samson carries out his duties in unhesitating silence, suffering without complaint his unjust treatment at the hands of Abbot Hugo.[112]

The day comes for the monks of St. Edmunsbury to elect a new abbot. The initial discussion and deliberations appear, at first, to mirror the great palaver of parliamentary politics, a "sanhedrim

---

[110] Carlyle, *PP*, 47.

[111] Carlyle, *PP* 70.

[112] Samson's silent contemplation contrasts strongly with the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola, whom Carlyle excoriates as responsible for the modern sham age in the *Latter Day Pamphlets*.

of babble."[113] But the election here is of an altogether different spirit than that of the hustings. Hugo and twelve senior monks decide on three names, presenting them to King Henry II to make the final selection. The king is dissatisfied with the three and asks for additional nominations drawn from outside the monastery. Some haggling ensues, and the Bishop of Winchester is brought in to adjudicate. The choice ultimately falls between two men, Samson, only a lowly sacristan, and Hugo, the incumbent Abbott. Asked to decide, the monks unanimously select Samson, who falls to kiss the feet of the king, before rising and leading the monks in chanting psalm fifty one, *Miserere mei Deus*.[114]

This election testifies to the living, heroic spirit of the monks. Despite their corruptions, in these barbarous times men were still capable of finding leaders worthy of reverence. The "depth and opulence of true social vitality" consisted in the fact that "the fit Governor could be met with under such disguises" and chosen as the true ruler of the community. Their election succeeds not because of clever institutional design or the persuasive speeches given by campaigners. The monks' "electoral winnowing-machine" was "a mind fixed on the Thrice Holy, an appeal to God on high."[115] Elections are revealing not because the procedure confers special authority, but because it is a means of assessing the quality of the electors. The problem of modern parliamentarism is not that quacks corrupt the proceedings, but that the people continue to select the quacks:

> Given the men a People choose, the People itself, in its exact worth and worthlessness, is given. A heroic people chooses heroes, and is happy; a valet or flunkey people chooses sham-heroes, what are called quacks, thinking them heroes, and is not happy. The grand summary of a man's spiritual condition, what brings out

[113] Carlyle, *PP* 78.

[114] Carlyle, *PP*, 85.

[115] Carlyle, *PP*, 81.

> all his herohood and insight, or all his flunkeyhood and horn-eyed dimness, is this question put to him, What man dost thou honour?[116]

It is a sign of the wisdom and virtue of these monks that they knew the right man to honor. Following his election, Abbot Samson undertakes a reform of the monastery. He re-orders the finances, badly kept by his predecessor. He cracks down on laxity and moral corruption and imposes with renewed vigor a dedication to silent prayer. The three types of men he likes worst are the "*Mendaces, ebriosi, verbose,* Liars, drunkards, and wordy or windy persons."[117] These are the types who now dominate an England torn between the sect of drudges and the sect of dandies. In all things, Samson is not coerced by the force of "public opinion," in the style of modern Windbag parliamentarians, but by a "heavenly Awe [that] overshadowed and encompassed, as it still ought and must, all earthly business whatsoever."[118]

3.3 Ora et Labora

The clearest evidence of Samson's greatness, Carlyle writes, was the "comparative silence" of his life. He was a "busy working man" and his "religion, his worship was like his daily bread;--which he did not take the trouble to talk much about; which he merely ate at stated intervals, and lived and did his work upon!"[119] Unlike the Christian reform movements of the nineteenth century, Samson's faith was not screamed from street corners, displayed through theatrical liturgies, or disfigured by sentimental humanitarianism. The superiority of the monastery consisted in its devotion to the Benedictine precept: *Ora et labora*. Though Carlyle thinks the days of the monastery have passed and

---

[116] Carlyle, *PP*, 79.

[117] Carlyle, *PP*, 100.

[118] Carlyle, *PP*, 108.

[119] Carlyle, *PP*, 118.

that those who seek to resurrect monasticism are contemptible dilletantes, this sacred precept remains the sole means of mastering the mechanism of the modern world.[120]

Throughout his writings, Carlyle returns to the connection between work and awe. Like other Victorian paternalists, Carlyle is contemptuous of idleness: "He that will not work according to his faculty, let him perish according to his necessity: there is no law juster than that."[121] Yet in tying work with worship, Carlyle offers a very different argument than do the typical moralist critics of sloth. The point is not to teach the laborer bourgeois virtues of personal responsibility, but to sanctify obedience. Carlyle's position is even further removed from the characteristically American defense of labor as a means of cultivating economic and therefore political responsibility.[122] Moral paternalism and yeoman republican independence are too close to the formulas of cash-nexus liberty for Carlyle to endorse.

The heart of Carlyle's defense of work consists in the connection between labor and sacral authority. He insists, with the Chartists, that "Fair day's wages for a fair day's work" is the most "unrefusable" and admirable demand.[123] The nobility of this demand is destroyed when subsumed into an abstract theory of distributive justice, which aligns work with earthly reward and

---

[120] On this subject we find one of the more striking divergences between Carlyle and Nietzsche, who writes in *Daybreak* against "those who commend work" for elevating industry and security over individuality and genius: "Fundamentally, one now feels at the sight of work—one always means by work that hard industriousness from early till late—that such work is the best policeman, that it keeps everyone in bounds and can mightily hinder the development of reason, covetousness, desire for independence. For it uses up an extraordinary amount of nervous energy, which is thus denied to reflection, brooding, dreaming, worrying, loving, hating; it sets a small goal always in sight and guarantees easy and regular satisfactions. Thus a society in which there is continual hard work will have more security: and security is now worshipped as the supreme divinity." *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 105.

[121] "Chartism," *EPS* 74. On the general Victorian hostility to idleness, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 147–90.

[122] Abraham Lincoln's speech against the mudsill theory remains the canonical defense of "free labor" as a source of individual emancipation. "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society," delivered September 30, 1859.

[123] Carlyle, *PP* 202.

Mammonism, a philosophy of the stomach. As Carlyle intones: "all true Work is Religion." The monks of St. Edmundsbury understood this well. Bound by the monastic rule, *Ora* and *Labora* were of a piece. Religious life did not consist in speculative theology or introspective spirituality. It was found in their seamless and unthinking fulfilment of their daily duties:

> Religion is not a diseased self-introspection, an agonizing inquiry: their duties are clear to them, the way of supreme good plain, indisputable, and they are travelling on it. Religion lies over them like an all-embracing heavenly canopy, like an atmosphere and life-element, which is not spoken of, which in all things is presupposed without speech. Is not serene or complete Religion the highest aspect of human nature; as serene Cant, or complete No-religion, is the lowest and miserablest?[124]

The monastic rule converts "Formulas" into a "*reality* in Human Life."[125] Modern formulas—the cash nexus, independence, liberty of contract, the invisible hand—are dead, no longer corresponding to life. Carlyle celebrates "true formulas" that have not devolved into slogans. The regularity and discipline furnished by the monastic rule established a script of life. These duties retained substance insofar as they were obeyed out of sacred awe. There is "one Liturgy which does remain forever unexceptionable: that of *Praying* (as the old Monks did withal) *by Working*."[126] True work is worship, because it unites the individual to a religious whole with an unconscious bond of duty. John 9:4—oft quoted by Carlyle—serves as the perfect statement of this sacral duty: "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work."[127]

---

[124] Carlyle, *PP*, 64.

[125] Carlyle, *PP*, 127.

[126] Carlyle, *PP*, 229.

[127] Carlyle, *PP* 158, 201. *Sartor Resartus*, 146. Some decades later, Max Weber quotes the same verse to note the necessity of fighting to preserve freedom and personality amidst the looming threat of impersonal domination. "On the Situation of Constitutional Democracy in Russia" in Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 71.

The only happiness available to man comes not from earthly reward but from the fulfilment of a divine duty: "his highest and sole blessedness is, that he toil, and know what to toil at: not in ease, but in united victorious labour, which is at once evil and the victory over evil, does his Freedom lie."[128] The freedom to fulfil this duty must replace the pseudo-liberty of contract. The nomadism of the industrial proletariat is miserable precisely to the degree that work is rendered temporary, transactional, and purposeless. The unity of the monastic *Ora et Labora* has vanished in the chaotic, contractual, and anarchic labor market of modern England.

Carlyle's celebration of total submission to a sanctified authority distinguishes him from the reformers who drew on his critique of industrial working conditions. Some of Carlyle's disciples—John Ruskin and William Morris, for example—took from this sanctification of work a justification for rejuvenating handicrafts and small-scale production. It is possible to find such themes in Carlyle's treatment of the contrast between medieval and industrial labor. But the true distinctiveness of Carlyle's account cuts in the opposite direction. He makes no Arendtian distinction between the labor of the *animal laborans* and the work of the *homo faber*. He does not celebrate making as a distinctively human, non-animalistic form of work.[129] What he draws from the monastic model is not a vision of intimate, creative, craft-level production, but a spirit of unflinching, devoted discipline.

Carlyle's theory of work-as-worship pairs a celebration of discipline with a veneration of "sincerity." Workers will be made heroic when they abandon sham formulas, and find a true hero to worship: "A man embraces truth with his eyes open, and because his eyes are open: does he need to shut them before he can love his Teacher of truth? He alone can love, with a right gratitude and

---

[128] Carlyle, "Characteristics," *EPS* 33.

[129] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 144–58.

genuine loyalty of soul, the Hero-Teacher who has delivered him out of darkness into light. Is not such a one a true Hero, and Serpent-queller; worthy of all reverence!"[130] The monks of St. Edmundsbury allowed Carlyle to propose a marriage between totalized obedience and genuine sincerity. In finding a true ruler to revere, they free themselves from the cant of the world. The most sincere freedom is total obedience to one who deserves it. Therein lies the paradoxical root of Carlyle's appeal to both transcendentalist lovers of authenticity and reactionary apologists for the cult of the leader.

4. Two Contrasts: Comte and Coleridge

Unlike the more typical nostalgic reactionaries and romantics, Carlyle does not merely offer a moral critique of the ruling class and an appeal to noblesse oblige. He is ruthless in his presentation of the *Ancien Regime*, and he argues that the landed aristocracy and established church deserve to be eradicated. In like manner, Carlyle offers a far more literal version of the slaves-without-masters critique of modern government. The problem is not that the new ruling class is behaving badly, but that there are no rulers at all. Liberal societies are anarchic, ruled by no-rule, and subject to the tyranny of mechanism. The inspiration he draws from medievalism is the unity of reverence and heroic authority, which combination must take a decidedly modern form in the future.

It is worth comparing Carlyle to the two thinkers who come closest to articulating his view of the situation: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Auguste Comte. They both emphasize the anarchy—especially the spiritual anarchy—of the post-feudal liberal state. They both propose a new form of spiritual authority to restore order. Nevertheless, their political visions are ultimately incompatible with Carlyle's. Though more sophisticated, Coleridge is the master figure of the "cant-religion" and

[130] Carlyle, *Hero Worship* 108.

"sham-reverence" school, Carlyle argues, unable to recognize the total obsolescence of Christianity. Comte, for his part, offers a disenchanted and bureaucratic vision of spiritual superintendence. That too is markedly different from Carlyle's fixation with a new, personal form of heroic mastery.

4.1 Coleridge's Clerisy

In Coleridge, we find the most systematic articulation of the feudal nostalgia of English Toryism. Like his close friend, Southey, Coleridge evolved from a radical champion of republicanism and the French Revolution into a leading figure of British reaction. Where Southey's political thought struggled to rise above mere critique, however, Coleridge successfully produced a more complete statement of his conservative political philosophy. In his 1829 *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, Coleridge is animated by the imperative of restoring balance to modern Britain. Politics, he argues, is torn between the antagonistic forces of permanence and progression. In this new age of commerce and mechanism, the forces of progress have triumphed, and so what is needed is a reinvigoration of those institutions which embody philosophic reflection and moral stability.

Coleridge sketches a critique of the present that in certain respects anticipates Carlyle's condemnation of modern, spiritless mechanism. The century and a half following the Glorious Revolution, Coleridge writes, have witnessed the rise of a new "mechanic philosophy." Under the influence of "Mechanico-corpuscular" theories of materialism and empiricism, philosophers have abandoned theological ambition and have come to think only in terms of brute sensation. Modern Britain has replaced the book of Genesis with the state of nature, an "Ouran Outang theology of the origin of the human race." This lowering of the heavenly to the earthly explains the political situation of modern Britain, which he characterizes as follows:

> Talents without genius; a swarm of clever, well-informed men: an anarchy of minds, a despotism of maxims. Despotism of finance in government and legislation—of vanity and sciolism in the intercourse of life—of presumption, temerity, and hardness of heart in political economy.[131]

Finance, formulas, anarchy, crime, and drunkenness reign supreme. Against this mechanical condition, Coleridge favors a vital, spiritual vision of the State. In an analysis that mirrors Müller's, he writes that the true idea of the political community is that of "*constituted* Realm, Kingdom, Commonwealth, or Nation, *i.e.* where the integral parts, classes, or orders are so balanced, or interdependent, as to constitute, more or less, a moral unit, an organic whole."[132] The British state has been destabilized by the forces of progress—the "mercantile, the manufacturing, the distributive, and the professional" classes.[133] Their predominance has overwhelmed the institution that secured permanence: the landed aristocracy.

In a familiar move, Carlyle turns to medieval Christendom to find a model of the permanence he seeks to restore. While the forces of progression bring prosperity and improvement, England's liberty derives at least as much from its medieval inheritance: "To the feudal system we owe the *forms*, to the Church the substance, of our liberty."[134] In 1799, Coleridge had already begun to identify political liberty with these institutions, retreating from his earlier enthusiasm for the French Revolution. Praising France's ancient constitution, he wrote: "In those feudal institutions, which her shallow mock-statesmen have now made the objects of an hostile oath, she had links of

---

[131] Coleridge, *Idea of the Constitution*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Writings: On Politics and Society*, ed. John Morrow, Coleridge's Writings (London, England: MacMillan Press Limited, 1990), 186. Henceforth *CPS*.

[132] Coleridge, *Idea of the Constitution*, *CPS*, 211.

[133] Coleridge, *Idea of the Constitution*, *CPS*, 26.

[134] Coleridge, *Idea of the Constitution, CPS,* 189. See also Coleridge's discussion of the same in his 1817 "A Lay Sermon." *CPS*, 142.

social subordination, a happy intertexture of the interests and property of the state."[135] The landed aristocracy protected the rights and welfare of its poor subordinates, checking the rise of pauperism unleashed by middle-class commercial expansion.

Just as important was the role of the church, which in feudal times served to cultivate, educate, and ennoble the landed aristocracy and commercial classes. Institutional balance of power alone is not sufficient for civilization and freedom. For both classes to serve their correct function, they must be tutored by the philosophic sobriety embodied by the clergy. The church is tasked with the "harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our *humanity*. We must be men in order to be citizens."[136] What is needed today, Coleridge argues, is the raising up of a new clerisy, not one that is identical with the ecclesial church, but that is the guardian of the wisdom and patrimony of the nation. As he summarizes, the "final cause" of this clerical estate is "to form and train up the people of the country to be obedient, free, useful, organizable subjects, citizens, and patriots, living to the benefit of the State and prepared to die for its defense. The proper object and end of the National Church is civilization with freedom."[137]

The national clerisy will be specifically tasked with education. In this connection it bears more in common with the modern professoriate than the traditional clergy. The three-fold aims of this education are not so different from the functions ascribed to the modern university system. First, the clerisy will identify men of scholarly capacity to encourage them in the acquisition of learning. Second, the clerisy will detect men of talent from lowly origins and help them to achieve

---

[135] Coleridge, "Comparison of the Present State of France with that of Rome under Julius and Augustus Caesar," *CPS*, 68. Coleridge compares the French Revolution with the barbarian conquests of Rome, which unsettled the empire by undermining the established balance of property. The new spirit of commerce is analogized to barbarian conquest.

[136] Coleridge, *Idea of the Constitution*, *CPS* 173.

[137] Coleridge, *Idea of the Constitution*, *CPS,* 179-80. T.S. Eliot drew on Coleridge's clerisy in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949).

upward mobility. And finally, the clerisy will spread sober religion across the wider citizenry.[138] With this revived (if modified) medieval church, England will cultivate and check the forces of commerce, restoring a needed permanence and therefore balance to its constitution.

There are substantial resonances between Coleridge and Carlyle's diagnoses of Britain's ills. There are moreover biographic parallels between the two, for they were both among the first British men of letters to read, translate, and internalize German romanticism and idealism. Yet Carlyle's assessment of his predecessor is, at best, mixed. In a letter to Emerson, Carlyle summarized Coleridge's legacy in a postscript: "How great a Possibility, how small a realized Result."[139] A fuller judgment can be found in Carlyle's *Life of John Sterling*, which devotes a chapter to Coleridge. He recounts there his personal dislike of the man, whose verbosity was at odds with Carlyle's famously taciturn nature: "To sit as a passive bucket and be pumped into, whether you consent or not, can in the long-run be exhilarating to no creature; how eloquent soever the flood of utterance that is descending."[140] Carlyle also mocks Coleridge's use of an unintelligible, German philosophical language—an amusing criticism in light of Carlyle's own "natural supernaturalism" and often impenetrable style.

The crucial substantive disagreement between the two centers on their assessment of Christianity. Where Coleridge believes that the churches are merely asleep and must be woken up, Carlyle believes the churches are dead.[141] Though Coleridge's proposal for a new national clerisy is not exactly traditional, it is broadly in line with the Anglican renewal attempts championed by

---

[138] Coleridge, *Idea of the Constitution*, *CPS*, 187.

[139] Carlyle, Letter to Emerson, August 12, 1834, *CL* 7.267.

[140] Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling*, *CCW* 11.55.

[141] Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling*, *CCW* 11.59.

Southey, the Young Englanders, and the Oxford Movement. Carlyle is gratuitous in his scorn for Christian conservatives. He writes that Coleridge is responsible for the new "Shovel-hat" Christianity, which cares more about vestments than substance.[142] Coleridge's descendants include the most preposterous church reformers: "strange Centaurs, spectral Puseyisms, monstrous illusory Hybrids, and ecclesiastical Chimeras."[143]

There is no difference in this regard between Tory Anglican reformers and the Chartists. They both turn to Morrison Pill miracle cures—the Chartists think a new reform bill will end the present anarchy, and the high-churchers think a more lavish liturgy will end the Chartists. Coleridge fails to recognize how empty English Christianity has come to be. As Carlyle mercilessly puts it, "Christianity is as good as extinct in all hearts." What remains is only the "rotten carcass of Christianity; this malodorous phosphorescence of *post-mortem* sentimentalism."[144] Modern Christianity cannot match the seriousness that once roused John Knox and Oliver Cromwell. Today it serves merely to plead the case of scoundrels and apologize for the indigent. Christianity has become idolatry, which Carlyle defines in *Hero Worship* as "Formulism, and Worship of Formulas … Blameable Idolatry is *Cant*.[145] The Christianity Coleridge hopes to resurrect is an empty falsehood.

Second and more importantly, Coleridgean Christian revival misunderstands the source of the current anarchic situation. Once again Carlyle is far more critical of the *Ancien Regime* than is Coleridge. The modern world—with its mediocrities and commercial domination—is not just the product of false metaphysical doctrines. It is the consequence of the aristocracy's abdication of

---

[142] Carlyle, *CL* 17.312.

[143] Carlyle, *Life of Sterling CCW* 11.61-2.

[144] Carlyle, *LDP* 68, 70. It is difficult to trace any direct influence on this point, but Carlyle's thesis is extremely close to Nietzsche's diagnosis of post-Christian slave morality.

[145] Carlyle, *Hero Worship* 105.

responsibility. The working poor of the world seek vengeance against their Do-Nothing mock superiors and clerics. The French Revolution, recall, was "most respectable and ever-memorable," in Carlyle's view, for in their savagery the Jacobins well understood the guilt of the old, sham lords and priests.[146] New liturgies and creeds are altogether useless as a response to the current corruption. The goal must not be the gradual spread of sober reason or the proper balance of social forces. In Carlyle's mind, something much more radical and revolutionary is needed than that.

Perhaps the most damning strike against Coleridge from the Carlylean perspective is that a thinker like him could be so admired by John Stuart Mill. In a famous essay celebrating Coleridge's contribution to modern philosophy, Mill makes clear that this is the kind of conservatism liberals should welcome. Coleridge offers a healthy resistance to the philosophical materialism of the empiricists, one that does not ultimately succeed, Mill insists, but one that helps the empiricists to strengthen their method. In politics, Coleridge is in many respects "a better Liberal than Liberals themselves," especially in his secularization of the clerisy.[147] Coleridge rightly emphasizes the importance of elitism in a liberal society, Mill explains, and liberals must therefore honor Coleridge "for having vindicated against Bentham and Adam Smith and the whole eighteenth century, the principle of an endowed class, for the cultivation of learning, and for diffusing its results among the community."[148]

Carlyle does not comment on Mill's essay, but it captures in almost perfect form what he takes to be the unseriousness of the liberal mind. Coleridge is useful as part of a curated debate between rival formulas—progress and permanence. His philosophy is attractive as a tool for

---

[146] Carlyle, *LDP* 81.

[147] Mill, "Coleridge," (1840) *MCW* 10.162-3.

[148] Mill, "Coleridge," *MCW* 10.150.

improving one's own argumentative skill, not because it promises true understanding. Coleridge and Mill's elitism does not celebrate true excellence, but merely justifies a university class that stands above and superintends the democratic public without exercising real mastery over it. Their clerisy might be compared to a public broadcast corporation. In that attraction to an almost bureaucratized intellectual elite, Mill draws Coleridge close to the other important contrast for Carlyle, Auguste Comte.

4.2 Comte's Technocracy

Comte was a disciple of Henri de Saint-Simon, who was an extraordinarily important influence on Carlyle.[149] Carlyle repeatedly insists that the central question of the day is the "organization of labor," the trademark language of the Saint-Simonian and Comtean traditions.[150] Like Carlyle, Comte theorizes the present state as an anarchic stage of transition, awaiting the emergence of new rulers. Like Carlyle too, Comte sees something instructive in the example of the medieval Church and feudal aristocracy but insists that the new ruling class must be of an altogether modern character. Comte writes in 1848 that Europe has accomplished the "negative" phase of history, the abolition of the old regime, but it has only just begun the work of constructing "a basis for the new social state."[151]

---

[149] The best overview of this subject is Alexander Jordan, "'Noble Just Industrialism' Saint-Simonism in the Political Thought of Thomas Carlyle" (PhD Diss, European University Institute, 2015). See also Richard Pankhurst, *The Saint Simonians, Mill and Carlyle; a Preface to Modern Thought* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1957).

[150] Carlyle comes close to praising his Saint-Simonian contemporaries on this point: "Alas, what a business will this be, which our Continental friends, groping this long while somewhat absurdly about it and about it, call 'Organisation of Labour;'—which must be taken out of the hands of absurd windy persons, and put into the hands of wise, laborious, modest, and valiant men." *PP* 176. I offer a longer discussion of Carlyle's vision of organized labor in chapter 5.

[151] Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism* (London: Trübner and co., 1865), 63.

Carlyle does not write at length about Comte, though what fragmentary remarks we have are fairly critical. From a broader view of the spirit of his project, we can identify two important differences that separate their superficially similar programs. First, the Comtean project of achieving a rational, metaphysics-free, demystified scientific positivism would represent to Carlyle the most obscene acceleration of the modern "mechanical" mind. And second, the Comtean proposal to establish a class of priest-scientists to provide spiritual direction is far too bureaucratic a solution for Carlyle to countenance.

The deepest agreement between the two is their shared assessment of the present anarchy. Like Carlyle, Comte argues that the bourgeois economic elite and parliamentary leadership class have abandoned the responsibilities of guardianship.[152] The master problem of the age is "mental anarchy." No shared system of belief has arisen to replace a dead Christianity, resulting in an "almost total absence of public morality" and a regime that relies on administrative despotism alone.[153] Among the worst features of the prevailing, liberal "revolutionary prejudices" is a hostility to all spiritual authority.[154] Rejecting paternalism and embracing laissez faire, the new society boasts of its freedom, but produces not a pacific flowering of personality but a degeneration into bitter class conflict. No agreement can be found and no one emerges capable or willing to command the reverence of the many: "society is from a moral point of view obviously in a state of true and

---

[152] Akin to Coleridge's demand to balance progress and permanence, Comte offers the slogan of "order and progress." Comte, *General View*, 112.

[153] Comte, "Considerations on the Spiritual Power," Auguste Comte, *Early Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 196–97, 200. Henceforth *EPW*. Carlyle remarks that the liberal societies which appear to function—England and America—are in fact little more than "Anarchy *plus* a street-constable." *LDP* 283.

[154] Comte, "Spiritual Power," *EPW* 192. The wicked consequences produced by the "the intellectual anarchy of the time" is compounded by the attempt to establish "government on the basis of pure self-interest, irrespectively of all moral considerations." *General View*, 124.

profound anarchy … this anarchy stems from the absence of any preponderant system which is capable of uniting all minds in a single communion of ideas."[155]

Comte too turns to medieval Christendom and feudalism as a corrective to spiritual anarchy. An admirer of Joseph de Maistre, Comte has much praise for medieval Catholicism.[156] Like many of the thinkers canvassed in the previous section—Haller, Müller, Schiller, and Novalis—he is especially attentive to Christianity's separation of temporal and spiritual authority, which he celebrates as "a masterpiece of human wisdom."[157] The two swords of Church and State, first theorized by Pope Gelasius I in 494 AD, were a source of vitality.[158] The martial aristocracy earned its right to temporal rule through conquest and strength. These lords were guided and civilized by the church's spiritual authority, which cultivated and checked the feudal aristocracy without despotically overwhelming it. Comte is effusive in summarizing Catholic Christendom's *duo sunt* regime:

> Not only did the theological and military system experience an immense improvement through the foundation of Catholicism and feudalism; but besides, the great political fact resulting from this formation—that is, the regular division between the spiritual power and the temporal power—must be considered as having brought to noble perfection the general theory of social organization, for the whole

---

[155] Comte, "The Sciences and Scientists," *EPW* 168.

[156] Because he rescued the legacy of the Middle Ages from the crude, dismissive treatment of modern, Enlightenment historians, the "great De Maistre, was of material assistance in preparing the true theory of Progress." Comte, *General View,* 67. On Comte's appreciation of de Maistre and other reactionary Catholics, see Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, vol. 1 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 261–68; Tonatiuh Sandoval, "Auguste Comte's Reading of Maistre's Du Pape: Two Theories of Spiritual Authority," in *Joseph de Maistre and His European Readers*, ed. Carolina Armenteros and Richard Lebrun (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 75–94.

[157] Comte, *General View*, 82.

[158] The first major statement is Pope Gelasius I's letter to Emperor Anastasius I Diocorus in 494. *Pope Gelasius I, The Letters of Gelasius I*, trans. Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 73–80. The doctrine is also famously articulated in Pope Boniface VIII's 1302 bull, *Unam Sanctam*.

> conceivable lifetime of the human race, under whatever regime it might ever have to exist.[159]

Like Carlyle and unlike Coleridge, Comte does not believe that the church and landed aristocracy can be resurrected. Both institutions are obsolete. They offer a model, however, for their modern successors: Industrialists and scientists. Carlyle too points to the "captains of industry" as the only hope for a new heroic ruling class, and in this respect he shares Comte's Saint Simonian turn to the industrialists. Comte is more innovative, however, in identifying scientists as the new spiritual authorities. Like the medieval priesthood, Comte's scientists will control education, instilling in the people a system of belief that will lead them to freely obey their temporal authorities.[160] The new scientist-priests will also maintain peace among rival nations and manage the economy with an eye toward harmony and reciprocity. Scientists will take up this work of spiritual leadership because they will be the vanguard of the new positivist age of science and reason:

> the scientific corporation corresponds to the positive state of philosophy … Scientists, having at last succeeded in constructing their own philosophy, will again be incorporated into society to be its spiritual rulers, in a mode absolutely different from the theological mode.[161]

Herein lies the first crucial departure from Carlyle. Comte's positivism attempts to inaugurate an age of scientific rationality. He traces a progression from the ages of theology to metaphysics and finally to positivism. The essential achievement of the positivist age is that it will no longer be concerned with unknowable questions of final causes or invisible realities. Just as modern physics takes phenomena as given and asks nothing more, so too must the new science of society (sociology is a Comtean coinage) become a "social physics" that gives up the futile attempt to solve the

---

[159] Comte, "Spiritual Power," *EPW* 188.

[160] Comte, *General View*, 87.

[161] Comte, "Sciences and Scientists," *EPW* 181.

insoluble:[162] "Positive philosophy, setting aside any investigation into *cause*, which it proclaims to be inaccessible to the human mind, is simply attached to the discovery of *law*, that is, the constant relations of similarity and succession which the facts have with each other."[163]

The Comtean scientist aspires to document empirical regularities. For Carlyle, this would constitute the final victory of the spiritless, mechanical philosophy he abhors. As he puts it in "Characteristics," the modern philosopher has become a "Word-monger; his *vital* intellectual force lies dormant or extinct, his whole force is mechanical, conscious … when once confronted with the infinite complexities of the real world, his little compact theorem of the world will be found wanting."[164] Social regeneration requires sacred awe. Comtean positivist scientists could only reproduce the "steam-engine" mentality of Britain's materialist, empiricist, dismal dogmas.[165] However elusive the philosophical content of Carlyle's "natural supernaturalism," it certainly bears no resemblance with Comte's scientism.

The second disagreement concerns Carlyle's skepticism of institutionalized spiritual authority. Comte is contemptuous of laissez-faire, rejecting the concept of spontaneous order decades before Carl Menger would coin the phrase:

> The fundamental vice of political economy, considered as a social theory, consists in this: having discovered, from some particular points of view which are very far from

---

[162] Comte, "Sciences and Scientists," *EPW*, 151.

[163] Comte, "Sciences and Scientists," *EPW*, 153.

[164] Carlyle, "Characteristics" *EPS* 27.

[165] Carlyle rebukes modern philosophy for reducing "this God's world to a dead brute Steam-engine, the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains." *Hero Worship* 65. The "steam engine" metonym is one of Carlyle's preferred attacks on modern philosophy. One of his more striking uses comes in his contemptuous description of John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*: "It is wholly the life of a logic-chopping engine, little more of human in it than if it had been done by a thing of mechanized iron. Autobiography of a steam-engine, perhaps, you may sometimes read it. As a mournful psychical curiosity, but in no other point of view, can it interest anybody." Carlyle, Letter to John Carlyle, November 5, 1873, *CL* 49.15.

> being the most important, the spontaneous and permanent tendency of human societies towards a certain necessary order, it believes itself entitled to infer that it is useless to regularize that order by positive institutions; whereas this great political truth, conceived as a whole, only proves the possibility of organization, at the same time as it leads us to a worthy appreciation of its vital importance.[166]

Scientists will impose order on the economy by educating capitalists and laborers as to their moral responsibilities and by resolving disputes that arise. Carlyle is not nearly as definite as Comte in distinguishing between temporal and spiritual authorities. The two powers exist and are vital for the flourishing of society, he acknowledges, but he is not certain that they must be separated: "Aristocracy and Priesthood, a Governing Class and a Teaching Class: these two, sometimes separate, and endeavouring to harmonise themselves, sometimes conjoined as one, and the King a Pontiff-King."[167] Captains of Industry must emerge as temporal authorities—industrial labor will replace aristocratic martial virtues. It is less clear whether any distinct spiritual leadership class will emerge.[168]

Part of Carlyle's appeal despite his noxious politics is his apparent openness to a new role of artists and literary men as the cultural and spiritual heroes of a modern age.[169] *Hero Worship* takes up the age of the "hero as man of letters," offering Johnson, Rousseau, and Robert Burns as examples.[170] In the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, he describes great writers as the "*true* Archbishops of the

---

[166] Comte, "Spiritual Power," *EPW* 221

[167] Carlyle, *PP* 239.

[168] The liberal statesman and writer, John Morley, puts the contrast in these terms: "Like Comte, in his ideas of temporal reconstruction, Mr. Carlyle goes back to something like the forms of feudalism for the model of the industrial organisation of the future; but in the spiritual order he is as far removed as possible from any semblance of that revival of old ecclesiastical forms without the old theological ideas, which is the corner-stone of Comte's edifice" John Morley, *Critical Miscellanies* (Macmillan, 1888), 194.

[169] Raymond Williams, for example, raises this possibility. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, 90ff.

[170] Carlyle, *Hero Worship* 133-168.

World," and he indicates a hope that such men might emerge as modern "Souls'-Overseers."[171] Interpreting Carlyle too far in this direction threatens, however, to transform him into Matthew Arnold. In his clearest descriptions of future heroism, the two swords are united in one man, with little place for an autonomous sphere of artistic or literary leadership.[172] Carlyle is most blunt on this matter in "Shooting Niagara," among the most cruel and bitter of his writings. Written in response to the passing of the Second Reform Act, the essay describes England's experiment with universal equality and democracy as a suicidal voyage over Niagara Falls. Some natural aristocrats may try to restore the nation through literature, but soon enough that effort will "fluff itself off into Nothing … like a poor bottle of soda-water with the cork sprung."[173] Shakespeare himself could not save the nation.

Unlike Comte, then, Carlyle does not cleanly separate the spiritual and temporal powers. There are moreover specific features of Comte's science-priesthood that are incompatible with Carlyle's philosophy. Comte recognizes that to command spiritual authority, the scientists will need to stand atop a new religion. Like Coleridge, Comte is convinced that liturgical theatricalities or new saint calendars will produce the kind of sacred reverence secured by the Catholic church in the Middle Ages. Carlyle is dismissive of these attempts "to invent God," and he quips that he has already seen "some twelve or thirteen New Religions" attempting to functionally replace Christianity."[174] While it is true that man's spiritual nature cannot be satisfied by mere mechanism, sham religions will not do either.

---

[171] Carlyle, *LDP* 168.

[172] Robert Burns was a hero worthy of honor, but it is no accident that such a man could never be revered by the British nation of valets. Carlyle, *LDP*, 118.

[173] Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara: And After?" *EPS* 283.

[174] Carlyle, *PP*, 224.

Carlyle's hero worship remains essentially personal, inhering in the reverence of the great man. By implication, he is hostile to any attempt to institutionalize charisma. It would be absurd, on his view, to suggest that the disenchanted spiritual direction of a bureau of scientists could inspire the reverence true heroes could command. Abbot Samson's power flowed from the nobility of his person, not the rational organization of the class he represented. Personal rulership cannot be replaced by a bureaucratic government of "redtape and routine."[175]

Conclusion

Thomas Carlyle's depiction of medieval life in *Past and Present* is in many respects the nineteenth century's most influential display of feudal nostalgia. What this chapter has attempted to show, however, is how distinctive Carlyle's feudal imagination was. The appeal to a pre-capitalist, pre-democratic idyll was a ubiquitous mode of social critique in the decades following the French Revolution. The foil almost always articulated a moral critique of modern life and proposed a restoration of mutual concern or social solidarity, often by reviving remnant forms of the aristocratic order. Carlyle's feudalism, on the contrary, offers a vision of religious intensity and political authority that can in no ways be recovered by returning to the modes or practices of the *Ancien Regime*. The church and aristocracy have become frauds, and providence demands their swift annihilation.

What is instructive about feudalism—and the monastery in particular—is the spirit of *ora et labora*. A divinized duty to work, Carlyle argues, must be connected to sacralized forms of political obedience in the new, industrial world. That is the core political lesson to be drawn from the medieval example. In modern conditions, new captains of industry must arise who can command totalized obedience from their soldier-like laborers. Carlyle, in this regard, might be classified as what

[175] Carlyle, *LDP* 130.

Jeffrey Herf termed a "reactionary modernist."[176] Carlyle does not seek to abolish modern industry or to return to the cottage economy as would many of his most influential followers. Mechanism cannot be destroyed but must be wielded by a new industrial aristocracy: "Mechanism is not always to be our hard taskmaster, but one day to be our pliant, all-ministering servant."[177]

[176] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[177] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 21.

Chapter Three: What Marx saw in Feudalism: "The Democracy of Unfreedom"[1]

As we have seen, one of Carlyle's more surprising readers is Friedrich Engels, who in 1843 writes a favorable review of *Past and Present* in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* under the editorial direction of Karl Marx and Arnold Ruge. Engels praises Carlyle as the only recent writer who "strikes a human cord, presents human relations and shows traces of a human point of view."[2] While he goes on to offer a Feuerbachian critique of Carlyle's insistence on the need to restore religious faith, Engels is impressed by the vision of human interdependence captured by the reactionary's rebuke of modern economic relations. It was from Carlyle that Marx and Engels found the language of the "cash nexus" that would be made famous through their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. Like Carlyle, the two see something instructive about medieval feudalism as a contrast for the anarchic nature of modern bourgeois society.

In their hands, this diagnosis of anarchy comes to be associated specifically with a modern capitalist mode of production. As a famous passage of the *Manifesto* puts it, bourgeois society is "like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells."[3] It is a mistake to think of modern capitalism as a plutocracy under the rule of the rich. The capitalist too is constrained by impersonal market forces beyond his control.[4] Long before he developed his account of capitalist production, the young Marx was already attentive to the

---

[1] An abbreviated version of this chapter has been published in article form. Dimitrios Halikias, "The Young Marx on Feudalism as the Democracy of Unfreedom," *The Historical Journal* 67, no. 2 (March 2024): 281–304.

[2] Engels, "Review of Carlyle," (1844) *MECW* 3.444.

[3] Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) *MECW* 6.489. Henceforth *CM*.

[4] For this reason some recent scholars have offered republican interpretations of Marx, finding in his treatment of capitalism a radicalized vision of the non-dependence theory pioneered by Pettit and Skinner. Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*; Bruno Leipold, "Marx's Social Republic: Radical Republicanism and the Political Institutions of Socialism," in *Radical Republicanism*, ed. Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

problem of modern anarchy. The aim of this chapter is to highlight how Marx theorizes that anarchy by returning to the model of medieval feudalism, a political and economic regime that was subject to conscious human control.

Marx famously argues in "On the Jewish Question" that liberal democracy offers only a partial advance for human freedom. By entrenching a gap between the public and private spheres, the liberal state introduces a kind of social schizophrenia, a confusion about the connection between one's individual freedom and the collective freedom of the whole. Ostensibly free citizens are in truth atomized combatants in a condition of Hobbesian war. Liberal, bourgeois society offers political but not human emancipation.[5] Only communism, Marx claims, will provide the full reconciliation of private and public, of individual and collective freedom. Marx does not fully explain what he means by human emancipation, but an important clue can be found in his recurring contrast between the cash-nexus character of bourgeois society and the intimate political forms of medieval feudalism. In this context Marx cryptically terms the Middle Ages the "democracy of unfreedom," and finds in feudalism a social order in which the community is thoroughly politically constituted.[6] Corporate identity and transparent authority produce an integrated common life, constituting a partial model for what Marx terms "true democracy."[7] If bourgeois liberalism brings political but not human emancipation, feudalism fills in a missing piece by embodying a system of human unfreedom.

---

[5] Marx, "On the Jewish Question," (1843) *MECW* 3.160. Henceforth "OtJQ"

[6] Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," (1843) *MECW* 3.32. Henceforth "Critique of Hegel."

[7] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.30.

Feudalism is the subject of an extensive body of Marx scholarship, largely focused on the question of the transition to capitalism.[8] Less attention has been paid to the young Marx's assessment of the integrated and political character of feudal social life and its relevance for Marx's theorization of democracy.[9] Feudal subjects were unfree and oppressed, yet the unity of political authority and economic obligation offered a holism absent in the fragmented life of modern citizens.[10] Economic relationships were bound up with personal, political relationships, not the autonomous workings of market forces. Medieval society in its political, economic, and religious dimensions was unified and controlled—not by the people, but by genuine, human authorities. Consequently, the connected categories of democracy and humanity are prefigured in medieval feudalism but lost in liberal capitalism.[11]

---

[8] The transition debate is inspired by *Capital*'s treatment of primitive accumulation and Marx's preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," (1859) *MECW* 29.263. See for example Rodney Hilton, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1976); T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also Claudio J. Katz, "Karl Marx on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism," *Theory and Society* 22, no. 3 (1993): 363–89. Also relevant is Marx's engagement with Russian communal peasant life as a model for communism. For an overview of Marx's mature thinking on the subject—spurred by his exchange with Vera Zasulich—see the essays and texts compiled in Teodor Shanin, ed., *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

[9] For work that emphasizes Marx's affinity with the medievalism of conservatives and romantics, see Andrew Collier, "Marx and Conservatism," in Andrew Chitty and Martin McIvor, eds., *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy* (London, 2009), 94–104; Michael Levin, "Marxism and Romanticism: Marx's Debt to German Conservatism," *Political Studies* 22/4 (1974), 400–413; Michael Löwy, "The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization," *Theory and Society* 16/6 (1987), 891–904.

[10] For a study on this theme that draws on Marx and Polanyi, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, "The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism," *New Left Review* I, no. 127 (1981): 66–95.

[11] Jerry Cohen describes a dialectical progression of labor from "undifferentiated unity" to "differentiated disunity," and finally arriving at "differentiated unity." Medieval work is concrete and therefore unified, even if undifferentiated because of its non-abstract, non-universal character. Cohen's account of feudal life as "undifferentiated" is forced if not positively inaccurate. Medieval life was dominated by an immense variety of overlapping, complex social institutions, yet retained a sense of integration and organic unity. Feudalism is thus better described as lacking freedom and independence, not as lacking differentiation. G. A. Cohen, "Marx's Dialectic of Labor," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1974): 235–61.

Tracing Marx's account of the medieval spirit clarifies the relationship between his ethical-humanist treatment of human nature and his political-democratic critique of the liberal state. Reconciling these two features of Marx's project has long been a source of controversy, leading Gareth Stedman Jones to remark that Marx's corpus is riven by an incoherent attempt to balance the two.[12] Scholars who prioritize Marx's ethical commitments classify Marx as a theorist of human flourishing and self-actualization in the spirit of his Young Hegelian contemporaries. David Leopold and Douglas Moggach, for example, interpret Marx as a "moral perfectionist" with a quasi-Aristotelian view of eudaimonistic communal life.[13] Warren Breckman similarly emphasizes Marx's debt to radical Hegelians' critique of personalism and suggests that his communism is consistent with Ruge and Feuerbach's understanding of spiritualized community.[14] These interpretations incline toward an individualistic, ethical, and non-political interpretation of Marx. For Moggach, Marx's early works reveal a "devaluation of the political in favour of the social,"[15] while Leopold insists that Marx offers qualified support for individual rights even when they sit in tension with the common good.[16] Recent "republican" treatments of Marx offered by William Clare Roberts and others

---

[12] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 271. Alvin Gouldner termed this alleged incoherence the "nuclear contradiction" at the heart of Marx's thinking. *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 32–40.

[13] David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 183-235. Douglas Moggach, "German republicans and socialists in the prelude to 1848," in Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones eds., *The 1848 revolutions and European Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 216-235.

[14] Warren Breckman, *Dethroning the Self: Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 258-297.

[15] Moggach, "German Republicans," p. 229.

[16] David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 261.

proceed in a similar vein, reading Marx as a champion of the negative freedom of individual independence, not the positive freedom of collective self-determination.[17]

In contrast, other scholars emphasize democracy—not individual flourishing—as the foundation of the young Marx's work. Focusing on Marx's critique of the *Philosophy of Right*, Shlomo Avineri and Maximilien Rubel argue that Marx's 1843 democratic critique of liberalism constitutes the foundation of his mature communism.[18] More recently, Alexandros Chrysis has argued that Marx's account of "true democracy" as sovereign self-determination remains thoroughly political and animates his later writings.[19] Richard Hunt's magisterial study remains the most systematic articulation of this democratic interpretation. Attempting to rescue Marx from the accusation of proto-totalitarianism, Hunt argues that Marx's early writings demonstrate a consistent commitment to a majoritarian and even liberal form of social democracy.[20]

By treating his idiosyncratic characterization of feudalism as a democratic foil for bourgeois liberalism, this article emphasizes the conceptual centrality of democracy for the young Marx. At the same time, it draws out the distinctiveness of Marx's democratic theory. Breaking with Hegel,

---

[17] Leopold notes resonances between his perfectionist interpretation and the tradition of neo-Roman republican liberty. 254. Roberts identifies Marx's primary aim as securing freedom from dependence, and he starkly suggests that Marx's apparent embrace of the positive liberty of democratic self-determination is as theoretically central for Marx as are his views of phrenology. William Clare Roberts, "Marx's Social Republic: Political Not Metaphysical," *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 2019, 27, no. 2 (2019): 45.

[18] Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Maximilien Rubel, "Notes on Marx's Conception of Democracy," *New Politics* 1, no. 2 (1962): 78–90.

[19] Alexandros Chrysis, *"True Democracy" as a Prelude to Communism: The Marx of Democracy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[20] Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818-1850* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974). Hunt's interpretation is shaped by his Cold War context, yet his core argument is supported by more recent work emphasizing Marx's commitment to universal suffrage and parliamentarism. Sean Monahan, "The American Workingmen's Parties, Universal Suffrage, and Marx's Democratic Communism," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 2 (June 2021): 379–402; Igor Shoikhedbrod, "Marx and the Democratic Struggle Over The Constitution in 1848–9," *History of Political Thought* 43, no. 2 (May 23, 2022): 357–81.

Guizot, and others, Marx offers a political—not private— interpretation of the medieval spirit. The French Revolution and the modern constitutional state have, in an important respect, depoliticized society in a manner at odds with feudal society. Marx's description of medievalism points to his understanding of democracy as both a political regime and an expression of non-fragmented social unity. Medieval subjects were democratic insofar as they were constituted in webs of conscious human dependence. This vision of democracy is not essentially concerned with moral flourishing or neo-Roman independence. Such interpretations tend toward an almost anarchistic account of Marx, neglecting his emphasis on human, political authority. Nor is Marx easily assimilable with social democracy or individual rights, as Hunt and Leopold suggest. Rather, democracy constitutes an enactment of integrated, collective control over social life. This sovereignty is only possible insofar as citizens understand themselves as collectively constitutive of the social order—a mode of thinking in some ways more akin to medieval corporatism than liberal bourgeois individualism.

This chapter begins by outlining Marx's critique of feudal nostalgia and his celebration of capitalism's overthrow of feudal society. The second section turns to Marx's account of bourgeois dehumanization and the glimpses of a more human, intimate life found in medieval society. The article then takes up Marx's description of medievalism as the "democracy of unfreedom," explicating the understanding of politics and democracy underwriting that description. The fourth section further develops this theme, treating Marx's critique of Hegel's account of constitutional representation and the legacy of the French Revolution. The fifth section treats Marx's "chiastic" method in juxtaposing medieval feudalism and liberal capitalism.

1. Marx Against Feudal Nostalgia

An account of Marx's treatment of feudalism must begin with his vociferous rejection of feudal nostalgia in its socialist and reactionary varieties. The *Communist Manifesto* celebrates

capitalism's revolutionary power and its destruction of the medieval guild economy. Reactionaries pine for a return of patriarchal, hierarchical society, a "Feudal Socialism: half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future." While insightful on the pathologies of capitalism, Tory socialism is "ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history."[21] Even non-reactionary reformers like Simonde de Sismondi look to patriarchal guilds as a model for restoring "the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages."[22] Something similar is true of utopian socialists like Robert Owen and Saint-Simon, whose cooperative communal proposals reconfigure feudal economic intimacy.[23]

Marx rejects this nostalgia and welcomes the emergence of the capitalist, bourgeois economy. Feudalism was brutally exploitative and must be replaced by bourgeois political and economic domination.[24] Consider, for example, Marx's comments on India, a paradigmatic case of pre-capitalist oppression. Marx sees something "sickening" in British imperialism and draws attention to the tragedy of a people losing their ancient civilization. Still, Marx continues, it cannot be forgotten that these "idyllic village communities" were sites of "unspeakable cruelties":

> We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature.[25]

---

[21] *CM*, *MECW* 6.507.

[22] *CM*, *MECW* 6.492.

[23] *CM*, *MECW*, 6.514-7. On Saint-Simon's debt to reactionary thinkers, see Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography, Volume I* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 73-5.

[24] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (henceforth *1844 Manuscripts*) *MECW* 3.266. Cf. Engels, "The State of Germany," (1845) *MECW* 6.16.

[25] Marx "British Rule in India," (1853) *MECW* 12.132.

The same is true of medieval Europe. Some sadness is felt in the *Manifesto's* oft-quoted observation that with the rise of capitalism "all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away… All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."[26] A more literal rendering of this famous final line ("*alles ständische und stehende verdampft*") makes clear that Marx refers specifically to the destruction of the medieval society of orders (*Ständegesellschaft)*.[27] Nevertheless Marx is clear that the ethico-religious core of feudal society was a farce, the "heart of a heartless world." Criticism has "torn up the imaginary flowers from the chain not so that man shall wear the unadorned, bleak chain but so that he will shake off the chain and pluck the living flower."[28] Feudalism was the chain, chivalric ideology the illusory flowers.

The abuses of feudalism were well known to the reactionaries and romantics who took it as an inspiration. The nostalgic defended an idealized medievalism shorn of its oppressive characteristics. Marx rejects such efforts not primarily because they romanticize the past, but because they misunderstand the future. He rebukes figures like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, for example, for attempting to "keep the good side while eliminating the bad" of any given economic system.[29] For Marx, such syncretism reduces to "the absurd problem of eliminating history."[30] Progress demands the perfection of bourgeois production and the destruction of feudal institutions.

While decrying abuses in India Marx welcomes capitalist imperialism's role in ridding the colony of pre-modern tyranny. We find here the core of Marx's generally equivocal attitude toward

---

[26] Marx and Engels, *CM*, *MECW* 6.487.

[27] Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Liveright Pub. Corp., 2013), 206–7.

[28] Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," (1844) *MECW* 3.175-6.

[29] Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), *MECW* 6.178-9.

[30] Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, 6.174-5.

empire and colonialism.[31] It is a tragic fact of history, but a fact nonetheless, that bourgeois brutalization is historically indispensable:

> The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world—on the one hand universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. … When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous, pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.[32]

Only after the destruction of feudalism can the proletariat's struggle against the bourgeoisie begin: "from that moment the struggle is simplified, reduced to two parties, and changes, by that circumstance, into a "war of the knife.'"[33] A parallel argument recurs in Marx and Engels' treatment of free trade.[34] The relative desirability of free trade or protectionism depends on the condition of the nation's bourgeoisie. In Germany, where industrialization lags behind, Marx and Engels favor protectionism to clear away "the medieval remnants of a feudal aristocracy."[35] In England, where

---

[31] Marx and Engels never defend an abstract principle of self-determination. The question of whether to support a given independence struggle depends on whether that struggle will advance society's productive powers. For example, Engels celebrates America's triumph over Mexico in 1847 as a victory of bourgeois capitalism over primitive patriarchalism; "The Movements of 1847," (1848) *MECW* 6.527. In the same year, Marx and Engels defend Polish independence as a challenge to reactionary Russian and Austrian absolutism; "On the Polish Question," (1848) *MECW* 6.551; cf. Marx, "Speech at the Polish Meeting in London," (1866) *MECW* 20.196-201. If imperialism overcomes feudalism, it is to be supported; but if self-determination overcomes feudalism, then it is to be supported. See also Engels' rejection of an abstract "principle of nationalities;" "What Have the Working Classes to do with Poland," (1866) *MECW* 20.152-61. Cf. Avineri, *Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 168–72.

[32] Marx, "Future Results of British Rule in India," (1853) *MECW* 12.222.

[33] Engels, "The Prussian Constitution," (1847) *MECW* 6.71. Cf. Engels, "The Constitutional Question in Germany," (1847) *MECW* 6.86.

[34] Marx, "Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's Book," (1845) *MECW* 4.280.

[35] Engels, "Protective Tariffs or Free Trade," (1847) *MECW* 6.94. Marx and Engels favor alliance with German liberal bourgeoisie against the forces of feudalism *CM* 6.519. Cf. Engels, "Speeches in Elberfeld," (1845) *MECW* 4.256-64.

industrial development is advanced, free trade serves a progressive role by heightening the conflict between workers and capital: "the Free Trade system hastens the Social Revolution. In this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, I am in favor of Free Trade."[36]

Feudal nostalgia attempts to frustrate the course of history. Conservatives like the Swiss Catholic Sonderbund resist bourgeois centralization and must be defeated.[37] No alliance is to be had with solidaristic Christian conservatives, who offer moral critiques of capitalist exploitation. The rule of the bourgeoisie must be perfected before more radical revolution is possible.[38] For the same reason, Marx and Engels reject utopian socialism. It is neither possible nor desirable to retreat from bourgeois industrialization, inspired by feudal idylls of cooperation and reciprocity.

As Marx summarizes, "the abolition of bourgeois property relations is not brought about by preserving those of *feudalism*," but rather "the *bourgeois revolution* [is] a precondition for the *workers' revolution*."[39] This is due in part to the civil liberties established by the liberal state. Jury trial, legal equality, and freedom of speech are victories not just for the middle class, but for the proletariat.[40] More important still, bourgeois economic brutalization is essential in maturing proletariat consciousness. Through exploitation the proletariat comes to understand its revolutionary role in history. This consciousness is necessary to overcome the parochial boundaries of feudal life and to revolutionize cooperative production. Where localists and utopians hope to return to simpler modes

---

[36] Marx, "Speech on Free Trade," (1848) *MECW* 6.465. Engels too welcomes the fight of the capitalists to "clear the vestiges of the Middle Ages" and "annihilate patriarchalism." "The Movements of 1847," (1848) *MECW* 6.529.

[37] Engels, "The Civil War in Switzerland," (1847) *MECW* 6.367-74; and "The Movements of 1847," (1848) *MECW* 6.523-25.

[38] Marx, "The Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*," (1847) *MECW* 6.220-34.

[39] Marx, "Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality" (1847) *MECW* 6.332-3.

[40] Marx, "Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*" (1847) *MECW* 6.228. Cf. "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.155.

of life—what Paul Thomas termed "working-class separatism'—Marx and Engels embrace totalizing economic complexity.[41] As Engels puts it in a draft of the *Manifesto*, even if a slave or serf is better fed than an industrial proletarian, "the latter stands at a higher stage of development" because the proletarian's newfound freedoms make him a full member of civil society.[42]

The development of the proletariat requires the subjective recognition and objective reality of mass cooperation. Workers must see that the economic world is their own creation, and they must be formally and materially capable of seizing control of the world they have made. They must recognize that all economic activity is social, not individual. Intimate, feudal, parochial production cannot match the awesome, collective social power of spontaneous capitalist forces. As the *Manifesto* puts it, modern industry transforms "the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of labourers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers."[43] The Middle Ages never achieved such solidarity. By enforcing a perfected, atomistic specialization, capitalism mobilizes mass cooperation, constructing what Marx later calls a "collective worker" out of an army of fragmented specialists.[44]

2. Feudal Humanity Against Bourgeois Egoism

Despite these rebukes of feudal nostalgia, there remains what Jean Cohen called a "curiously anti-modern thrust" at the heart of Marx's diagnosis.[45] Marx simultaneously affirms (1) That

---

[41] Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 177.

[42] Engels, "Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith," *MECW* 6.100.

[43] Marx and Engels, *CM, MECW* 6.491.

[44] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 464. Henceforth *Capital*.

[45] Jean L. Cohen, *Class and Civil Society: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 35.

medieval feudalism was a site of vicious exploitation; (2) That history requires the ascent of bourgeois society over feudalism; yet (3) That feudalism was characterized by humanizing relationships modern capitalism has destroyed. Consider, for example, this passage from the *Manifesto*. The bourgeoisie:

> has destroyed all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his natural superiors, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash-payment". It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation… for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.[46]

Feudal ties were hypocritical and exploitative. Nevertheless, they were fundamentally different from the cash-nexus bonds of the bourgeois age. In that respect, Marx's treatment of feudalism clarifies what a non-contractual social order consists in. It is tempting, consequently, to interpret the young Marx as a humanist communitarian.[47] Douglas Moggach and David Leopold advance such interpretations, reading Marx as a moral critic of egoist *Gesellschaft* and defender of benevolent *Gemeinschaft*.[48] Marx attacks bourgeois society for its disregard of social solidarity and its entrenchment of instrumentalized competition, even offering marriage as a model of free human association. At the same time, Marx goes beyond merely affective social analysis, turning to the legal and political institutions that underwrite solidarity. His treatment of feudalism is instructive in its insistence that human community requires transparent human authority.

---

[46] Modified translation, *CM*, *MECW* 6.487; *MEW* 4.465.

[47] As Marx remarks in the *1844 Manuscripts*, true communism "equals humanism', for it provides "the complete return of man to himself as a *social* i.e., human being'. *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.296. Marx credits Feuerbach with this discovery, *MECW* 3.232. In the opening line of *The Holy Family*, Marx announces himself as the champion of "*real humanism*" *MECW* 4.7.

[48] Moggach, "German Republicans," 234; Leopold, *Young Marx*, 223-45.

2.1 Feudalism and Intimacy

Marx is at his most Feuerbachian and humanistic in his characterization of society as a form of non-instrumental love: "Assume *man* to be *man* and his relationship to the world to be human: then you can exchange love only for love, trust only for trust."[49] This vision of free, non-contractual association is particularly clear in Marx's treatment of marriage, the paradigmatic non-egoistic bond of pre-modern social life.[50] In an 1842 article, Marx describes marriage as a spiritual, pre-legal institution and criticizes liberal arguments for an arbitrary right to divorce.[51] In the same year, Marx rebukes the Historical School of Law for failing to recognize the rationality of monogamous marriage. Favorably citing Benjamin Constant, he praises the "sanctification of the sexual instinct by *exclusiveness*."[52] In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx goes so far as to tie marriage to species-being:

> From the character of this relationship follows how much *man* as a *species*-being, as man, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself; the relation of man to woman is the *most natural* relation of human being to human being. It therefore reveals the extent to which man's *natural* behaviour has become *human* … This relationship also reveals the extent to which man's *need* has become a *human* need; the extent to which, therefore, the *other* human as human has become for him a need; the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being.[53]

---

[49] Modified translation, *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.326; *MEGA* I/2.438. In a similar passage, Marx points to workers who de-instrumentalize community: "what appears as a means becomes an end …Association, society and conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life'. *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.313. Marx's economic Feuerbachianism resonates with Moses Hess' "On the Essence of Money." See Julius Kovesi, "Moses Hess, Marx and Money," in *Values and Evaluations: Essays on Ethics and Ideology*, ed. Alan Tapper (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 127–207.

[50] For discussions of Marx's views of marriage, see Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Richard Weikart, "Marx, Engels, and the Abolition of the Family," *History of European Ideas* 18, no. 5 (1994): 657–72.

[51] Marx, "The Divorce Bill," (1842) *MECW* 1.307-10. Marx draws on Hegel's account of marriage as not a subjective contract, but an objective expression of "ethical love." Hegel, *Hegel*, 201. Henceforth *PR*.

[52] Marx, "Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law," (1842) *MECW* 1.207.

[53] Modified translation, *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.296; *MEGA* I/2.389.

Echoing Adam Müller's reactionary, Catholic analysis, Marx argues that marriage bridges individual and social life. The bond does not serve the merely private interest of the partners, nor does the bond dissolve each partner's identity. Spouses retain distinct but united existences. Private desires are elevated from animalistic urges to human needs insofar as those desires are socially mediated and other-regarding. In conceptualizing community this way, Marx echoes Feuerbach's account of species-being: "The *essence* of man is contained only in the community, in the *unity of man with man*—a unity, however, that rests on the *reality* of the *distinction* between "I" and "You"."[54] For Marx, marriage is species-being in embryo.

Where marriage typifies human association, prostitution typifies bourgeois egoism. Marx and Engels make clear that the widespread emergence of prostitution is a literal consequence of capitalist, industrial poverty.[55] As a more abstract matter, however, a spirit of "general prostitution" metaphorically represents the dehumanized relationships capitalism fosters.[56] In "On the Jewish Question," Marx writes that prostitution subverts "the species-relation itself, the relation between man and woman" by turning sex into a commodity.[57] In the *Manifesto* and its earlier drafts, Marx and Engels accuse capitalists of destroying marriage by spreading universal commodification and therefore prostitution.[58] Bourgeois marriage is contractual—like prostitution and wage labour—and

---

[54] Ludwig Feuerbach, "Principles of the Philosophy of the Future," in *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, trans. Zawar Hanfi (London: Verso, 2012), 175–246.. In an 1844 letter to Feuerbach, Marx writes that this text constitutes the philosophical foundation of socialism. *MECW* 3.354.

[55] *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.244. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, (1845) *MECW* 4.441-2.

[56] *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.294-5.

[57] "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.172.

[58] *CM, MECW* 6.501-2. Cf. Engels, "Principles of Communism," (1847). Engels in 1844 had already made this point, claiming that the "liberal economic system had done its best to universalize enmity, to transform mankind into a horde of ravenous beasts (for what else are competitors?)," reaching its fullest, destructive form with "the dissolution of the family." Engels, "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy," (1844) *MECW* 3.423-4.

bastardizes human unity. While marriage has been a hypocritical mask for oppression, like feudalism it offers a glimpse of life beyond the cash nexus.[59]

This theme is prominent in Engels' writings from the same period. Quoting Carlyle in an 1844 article, Engels observes that "the abolition of feudal servitude has made "cash-payment the sole relation of human beings." Property, a "natural, spiritless principle opposed to the human, spiritual principle, is thus enthroned."[60] Like Marx, Engels treats prostitution as the universalization of bourgeois domination, a consequence of replacing the rule of lord with the rule of money:

> Money—the alienated, empty abstraction of property—is made master of the world. Man has ceased to be the slave of men and has become the slave of *things*; the perversion of the human condition is complete; the servitude of the modern commercial world, this highly developed, total, universal venality, is more inhuman and more all-embracing than the serfdom of the feudal era; prostitution is more immoral and more bestial than the *jus primae noctis*.[61]

The invocation of *jus primae noctis* makes clear that Engels does not apologize for feudalism and its illusory *noblesse oblige*. The point, rather, is to diagnose the new depersonalized domination that emerges with bourgeois society.

2.2 Feudal Legal Indeterminacy

Marx's analysis of free human association is connected to his account of the legal and political forms underwriting modern social life. His early humanism is political, not merely social or moral. This is clear in his 1842 articles covering debates between liberals and reactionaries in the

---

[59] The *German Ideology* speaks of the "slavery latent in the family', *German Ideology,* (1845) *MECW* 5.33. Henceforth *GI*. Decades later, Engels celebrates monogamy as a great advance that will be fully realized under communism. Engels, *Origin of the Family*, (1884) *MECW* 26.173-83.

[60] Modified translation, Engels, "Condition of England', (1844) *MECW* 3.476; *MEGA* I/3.545.

[61] Engels, "Condition of England', (1844) *MECW* 3.476; *Condition of the Working Class MECW* 4.441-2.

Rhineland Assembly.[62] These writings demonstrate Marx's disdain for both reactionary conservatives and reformist liberals. While sharing some liberal aims—the defense of free speech, for example—he is at pains to emphasize the inadequacy and perversity of their arguments: "God save me from my friends!" he exclaims at one point.[63] These debates waver "between the deliberate obduracy of privilege and the natural impotence of a half-hearted liberalism."[64]

Though sympathetic with the liberal program, as in his critique of the divorce law, Marx is attentive to the dangers of repudiating medieval legal and economic institutions. In his articles on forest lands, for example, Marx criticizes both the reactionary arguments of Prussian conservatives and the liberal arguments for a formal codification of individual property rights. Inspired by the Napoleonic Code—recently in place in the Rhineland—liberal reformers rejected the convoluted legal structure of the *Ancien Regime*. Against conservative attempts to restore traditional prerogatives, liberals sought to establish a rational legal code to clearly delineate property rights. While critical of the abusive nature of feudal institutions, Marx notes that the codification of individual rights destroys salutary features of the old regime.[65] Feudal usufruct rights knit men together within a web of shared, reciprocal duties. Liberal formalism, on the other hand, entrenches a privatized egoism at

---

[62] Hunt argues that Marx in this period is not a communist, but a radical republican. *Political Ideas*, 30-40. Breckman shows that the Young Hegelians took seriously questions of constitutionalism and political economy. *Dethroning the Self*, 258-97. Charles Barbour argues against a story of rupture between 1842 and 1843, arguing that Marx's 1842 articles are contemporaneous with his "Critique of Hegel," which is traditionally dated to 1843. "The Kreuznach Myth: Marx, Feuerbach and the "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law,'" *History of Political Thought* 44 (2023), 390-414.

[63] Marx, "Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly: Debates on the Freedom of the Press," (1842) *MECW* 1.179. Marx is particularly contemptuous of liberal arguments which reformulate free speech into a species of economic right: "To make freedom of the press a variety of freedom of trade is a defense that kills it before defending it." Ibid., 1.174.

[64] Marx, "Proceedings," *MECW* 1.180.

[65] On this subject, Marx is influenced by Savigny's critique of legal reform. Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, 62–68; Donald R. Kelley, "The Metaphysics of Law: An Essay on the Very Young Marx," *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (1978): 350–67.

odds with medieval interdependence. Feudal customs that protected the rights of the poor to glean wood cannot be clearly delineated and are therefore rejected by the liberal reformers. The transition from informal status to formal contract—Henry Maine's hallmark of the modern world—undermines human reciprocity.[66] When liberals codify rights, they destroy what was rational about feudalism and preserve what was oppressive about it. This was the case, for example, with the dissolution of the monasteries—a necessary step, Marx claims, but one which failed to replace the service to the poor offered by monastic institutions.[67]

Marx links feudal, non-contractual economic entitlements with the hybrid nature of medieval politics. Likewise, he associates egoistic property rights with the modern constitutional state. Where feudal property arrangements are marked by flexibility, the liberal "legislative mind" demands clarity and reifies egoistic separation. The feudal prerogatives of the poor were "a mixture of private and public right, such as we find in all the institutions of the Middle Ages." They rested not on clear statutory distinctions, but on the peasantry's "sure instinct of the *indeterminate* aspect of property."[68] Indeterminacy recognized that relationships among human subjects are prior to legal relationships among things. Medieval customary property was neither a Lockean right to individual dominion nor a Hobbesian construction of the sovereign. Instead, it offered social recognition that human needs cannot be clearly defined *ex ante* but must be actualized by hybrid, overlapping entitlements. The patrimonial rights regime did not cleanly divide public and private right but presumed the imbrication of individual and social life.

---

[66] Engels quips that Maine "believed that he made a colossal discovery when he said that our entire progress in comparison with previous epochs consists in our having evolved from status to contract, from an inherited state of affairs to one voluntarily contracted—a statement which, in so far as it is correct, was contained long ago in the *Communist Manifesto*." Engels, *Origin of the Family*, *MECW* 26.186.

[67] Marx, "Wood Theft," *MECW* 1.232.

[68] Marx, "Wood Theft," *MECW* 1.233.

This blending of private and public is rejected in favor of rigid private rights supervised by an ostensibly representative public authority. The liberal reformers unwittingly strengthen the position of the owners, codifying their rights to property while refusing to recognize the entitlements of the poor.[69] The bourgeois law does not see the poor as human beings, members of the community with legitimate interests.[70] Despite its abusive inegalitarianism, the feudal arrangement recognized the priority of human relations over those of private property. Deploying a familiar allusion, Marx writes that the new liberal law treats property violators the way Shylock treats his debtors.[71] Theft ceases to be a crime against the community and becomes a matter of private restitution.[72] "This logic," Marx summarizes, "*turns the authority of the state into a servant of the forest owner*."[73] The feudal warden personified "the protecting genius of the forest," balancing the health of the forest with the needs of the people. The bourgeois warden becomes an agent of the rich.[74] Rational, clear private property "abolishes all natural and spiritual distinctions by enthroning in their stead the immoral, irrational, and soulless [*gemüthlose*] abstraction of a particular material object and a particular consciousness which is slavishly subordinated to this object."[75] There is something

---

[69] There are resonances here with James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[70] Marx, "Wood Theft," *MECW* 1.236.

[71] Concerning Marx's use of antisemitic tropes, see Leopold, *Young Marx*, pp. 163-80 and Stedman Jones, *Greatness and Illusion*, pp. 164-7.

[72] Marx, "Wood Theft," *MECW* 1.236, 256.

[73] Marx, "Wood Theft," *MECW*, 1.245.

[74] Marx, "Wood Theft," *MECW*, 1.237.

[75] Marx, "Wood Theft," *MECW*, 1.2626. Andrew Chitty, "The Basis of the State in the Marx of 1842," in *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, ed. Douglas Moggach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 220–41.

valuable, Marx insists, in the communal, feudal legal regime that is displaced by an individualistic approach to law.

2.3 Feudalism and Human Authority

These 1842 articles are primarily juridic in emphasis and are suffused with moralistic language. In the years following, Marx rhetorical and theoretical treatment of feudal relations shifts to the political prerogatives they entailed and the constitutional structure they derived from. This is clear, for example, in the *1844 Manuscripts*' treatment of medieval and bourgeois political authority. The imbrication of private and public right defended in his 1842 articles is connected to the jointly political and economic character of medieval lordship. Marx identifies human intimacy with political authority. Under feudalism, "those working on the estate have not the position of *day-labourers*; but they are in part themselves his property, as are serfs; and in part they are bound to him by ties of respect, allegiance, and duty. His relation to them is therefore directly political, and has likewise an *intimate* [*gemütliche*] side."[76] Marx is interested here in the connection between political rule and human relationships. The non-egoistic character of feudal property arrangements depends on human authority. Lord and serf did not relate to one another as employer-employee, but as co-participants in a sacred chain of authority.

The transition from personal political authority to impersonal economic contract marks the rise of a new form of oppression. To theorize how that oppression might be overcome, feudalism again offers an instructive model. In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels remark that "individuals seem freer under the dominance of the bourgeoisie than before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are to a greater extent governed

[76] Modified translation, *1844 Manuscripts, MECW* 3.266; *MEGA* I/2.360.

by material forces." Modern men see their economic conditions as "accidental" because they believe their economic life is disconnected from political subordination. Labor appears as "something positive" apart from a political-economic regime. Because economic life under feudalism was bound up with political authority, it was, paradoxically, more free.[77]

The *1844 Manuscripts* develop this contrast between feudal personal authority and the capitalist depersonalized tyranny of money by drawing on Engels' earlier analogous comparison between Catholicism and Protestantism: Adam Smith is the "Luther of Political Economy."[78] Catholicism and feudalism feature transparent exploitation by an alien master, the direct, personal command of priest and lord. Protestantism and capitalism reject that personal hierarchy. The invisible church and the priesthood of all believers replace the episcopacy and sacramental clergy. An unmediated relationship with God replaces saint cults and devotions. Likewise, the bourgeois economy entails formal legal and economic equality, abolishing inherited obligations to particular masters. Yet rather than bring emancipation, Protestantism and capitalism produce a new alienation. Where the Protestant is enslaved by a God he creates for himself, the proletariat is alienated by the fruit of its own labour:

> Just as Luther recognized *religion—faith* as the substance of the external *world* and in consequence stood opposed to Catholic paganism—just as he superseded *external* religiosity by making religiosity the *inner* substance of man—just as he negated the priests outside the layman because he transplanted the priest into laymen's hearts, just so with wealth: wealth as something outside man and independent of him, and therefore as something to be maintained and asserted in an external fashion is done away with; that is, this *external, mindless objectivity* of wealth is done away with, with private property being incorporated in man himself and with man himself being recognized as its essence. But as a result man is brought within the orbit of private

[77] *GI*, *MECW* 5.78. This treatment of freedom raises difficulties for republican interpretations of Marx. Freedom is associated here with the linking of political authority and economic conditions—a form of conscious, collective dependence rather than individual independence.

[78] Engels first deploys this analogy in "Critique of Political Economy', (1843) *MECW* 3.422-3.

> property just as with Luther he is brought within the orbit of religion. Under the semblance of recognizing man, the political economy whose principle is labour rather carries to its logical conclusion the denial of man.[79]

With Luther, man's struggle against the external priest is replaced with the struggle against his own "*priestly nature*."[80] The feudal, Catholic tyranny of men is replaced by the capitalist, Protestant tyranny of property.[81] Yet despite this new alienation, both Protestantism and capitalism represent historical progress. The recognition, however incomplete, of man as the essence of religion and property constitutes an important step in the development of human consciousness. Taking labor as the principle of wealth, bourgeois capital represents an advance over the traditional economy of landownership.

Unsurprisingly, reactionary landed aristocrats disdain the bourgeois capitalist, a "sly, hawking, carping, deceitful, greedy, mercenary, rebellious, heartless and spiritless person who is estranged from the community and freely trades it away."[82] New money has no interest in the welfare of dependents, as it is moved only by the ceaseless drive for acquisition. The new bourgeoisie is no less contemptuous of the old aristocracy, which it sees as hypocritical, haughty, and backwards. Marx agrees that the landed aristocrat deceives himself, for his social position too is built on exploitation. Nevertheless, illusory aristocratic ideology matters historically.[83] In accordance

---

[79] *1844 Manuscripts, MECW* 3.290-1; *MECW* 3.272.

[80] "Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," *MECW* 3.182.

[81] Marx returns to this theme in *Capital*, noting how capitalism conceals the real nature of social relationships. In medieval Europe "we find everyone dependent—serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clerics." Transparent hierarchy gives labor "its immediate social form." Hypocritical bourgeois society, on the other hand, masks the true nature of economic production. At least feudal labor relations "are not disguised as social relations between things, between the products of labour." *Capital*, 170. Cf. Marx's discussion of the working day, which mystifies the degree to which laborers work *for* their masters. *Capital*, 340-67.

[82] *1844 Manuscripts, MECW* 3.287.

[83] As Lukács summarizes feudal ideology: "juridical (privilege-creating) forms retain a great and often absolutely crucial importance for the consciousness of estates in the process of disintegration. For the form of the estates conceals the

with feudal ideology, the traditional landlord was duty-bound to care for his peasants where the modern capitalist is absolved of duties to his nominally equal workers. As Marx puts it in "On the Jewish Question," the abolition of feudalism threw "off the bonds which restrained the egoistic spirit of civil society."[84] Engels, whom we have already seen claim that modern wage labor is more totalizing and inhuman than feudal serfdom, suggests some years later that even the slave master has more regard for his slave than the bourgeoisie has for the proletariat. When the slave or serf is unproductive, the master is obliged to feed him. Not so with the industrial proletariat:

> The slave is sold once and for all, the proletarian has to sell himself by the day and by the hour. Being the property of *one* master, the individual slave has, since it is in the interest of this master, a guaranteed subsistence, however wretched it may be; the individual proletarian, the property so to speak, of the whole bourgeois *class*, whose labour is only bought from him when somebody needs it, has no guaranteed subsistence. This subsistence is guaranteed only to the proletarian *class* as a whole … Thus the slave may have a better subsistence than the proletarian.[85]

Marx attributes this transformation to the commodification of labor. Modern production treats man as "a *commodity*, the human commodity'; he becomes a "*mentally* and physically *dehumanized* being."[86] When rendered redundant by the market, the worker "has *no* work, hence *no* wages, and since he has no existence *as a human being* but only *as a worker*, he can go and bury himself, starve to death, etc."[87] Capitalism transforms juridical, human dependents into free, abstract labourers. Egoism and the laws of the market replace patriarchalism and authority. Marx welcomes the triumph of "filthy self-

---

connection between the—real but "unconscious'—economic existence of the estate and the economic totality of society." György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness; Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 57.

[84] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.166.

[85] Engels, "Principles of Communism," (1847) *MECW* 6.343-4. In *Capital*, Marx adds that American chattel slavery became perfectly brutalized when the patriarchal slave master transformed into a capitalist. *Capital*, 345, 377-81.

[86] *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW* 3.284.

[87] *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW*, 3.283.

interest" over intimate feudal dominion. Landed property—which traditionally resisted the logic of capital—must "be dragged completely into the movement of private property and that it become a commodity; that the rule of the proprietor appear as the undisguised rule of private property… that all personal relationship between the proprietor and his property cease."[88] Intimate feudal relationships obstruct the development of society's productive powers and the formation of revolutionary class consciousness. Nevertheless, Marx remains attentive to the centrality of the rule of man under feudalism. While corrupt and oppressive, that rule of man will return in radicalized form under communism.

Marx summarizes his comparison of feudalism by juxtaposing two proverbs. Where the medieval world proclaimed "*nulle terre sans seigneur* [There is no land without its lord]" the bourgeois age replies "*l'argent n'a pas de maître*, [Money knows no master]." The transition from the rule of the lord to the rule of money entails "the complete domination of dead matter over man."[89] The medieval identification of land and lord integrated political and economic authority. Bourgeois society lacks personal masters, leaving only the tyranny of money. Feudalism, with its explicit, human domination, offered personal if illusory community. The real community of communism will establish deliberate, collective mastery over social life through the free association of the whole. The communist revolution will transform passive dependence on the abstract, impersonal powers of production into "the control and conscious mastery of these powers."[90]

---

[88] *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW*, 3.267.

[89] *1844 Manuscripts*, *MECW*, 3.287. Marx repeats this juxtaposition in *Capital*, 247n1.

[90] *GI, MECW* 5.51; *MECW* 5.88.

3. True Democracy, Political Democracy, and Feudal Democracy

The humanity of feudalism consists not only in its non-contractual social bonds, but in a political order constituted by transparent, human political authority. For this reason, Marx claims that feudalism was not only political but a kind of democracy. Throughout the early 1840s, Marx connects the categories of humanity and democracy. In his letters to Ruge, he speaks of the "human world of democracy,"[91] describing emancipation as the transformation of "society into a community of human beings united for their highest aims, into a democratic state."[92] Likewise, in his critique of the *Philosophy of Right*, Marx notes the "fundamental distinction" between "legal" and "human" democracy. Against liberal pharisees, he insists that man must reign over law: "man does not exist for the law but the law for man."[93] What he calls "human emancipation" in "On the Jewish Question" is connected to the "true democracy" theorized in the "Critique of Hegel." Together, these texts develop Marx's critique of liberal constitutionalism and Hegelian political philosophy.[94] True democracy and human emancipation are marked by the conscious assertion of collective control over social life.

3.1 Two Meanings of Politics

Marx identifies Hegel as the "interpreter" of the modern state, so Marx's philosophical critique of Hegel's constitutional theory is of a piece with his democratic critique of the bourgeois state. Hegel theoretically defends what the modern state institutionalizes: class-based elitism mediated by constitutional representation and the priority of the private, commercial sphere over

---

[91] Marx, "Letters to Ruge," *MECW* 3.139.

[92] Marx, "Letters to Ruge," *MECW* 3.137.

[93] "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.30.

[94] Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 8–40.

democratic sovereignty.[95] The French Charter of 1830, for example, granted voting rights to a vanishingly small number of French citizens. The English Reform Act of 1832 was substantially more generous but retained limited suffrage to weaken the working class. Like many of his contemporary radicals, Marx insisted on universal suffrage and a sovereign, majoritarian, unicameral legislature.[96] Those institutional arrangements, alone, however, were insufficient.[97] Marx notes that in the United States, for example, universal white, male suffrage fails to abolish private property. The formal possibility of democratic sovereignty is insufficient so long as the state is legitimized and constrained by individual rights and civil society.[98]

Marx, in other words, rebukes the "liberty of the moderns" defended by Benjamin Constant and associated with Scottish Enlightenment liberalism and Montesquieu's commercial republicanism.[99] This was the vision of negative liberty institutionalized by the conservative liberal constitutions of 1840s France, England, and America. As Constant puts it in his influential lecture: "we can no longer enjoy the liberty of the ancients, which consisted in an active and constant participation in collective power. Our freedom must consist of peaceful enjoyment and private independence."[100] Liberals in the mold of Constant repudiated radical democracy as a dangerous

---

[95] "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.84.

[96] Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 132-75.

[97] Like many in their circle, Marx and Engels see democracy not simply as a form of government, but as a more sweeping commitment to social equality. Wilfried Nippel, *Ancient and Modern Democracy: Two Concepts of Liberty?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 279–93.

[98] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.153.

[99] Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The importance of Constant for the young Marx is evident from the lengthy excerpts from Constant's *On Religion* Marx copied in his 1842 notebooks. *MEGA* IV/1.342-367.

[100] Benjamin Constant, "Liberty of the Ancients Compared to That of the Moderns" in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 316. Rousseau is the most significant critic of commercial, negative liberty and is consequently rebuked by Constant, *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their Relation to European Civilization* in *Political Writings*, 106-9. Marx and Rousseau offer parallel critiques of the commercial constitutionalism defended by Hegel, Constant, and Montesquieu. For contrasting studies of this debate, see Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu,*

feature of antiquity. They defended bourgeois ordered liberty, commercial prosperity, and representative government. Marx recognizes the connection between this program of "merely political" democracy and the even more conservative *Rechtstaat* defended by Hegel. Contrary to Constant's suggestion, Marx does not turn for inspiration to ancient democracy. Breaking with the historical narrative offered by his antagonists, Marx points to medieval feudalism as an instructive guide for democracy.

Marx writes in "On the Jewish Question" that the "political emancipation" of the modern state destroyed the "political character" of the medieval social order:

> The political revolution which overthrew this sovereign power and raised state affairs to become affairs of the general people, which constituted the political state as a matter of *general* concern, that is, as a real state, necessarily smashed all estates, corporations, guilds, and privileges, since they were all manifestations of the separation of the people from the community. The political revolution thereby *abolished* the *political character of civil society*.[101]

Marx offers here an equivocal account of politics. The modern, constitutional state is political insofar as it abolishes juridical distinctions across the people. The transition from feudal subject to republican citizen brings a higher sense of universality and species-life, generalizing the "political spirit" which had been fragmented under the feudal corporatist order. Yet the modern state is simultaneously depoliticizing insofar as it destroys the feudal integration of social and political life. Medieval economic affairs were not a matter for private contract, but were public emanations of one's place in society:

> Political emancipation is at the same time the *dissolution* of the old society ... What was the character of the old society? It can be described in one word—*feudalism*. The character of the old civil society was *directly political*, that is to say, the elements of civil

---

Rousseau, Marx: Politics and History, Verso (London: Verso Books, 1982); Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[101] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.166.

> life, for example, property, or the family, or the mode of labour, were raised to the level of elements of political life in the form of seignory, estates, and corporations. … they determined the relation of the individual to the *state as a whole*, i.e., his *political* relation.[102]

There are thus two dimensions of Marx's understanding of politics. The first—realized under liberal constitutionalism—is horizontal. By abolishing juridical distinctions, the constitutional state establishes a class of citizens tasked with the work of self-rule. The second dimension of politics—destroyed by liberal constitutionalism but found in feudalism—is vertical. Medieval economic life was elevated to the political through a visible connection to the "state as a whole." Under political feudalism, the medieval subject did not distinguish between political and economic duties. Both flowed from the demands of personal authorities. The person of the lord, not the autonomous laws of the market, directed economic life.

These two dimensions track Marx's distinction between "merely political" or "legal" democracy and "human" or "true" democracy.[103] Marx's critique of merely political democracy targets both formal constraints on popular sovereignty as well as the depoliticizing tendencies of a privatized, commercial civil society. Like others in their circle, Marx and Engels framed this divide in the terms of liberalism versus democracy.[104] Hegelian constitutional monarchy requires class-based representation and an independent bureaucracy in the model of *Vormärz* Prussia and the French July monarchy. Even if a majoritarian legislature and universal suffrage were established, Marx insists, the state would remain a merely political, horizontal democracy, for it would be unable to control the

---

[102] Marx, "OtJQ," 3.165.

[103] "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.30-1.

[104] Marx and Engels contrast conservative "middle-class liberalism" with radical "working-class democracy." "Address to Feargus O'Connor," (1846) *MECW* 6.59. Engels speaks of the "total difference between liberalism and democracy'. "The State of Germany," (1846) *MECW* 6.29. Arnold Ruge likewise demanded the "dissolution of liberalism into democratism." "A Self-Critique of Liberalism', in Lawrence S. Stepelevich, ed., *The Young Hegelians, an Anthology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 259.

matter of social life. It is in this context that Marx points to the vertical nature of politics in the medieval "democracy of unfreedom."

3.2 True Democracy against the Two-Fold Life

Marx sets his defense of "true democracy" in contrast to Hegel, who rejects popular sovereignty as an incoherent ideal. For Hegel, a "formless mass" can only be transformed into a "people" through the articulating power of "*the person of the monarch*."[105] Sovereignty cannot be located in the people, for there is no such thing as a people without the monarch. Marx inverts the argument, claiming that the existence of the monarch presupposes popular sovereignty.[106] Rejecting the classical debate concerning the virtues and vices of various forms of government, Marx insists that "democracy is the genus constitution," for the people are vested with the sovereign right to determine their form of government. Monarchy and aristocracy are not, strictly speaking, rivals to democracy, they are candidate institutional forms that the sovereign people may select. Monarchy is an expression of popular sovereignty, though it is a mystifying and hypocritical expression. The implication Marx draws from this constitutional theory is that the people must have sovereign control over the content and form of political life. The people stand above their creation, the constitution: "it is not the constitution which creates the people but the people which creates the constitution."[107]

---

[105] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 319. Breckman shows that Marx develops the anti-personalism of his Young Hegelian contemporaries. *Dethroning the Self*, 286-9.

[106] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.28.

[107] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," 3.29. The argument Marx develops in favor of popular sovereignty recalls early-modern debates over the site of sovereign authority and representation. See, for example, Quentin Skinner's reconstruction of the debate between Henry Parker and Thomas Hobbes. Quentin Skinner, "Hobbes on Representation," *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 155–84.

Marx terms this understanding of popular supremacy "true democracy," and he notes that "in true democracy the *political state is annihilated*." Yet as he immediately clarifies, such state abolitionism "is correct insofar as the political state *qua* political state, as constitution, no longer passes for the whole."[108] Marx does not favor the abolition of government, but rejects instead what Hunt termed the "parasite state" apart from and above the people.[109] True democracy is marked not by the rule of law or the constitution, but the rule of the people unencumbered by institutionalized counter-majoritarian constraints.[110] Eliminating these constraints, however, will not be sufficient to establish true democracy. It is not enough for "all individually" to participate in politics, they must act as "individuals as all."[111] That contrast, which recalls Rousseau's distinction between the "will of all" and the "general will," emphasizes the limits of procedural democracy. So long as individuals approach politics *as private individuals*, they are unable to rule themselves consciously and collectively. Merely political citizens cannot form a "species will," the "self-conscious will of the nation." Merely political democracy must overcome the "two-fold life" of bourgeois liberalism, in which a self-interested sphere of individual rights and commercial liberty stands against an ostensibly universal sphere of political self-rule. Modern society concretizes the theoretical contradiction in Hegelian philosophy, producing a dualism: self-interested, economic agent vs. selfless, public-spirited citizen. The *locus classicus* of this charge remains "On the Jewish Question':

> Where the political state has attained its true development, man—not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality*, in *life*—leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community*, in which he considers himself a *communal being*, and life in *civil society*, in which he acts as a *private individual*, regards other men as

---

[108] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.30.

[109] Hunt, *Political Ideas*, 125.

[110] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.57.

[111] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," 3.116.

> a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.[112]

Liberal, constitutional guarantees of individual rights transform man into "an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself," cut off from his fellows.[113] Instead of facilitating cooperation, such rights entrench Hobbesian conflict, a *bellum omnium contra omnes*.[114] Civil society and a rights-protecting private sphere make "every man see in other men not the *realization* of his own freedom, but the *barrier to it*."[115] The Hegelian political state is enslaved by the private realm it purports to command.[116] The Middle Ages were not characterized by the psychic schizophrenia and material dualism of bourgeois citizen-egoists. Indeed, the very idea of the political state is defined in contradistinction to civil society. Merely political democracy presumes an estrangement between public and private life foreign to feudalism:

> the political constitution as such [the merely political state] is brought into being only where the private spheres have won an independent existence. Where trade and landed property are not free and have not yet become independent, the political constitution too does not yet exist. The Middle Ages were the *democracy of unfreedom*. … In the Middle Ages there were serfs, feudal estates merchant and trade guilds, corporations of scholars, etc.: that is to say, in the Middle Ages property, trade, society, man are *political*; the material content of the state is given by its form; every private sphere has a political character or is a political sphere; that is, politics is characteristic of the private spheres too.[117]

---

[112] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.154.

[113] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.162.

[114] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.155 and "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.42.

[115] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.163.

[116] Marx writes that the constitutional state "is based on the contradiction between *public* and *private* life." The state restricts itself to "*formal* and *negative* activity," but it is unable to positively shape civil society and the market. The modern state is thereby founded on the "*slavery of civil society*." "Critical Marginal Notes on the Article by a Prussian," (1844) *MECW* 3.198.

[117] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.32.

Feudal economic conditions did not confront the subject as something detached from the political authority of the landed nobility.[118] Medieval life was integrated where bourgeois constitutional life is fragmented. Bourgeois citizens cannot exercise control over their societies because they have separated their political and economic identities. Feudalism featured no such bipolarity. Medieval economic and social roles just were political roles. They were not described as such because the vocabulary of politics comes into existence with the autonomy of civil society. Rather than flit between their roles as democratic citizens and bourgeois egoists, feudal subjects occupied a unified, corporate social identity. Where the bourgeois right to private property marks out a sphere of individual freedom and transforms economic relationships into cash-nexus, contractual arrangements, feudal economic obligations flowed from an ordered socio-political hierarchy. There were no purely private economic relationships under feudalism. Debts to the lord were inherited political obligations rather than voluntary economic contracts.

Religion, too, typifies bourgeois fragmentation. Reformulated in terms of private conscience, religion ceases to be a source of community and becomes "the essence of *difference*." Liberal states abolish religious privileges and relegate faith to the private sphere, leading paradoxically to its flourishing. Tocqueville and others report from America that faith thrives when removed from politics. The liberal separation of civil society from the state leads to privatized egoism: "Man, as the adherent of a *particular* religion, finds himself in conflict with his citizenship and with other men as members of the community."[119] Religious pluralism and conscience oppose medievalism's embrace of one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

---

[118] Marx, *GI, MECW* 5.78.

[119] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.154-5.

Even as feudal subjects were separated through distinctions of class, guild, and estate, medieval vertical social relations and duties remained holistic. Economic obligations derived from hierarchical bonds of political authority. While those bonds were unfree, they provided transparent recognition that one's social position was embedded within the web of relations connecting the individual to the community.

4. Medieval Estates vs. Hegelian Representation

Marx develops his contrast between feudal integration and bourgeois separation by comparing the medieval society of orders with modern political representation. Where medieval corporatism was political, constitutional representation as theorized by Constant and Hegel and established in France, Prussia, and the United States is an expression of privatization. In treating medievalism this way, Marx breaks with the general judgment of nineteenth-century thinkers. A familiar historical narrative concerning the emergence of the modern state held that the private, non-political bonds of the *Ancien Regime* were overcome by the French Revolution, which inaugurated a new kind of political state. Francois Guizot, for example, argued that under feudalism, public, political sovereignty strictly speaking did not exist. The lord's authority over his domain was that of a property owner, "what are today called public rights were then private rights; what are now called public authorities were then private authorities."[120] We have seen a similarly privatized interpretation of medieval hierarchy from the pen of Karl Ludwig von Haller, who conceptualizes all feudal relations as bonds of private law and obedience. A similarly privatized interpretation can be found in the writings of Comte and Proudhon. [121]

---

[120] François Guizot and William Hazlitt, *The History of Civilization, from the Fall of the Roman Empire to the French Revolution* (London: G. Bell & sons, 1901), 97.

[121] Haller praised feudalism for its rejection of public law, as opposed to an anthropomorphized, public sovereignty of a Hobbesian-Rousseauian state. Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, 160–96; Béla Kapossy, "Words and Things: Languages of Reform in Wilhelm Traugott Krug and Karl Ludwig von Haller," in *Languages of Reform in the*

Marx rejects this ubiquitous account, arguing that in a crucial respect the French Revolution destroyed the political nature of feudalism and privatized bourgeois society. He systematically critiques the view as it is expressed by Hegel, according to whom feudal corporations were the unpolitical "private property of individuals, so that what [individuals] had to do in relation to the whole was left to their own opinion and discretion."[122] Feudal prerogatives for Hegel become political with the consolidation of monarchical power. Feudal social relations were a matter of "firmly-fixed particular right, excluding a sense of universality."[123] Monarchical sovereignty replaced individual caprice with constitutional law, politicizing the medieval estates by incorporating them into the body politic.[124]

Hegelian estates mediate between private and public life, elevating private interest to the level of public concern:

> the Estates stand between the government at large on the one hand and the people in their division into particular spheres and individuals on the other. Their determination requires that they should embody in equal measure both the *sense* and *disposition* of the *state* and *government* and the *interests* of *particular* circles and *individuals*. … they ensure that individuals do not present themselves as a *crowd* or *aggregate*,

---

Eighteenth Century, ed. Susan Richter, Thomas Maissen, and Manuela Albertone (New York: Routledge, 2020). Despite rebuking Haller's apology for feudalism, Hegel shares his description of the private character of medieval society. *PR* pp. 278-81. Comte emphasized the private authority of the feudal military aristocracy and Catholic priesthood. "Considerations on Spiritual Power" in *EPW*. Central to Proudhon's critique of bourgeois society is the claim that capitalism has preserved and concealed feudal forms of private domination. Bourgeois exploitation is simply the newest instantiation of private hierarchy. See, for example, the discussion of "capitalistic feudalism" in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. John Beverley Robinson (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), 40–74. As Roberts has shown, Marx's critique of Proudhon centers on this moralistic misunderstanding of modern capitalism. Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 114–21.

[122] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 315; 338. On Hegel's understanding of the purely private and personal nature of feudal bonds of authority, see Richard Bourke, *Hegel's World Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 175ff.

[123] Modified translation, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 344.; Hegel, *Werke* (20 vols., Frankfurt, 1970), 12.509.

[124] Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 428.

> unorganized in their opinions and volition, and do not become a massive power in opposition to the organic state.[125]

These estates preserve yet overcome the separations of civil society, reconciling civic plurality and political unity.[126] They constitute a link between man as egoist and man as citizen. As Shlomo Avineri puts it, these mediating institutions "channel the egoistic ends of members of civil society into a universal structure."[127] Hegel sees the problem to be overcome—the separation of private from public—yet his institutional solution, Marx claims, offers an illusion of social integration that in fact reifies estrangement.[128] As early as 1842, Marx noted the difference between medieval corporatism and modern representation. The feudal model recognized the "spirit of a living unity," whereas constitutional representation produced separation. While rebuking the oppressive nature of feudal corporatism, he criticizes liberal theories of representation for forcing "the real organic life of the state" to sink into "unreal, mechanical, subordinated, non-state spheres of life."[129] Hegelian constitutional representation produces the same mistake, offering an illusory account of overcoming the "isolation" of particular interests.

As the "interpreter" of the modern state, Hegel develops sophisticated but ultimately mystifying apologies for the bourgeois, constitutional status quo.[130] This is seen, for example, in Hegel's theological language of mediation. The estates mediate between man and the state the way

---

[125] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 342.

[126] In his account of mediating institutions, Hegel's account shows an affinity with an influential tradition stretching from Montesquieu to Tocqueville to Gierke. That tradition is itself inspired by the way medieval institutions could temper and check the power of the central government. Through representation, the private can become the political.

[127] Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

[128] Cf. Leopold, *The Young Marx*, 79.

[129] Marx, "Commissions of the Estates," *MECW* 1.297.

[130] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.84.

Christ mediates between sinners and God the Father. Marx prefers to speak of "representation," a more honest description of the Hegelian constitution.[131] Constitutional representation promises to "counter the "isolation" of particular interests by presenting this isolation as a *political* act."[132] But no metaphysical magic emerges from the institutionalization of division. Calling divisions "political" does not dissolve the social separations they embody and intensify.

Marx, in other words, inverts Hegel's contrast between medieval and constitutional representation. Where Hegel argues that private estates acquire their public character through the modern state, Marx argues that the modern state depoliticizes feudal estates. The "spirit of the Middle Ages," he summarizes, is that "the estates of civil society and the estates in the political sense were identical, because civil society was political society." Medieval estates did not become political by means of representation, rather they "participated in legislation because they were *political* estates."[133] Hegel attempts to synthesize medieval representation with modern constitutionalism while abandoning the real spirit of feudal life.[134] Hegelian estates promise to structure subjects" corporate identities into a universal, differentiated whole. This model of representation turns estates into egoistic interest groups, precluding universal politics and thrusting "the human being back into the narrowness of his individual sphere."[135]

---

[131] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 75. A Hegelian constitution represents estates and other mediating institutions, not the people. To be acceptable, "representation must not be conceived as the representation of something that is not the people itself. It must be conceived only as the people's *self-representation*." Marx, "On the Commission of the Estates in Prussia," (1842) *MECW* 1.306.

[132] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.69.

[133] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.72-3.

[134] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.95.

[135] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.81.

For this reason, Marx and Hegel diverge on the legacy of the French Revolution. Hegel claims that the revolutionaries" fixation with abstract moral principles—formal natural rights, for example—produced terror, anarchy, and despotism.[136] At the same time, Hegel saw the Revolution as an indispensable event in the history of modern state formation. With the final destruction of feudal, private prerogatives, European states could fully politicize the medieval estate structure through a rational mode of public sovereignty.[137] Marx, on the contrary, argues that the French Revolution privatized identity, destroying the public character of feudal estates. The French Revolution "completed the transformation of the *political* into *social* estates, or changed the *differences of estate* of civil society into mere *social* differences, into differences of civil life which are without significance in political life."[138] Merely social estates produce merely economic inequality. They are characterized not by political prerogatives, but by wealth and education. Inequality becomes a matter of individualistic, class differentiation, not communal, political authority:

> The present-day estate of society already shows its difference from the earlier estate of civil society in that it does not hold the individual as it formerly did as something communal, as a community, but that it is partly accident, partly the work and so on of the individual which does, or does not, keep him in his estate, an *estate* which is itself only an *external* quality of the individual, being neither inherent in his labour nor standing to him in fixed relationships as an objective community according to rigid law.[139]

---

[136] Hegel's most famous discussion comes in his treatment of "Absolute Freedom and Terror" in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. J. N. Findlay, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 355–63.

[137] Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 446-57. Bourke, *Hegel's World Revolutions*, 180–89; Joachim Ritter, *Hegel and the French Revolution: Essays on the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 49ff.

[138] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.80. Marx's analysis anticipates Alexis de Tocqueville's account of the depoliticization of the French aristocracy, which is treated at greater length in the next chapter.

[139] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.80.

The French Revolution, like the modern constitutional state, is marked by the tension between universal politics and an autonomous private sphere. While *de jure* subject to the authority of the state, bourgeois civil society produces the two-fold life, the practical domination of the private over the public. Not even the Jacobins could overcome the contradictions inherent in the attempt to marry democratic sovereignty and bourgeois, negative liberties. They failed to recognize the structural fatality of a fragmented social life, imagining that politics could reign over the market when in truth it comes to be subservient to it. This diagnosis of the French Revolution is laid out most clearly in *The Holy Family*, calling attention to the impossibility of achieving democracy while chained by the slavery of civil society:

> Robespierre, Saint-Just and their party fell because they confused the ancient, *realistic-democratic commonweal* based on *real slavery* with the *modern spiritualistic-democratic representative state*, which is based on *emancipated slavery, bourgeois society*. What a terrible illusion it is to have to recognize and sanction in *the rights of man* modern bourgeois society, the society of industry, of universal competition, of private interest freely pursuing its aims, of anarchy, of self-estranged natural and spiritual individuality, and at the same time to want afterwards to annul the *manifestations of the life* of this society in particular individuals and simultaneously to want to model the *political head* of that society in the manner of *antiquity*![140]

It is remarkable that on Marx's view both the Jacobins and the Hegelian constitutional state could share this same "terrible illusion." Despite Hegel's repudiation of the Jacobin project, his attempted reconciliation of the private and public realms does not escape the paradox. Instead of producing the terror, Hegel's failure apologizes for the tyranny of the market.

In this assessment of the French Revolution, Marx distances himself from the model of democracy associated with the liberty of the ancients. In his critique of the *Philosophy of Right*, he adds to the contrast between medievalism and the bourgeois state two additional models: The Greek *polis*

---

[140] Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, *MECW* 4.122.

and oriental despotism. Greek democracy, Marx argues, featured total domination by the public sphere. The work of politics was the sole content of civic life, the "true and only content of the life and will of the citizens." In oriental despotism, on the other hand, there does not exist any public sphere. All are subject to the "personal caprice of a single individual."[141] Where ancient Greece abolished the private sphere and is fully subsumed by the public, oriental despotism imposed the private dominion of the ruler.

If the *polis* and oriental despotism monistically resolve the tension between the public and private, feudalism and the bourgeois state offer a dualistic resolution: "the Middle Ages are the period of *actual* dualism; modern times one of *abstract* dualism."[142] This contrast of dualisms brings out the distinctive estrangement characteristic of each regime. Medieval unfreedom separates subjective inner life from objective social function. No peasant freely chose their station, but the medieval alignment of identity and social function constituted a kind of unity. The freedom of the Hegelian state, on the other hand, honors the inner life of private individuals, attempting to reconcile subjective life with public citizenship. Yet the formal separation of heavenly politics from earthly civil society merely abstracts the estrangement of the two-fold life. Despite Hegelian rhetoric of universality, the private life of civil society dominates the public life of citizenship.

Under medievalism, the individual is "a member, a function of society." By reducing the individual to his objective social role, feudalism separates the human from "his general essence," turning him "into an animal that is directly identical with its function."[143] Despite that estrangement,

---

[141] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.32. Marx follows Hegel's treatment of the ancient *polis* and oriental despotism, departing from him in the assessment of the modern state. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 285.

[142] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.32.

[143] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.81.

the feudal reification of social function produced a kind of community. Feudalism thus captured one important feature of species-being (sociality and mutual dependence), while violating another crucial requirement: the freedom to consciously define the meaning of "life activity."[144] The constitutional state makes the opposite mistake; it "separates the *objective* essence of the human being from him as merely something *external*, material."[145] Though he is emancipated from the oppression of external authority, the alienation of the bourgeois economy consists in being dominated by the fruit of one's own labour. Under feudalism, social identity "did not *signify one thing* in civil society and *something else* in the political world."[146] Where feudalism offered unfree but unified social identity, the Hegelian state produces formal liberty and social estrangement.

Feudal corporatism was reactionary and oppressive. What Marx finds instructive is feudalism's recognition of the communal character of individual life. The integration of political and economic authority and the transparent bond between individual and community must be universalized under an emancipatory, democratic politics. Bourgeois constitutional states replace corporatism with egoism not universalism. The medieval estate structure must be raised to the level of the universal, not dissolved into competition and market domination. The contrast between medieval corporatism and modern representation is the political expression of the contrast between the rule of man and the rule of property:

> the political state expresses, within the limits of its form *sub specie rei publicae*, all social struggles, needs and truths. Therefore, to take as the object of criticism a most specialized political question—such as the difference between a system based on

---

[144] Consider this description of species-being in the *1844 Manuscripts*: "The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life activity. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness.… Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being." *MECW* 3.276.

[145] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.81.

[146] Marx, "Critique of Hegel," *MECW* 3.82.

> social estate and one based on representation—is in no way below the *hauteur des principes*. For this question only expresses in a *political* way the difference between rule by man and rule by private property.[147]

Liberal constitutionalists imagine that institutional design can bring unity out of division, *e pluribus unum*. In fact, they entrench social separation, and they enable the tyranny of the private market. Feudalism—though oppressive—prefigures features of democracy lost in the fragmentation of the representative state. While lacking the category of the universal citizen, the unity of political and economic life produced in each subject an integrated social identity and in each master a sense of control over local material conditions. With the abolition of feudalism, exploitative human mastery is replaced with depersonalized domination.

5. Marx's Chiastic Method

The path to communism runs from feudal oppression to human emancipation through purgative bourgeois proletarianization. The dialectical history Marx revolutionizes from its Hegelian origins follows a complicated, helical shape. History is propelled by contradiction and crisis, which locally worsen social conditions by perfecting the prior stage's distinctive evils, but which viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* can be seen to realize a higher form of social development. Themes of heightening contradictions and perfecting conditions of exploitation are well-worn topics of Marxist economics and historiography. This chapter has avoided the thorny question of dialecticism, exploring instead the contrast between the animating spirit of feudal and bourgeois society. Setting aside the methodological worries that afflict dialectical history, we might interpret Marx more modestly as offering a chiastic critique of liberalism by means of his appeal to feudalism.

---

[147] Marx, "Letters to Ruge," *MECW* 3.144. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (London: Verso, 2012), 78–97.

Marx is a stylistic master of chiasmus, deploying the device in many of his most memorable quips: "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons;"[148] "To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*;"[149] "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness;"[150] the modern state's "slavery of civil society" against the ancient *polis*' "civil society of slavery;"[151] "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas;"[152] and finally "reforms can never be brought about by the weakness of the strong; they must and will be called to life by the strength of the weak."[153]

Beyond its stylistic prominence, chiasmus captures a characteristically Marxist mode of thinking. "On the Jewish Question," for example, challenges Bruno Bauer for getting the relationship between individual and social freedom backward. Where Bauer argues that Jews must shed their particularistic religion and be integrated within the political community, Marx replies that the problem is not how to rescue the Jew from society, but how to rescue society from its huckstering, Jewish ethos: "The *social* emancipation of the Jew is the *emancipation of society from*

---

[148] Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," *MECW* 3.182.

[149] Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," *MECW* 3.175.

[150] Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," *MECW* 29.263. Cf. *GI*, *MECW* 5.37.

[151] Marx, "Critical Marginal Notes," *MECW* 3.198.

[152] Marx, "GI" *MECW* 5.59.

[153] Marx, "The Protectionists, the Free Traders and the Working Class," *MECW* 6.281.

Judaism."[154] This same penchant for opposites appears in his inversions of Feuerbachian philosophy of religion[155] and Hegelian philosophy of history.[156]

The chiastic method invites readers to think holistically. Absent a holistic approach, we might be tempted to interpret history piecemeal, as was done by the romantic and reactionary forms of neomedievalism treated in chapter one: Stages of society are assessed on a bevy of distinct criteria. Feudalism is superior to capitalism with respect to X, but capitalism is superior with respect to Y. Let us theorize a society that combines the good of feudal X and the good of capitalist Y.

Marx unequivocally rejects such cafeteria criticism. We cannot pluck the attractive features of various social states, discarding their unattractive properties. The naïve effort to choose only what one likes constitutes an inability to think comprehensively about historical change. Social stages are not custom-built, they must be embraced as totalizing wholes. This thesis is elaborated in Marx's critique of Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, itself a chiastic inversion of the same's *The Philosophy of Poverty*. Proudhon wishes to preserve the productive achievements of economic specialization, but to do away with its dehumanizing consequences;[157] to preserve the liberty and equality associated with economic competition, but to produce a world in which that competition no longer produces losers;[158] to expand the victories of trade-union activity, but to do away with the class-antagonisms associated with strikes.[159] For Proudhon,

---

[154] Marx, "OtJQ," *MECW* 3.174.

[155] Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," *MECW* 5.6-8.

[156] As Marx famously remarks, Hegel's dialectic "is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell." *Capital*, 103.

[157] Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *MECW* 6.178-9.

[158] Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *MECW* 6.190-1.

[159] Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *MECW* 6.206.

> every economic category has two sides—one good, the other bad. He looks upon these categories as the petty bourgeois looks upon the great men of history: *Napoleon* was a great man; he did a lot of good; but he also did a lot of harm. The *good side* and the *bad side*, the *advantages* and the *drawbacks*, taken together form for M. Proudhon the *contradiction* in every economic category. The problem to be solved: to keep the good side, while eliminating the bad.[160]

Replacing economic science with philosophical abstraction, socialists like Proudhon choreograph their speculative ideals to present a just and free economic order. This "metaphysics of political economy" idealizes economic categories, amputating them from the "real relations" from which they emerged.[161]

For Marx, real material conditions must change for ideals to be instantiated: "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist."[162] Proudhon's attempt to amplify the good of a given order while tempering the bad constitutes a reactionary struggle against history. The vicious qualities of feudalism had to destroy the virtuous elements for society to move into a higher stage of bourgeois economics and politics.[163] Class struggle is not a problem to be resolved, it is the driving force of historical progress. The Proudhonian error consists in developing abstract moralized concepts of justice, humanity, or freedom, and deploying those speculative ideals to guide a program of social or economic change.

---

[160] Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *MECW* 6.167.

[161] Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *MECW* 6.162. cf. *MECW* 6.124.

[162] Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *MECW* 6.166.

[163] "If, during the epoch of the domination of feudalism, the economists, enthusiastic over the knightly virtues, the beautiful harmony between rights and duties, the patriarchal life of the towns, the prosperous condition of domestic industry in the countryside, the development of industry organized into corporations, guilds and fraternities, in short, everything that constitutes the good side of feudalism, had set themselves the problem of eliminating everything that cast a shadow on this picture—serfdom, privileges, anarchy—what would have happened? All the elements which called forth the struggle would have been destroyed, and the development of the bourgeoisie nipped in the bud. One would have set oneself the absurd problem of eliminating history," Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *MECW* 6.174-5.

Reading Marx chiastically, we see that the contrast between medieval feudalism and bourgeois liberalism captures the dominant ethos of each epoch. This is one way of understanding Marx's attentiveness to feeling, a theme from as early as his doctoral work, which focused on the "subjective form, the spiritual carrier" of philosophical ideas, rather than their technical, premise-conclusion propositional content.[164] The maturation of the proletariat into a universal class does not depend on theoretical commitments, but a visceral experience of unity and revolutionary power. When Marx laments the inhumanity of "political emancipation," his point is that for all the guarantees of individual rights, bourgeois society cannot but be experienced as isolating and fragmented. It is not felt as an expression of social cooperation, but of egoistic competition.

Feudalism offers a rival spirit. Political relationships need not be divorced from economic ones, and ethico-religious values need not be fenced off from the public sphere. An experience of integrated totality combats the liberal experience of fragmentation. Democratic communism will be achieved when society is felt to be simultaneously emancipatory and human. The subjects of modern bourgeois liberalism lose sight of holistic unity, and they fear any expansion of public, collective, political life at the expense of their private, individual liberty. Feudalism—reactionary, oppressive, and unfree—points to the possibility of overcoming isolation, and it helps us to see the possibility of building a society that is both free and human.

Conclusion

The young Marx repudiates feudalism as a repressive social order, yet he finds in it a spirit of political and social integration abandoned by liberal constitutional representation. He celebrates the French Revolution and the modern state for introducing the possibility of citizenship but associates the same with privatizing social life to a degree unknown in the Middle Ages. He characterizes

[164] Marx, "Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature," *MECW* 1.36.

liberal republicanism as a form of slavery to the market, while describing the feudal aristocracy as a "democracy of unfreedom." This idiosyncratic contrast between feudalism and bourgeois liberalism is marked by a consistent logic. What Marx sees as instructive about medievalism is a holism, a transparent connection between political and economic life, and a conscious recognition of the individual's tie to the community. The feudal order is characterized by the priority of human relations over property rights. What made feudalism human and democratic was not merely an affective, communitarian ethos, but a commitment to transparent, political authority over the whole of social life.

One way to summarize the rival spirits of feudal and bourgeois society is to consider three loci of the comparison.[165] Religiously, Marx contrasts the external, transparent priesthood and saint cults of medieval Catholicism with the internalized, hypocritical priesthood of modern Protestantism. Economically, Marx sets the "intimate" personal social relationships of feudal life against the competitive, cash-nexus of bourgeois egoism. And politically, Marx insists on the political nature of medieval estates as opposed to the depoliticized economy under modern representative constitutions.

What is instructive about feudalism is a certain asymmetry across these antinomies of religion, economics, and politics. It is conceptually possible to distinguish the three bourgeois poles from one another. We can imagine constitutional states without Protestantism, capitalism without constitutionalism, and Protestantism without the market. Even if we accept, as Marx does, an elective affinity intertwining liberal religious, economic, and political sensibilities, there is no strict reason why they must come as a package.

---

[165] This is a respect in which Marx's critique strongly echoes that developed by Adam Müller.

No such conceptual separation is possible for the feudal poles. The juridical hierarchy of the Catholic episcopacy has immediate implications for medieval politics in a way Protestantism does not for the modern state. Feudal economic relationships were imbued with a political and ethical significance lost in an age of commodification and contract. Where Protestantism, capitalism, and liberal constitutionalism can be detached from one another, medieval Catholicism, feudalism, and estate representation are of a piece. Feudalism was unified if oppressive, featuring no bipolar separations of politics and economics. Feudal subjects could comprehend their *de jure* mutual dependence, where modern proletarians find themselves bewildered by an uncontrolled, anarchic interplay of depersonalized social and material forces.

The central themes raised by Marx in his early treatment of feudalism and democracy—the insufficiency of merely political democracy, the need for human, authoritative control over economic relations, and the aim of transcending the parasitic state—animate his later writings, particularly the *18th Brumaire* and the *Civil War in France*. The distinctive democratic theory that emerges from this treatment of medievalism emphasizes the connection between the rule of private property and the individual fragmentation produced by the bourgeois economy and political state. Feudalism—with its exploitative rule of man—was unified if oppressive. The integration of feudal life was passive, maintained by a chain of transparent oppression. By placing economic life under the power of the proletariat, the public and private spheres will be fully integrated, not in the passive manner of medievalism, but in a democratic and universalizing fashion. Communism, Marx suggests, will restore and radicalize what was glimpsed through feudalism but destroyed by liberalism: the objective reality and subjective experience of collective mastery over an integrated common life.

Chapter Four: Tocqueville of Aristocratic Servants and Democratic Servitude

Alexis de Tocqueville claims in his introduction to *Democracy in America* that "when royal power, supported by the aristocracy, peacefully governed the peoples of Europe, society, amid its miseries, enjoyed several kinds of happiness, which are difficult to imagine and appreciate today."[1] One form of happiness that flourished in this feudal, medieval age came from the dispersion of power, which checked would-be tyrants. Another came from the inculcation of Christian duty that kept monarchs from abusing their authority. But most significantly, Tocqueville suggests, is the connection between the *perception* of legitimacy and the *experience* of degradation. Paradoxically, the more permanent and fixed the class structure, the more tolerable the class relations. As he puts it in a passage worth quoting at length:

> Not having conceived the idea of a social state other than their own, not imagining that they could ever be equal to their rulers, the people accepted the benefits and did not question the rights of their rulers. They loved them when they were lenient and just and submitted without difficulty and without servility to their rigors as to inevitable evils sent to them by the hand of God. Custom and mores had, moreover, established limits to tyranny and founded a kind of right in the very midst of force.
>
> Since the noble did not think that someone would want to wrest from him the privileges that he believed legitimate, and the serf regarded his inferiority as a result of the immutable order of nature, it is conceivable that a kind of reciprocal benevolence could be established between these two classes sharing so different a fate. You then saw in society inequality, miseries, but souls were not degraded.
>
> It is not the use of power or the habit of obedience that depraves men; it is the use of a power that they consider as illegitimate and obedience to a power that they regard as usurped and oppressive.[2]

Most striking here is the attentiveness to the way objective social relations depend on the manner in which they are perceived and understood. Like Marx and Carlyle, Tocqueville centers his analysis on

---

[1] Tocqueville, *DA* 19

[2] Tocqueville, *DA* 19-20.

an appeal to an idealized account of the feudal past that allows him to diagnose what he takes to be a failing of modern liberal societies. Writing at precisely the same period, Tocqueville develops his own account of the anarchy that characterizes modern politics. American democracy—which Tocqueville offers as an image of the European future—rejects the illusions of natural hierarchy that legitimated the Middle Ages. This development constitutes a decisive moral improvement over the oppression of the feudal past. Like Marx and Carlyle also, Tocqueville is committed to a philosophy of history that rules out any return to the past. Democracy is a providential fact, he famously announces, and the only choice before us is a democracy in freedom or a democracy in despotism. Yet Tocqueville continues to be read in large part because of a tragic premonition that runs through his work: With the abolition of personal, aristocratic, and clerical subordination, a new form of impersonal, tutelary despotism threatens to take over.

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the vulnerabilities Tocqueville identifies with the psychology of democratic equality. We have just seen that Marx rebukes the "two-fold life" of bourgeois liberalism, an unstable balance between democracy and the private sphere. Much recent scholarship finds in Tocqueville similar worries about the threat market inequality poses to democratic citizenship.[3] This chapter argues that Tocqueville's more worrying suggestion is that this danger is not a tension between the domains of public and private freedom. Instead, the characteristic pathologies of democracy and the market stem from the same ideological root. A love of equality and a refusal to abide inequality lead citizens toward impersonal, tutelary despotism in their political, social, and economic lives.

[3] For a few examples of work that emphasizes this dimension of Tocqueville's thinking, see Richard Avramenko and Brianne Wolf, "Disciplining the Rich: Tocqueville on Philanthropy and Privilege," *The Review of Politics* 83, no. 3 (2021): 351–74; Gianna Englert, ""The Idea of Rights': Tocqueville on The Social Question," *The Review of Politics* 79, no. 4 (2017): 649–74; and Laura Janara, "Commercial Capitalism and the Democratic Psyche: The Threat to Tocquevillean Citizenship," *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 2 (2001): 317–50.

For Tocqueville, the illusory perception and public promulgation of equality renders dependence invisible. He targets the consequences of refusing to acknowledge the reality of inequality in a democratic society. That refusal does not just constitute ideological blindness—an inability to recognize the facts before one's eyes—it reworks the character of superior and inferior and gives rise to new social relations. He confronts his readers with the psychological dynamics of a society that repudiates hierarchy but cannot eradicate inequality. It is that contradiction, Tocqueville suggests, that propels toward new forms of depersonalized, tutelary despotism.

This trajectory is made evident in Tocqueville's contrast between the personal mastery of feudal aristocracy and the abstracted servitude of democratic society. This recurring juxtaposition offers an exaggerated romantic sympathy for medieval society. That tendency may derive from Tocqueville's aristocratic prejudices but may also be read as a deliberate choice to sharpen the contrast and emphasize the distinctive characteristics of modern democracy. By rejecting rigid, formal feudal status hierarchies, democracy promises an equality it cannot fully deliver. Democratic institutions "awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely."[4]

At least among the citizenry of free, white, men—a crucial qualification—the democratic public professes a belief in equality. "Public opinion," Tocqueville writes, compels free Americans to conceptualize themselves in terms of an "imaginary equality, despite the real inequality of their conditions."[5] From the class-stratifying market to prejudicial public opinion, social forces untethered to the concrete will of a superior constrain freedom. The consequence, Tocqueville suggests, is a mystification of inequality. We live in a world marked by social hierarchy but speak in the language

---

[4] Tocqueville, *DA* 316.

[5] Tocqueville, *DA* 1015.

of civic equals. The same democratic impulse that destroys personal authority leaves citizens weak in the face of amorphous social forces. The socially enforced belief in "imaginary equality" compels citizens to reconceptualize impersonal dependence as an expression of democratic freedom.

It is impossible to read Tocqueville on Americans' love of equality without acknowledging the contradiction of chattel slavery and hierarchical gender relations. That has been the subject of a great deal of work,[6] much of which I draw on here.[7] My focus, however, is restricted primarily to Tocqueville's treatment of free, white men—the class for whom the ideology of democratic equality most clearly applied in antebellum America. Even there Tocqueville notes patterns of degradation derived from America's egalitarian spirit. To that end, this chapter treats Tocqueville's account of the family, marketplace, and public opinion, sites where the psychology of equality is most directly seen. "Popular sovereignty," he writes, is the foundation of democratic culture: "the father of the family applies it to his children, the master to his servants, the town to those it administers, the province to the town, the state to the provinces, the Union to the states."[8] Beginning with intimate sites of democratization models what Tocqueville sees more generally as the transition from a social

---

[6] Tocqueville's account of America's democratic spirit has been accused of failing to adequately recognize the centrality of an entrenched racial hierarchy within an ideologically egalitarian society. See Rogers M. Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 549–66; Cheryl B. Welch, *De Tocqueville* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 61–65. Other work emphasizes Tocqueville's sensitive discussions of slavery, Native Americans, and white supremacy. See Alison McQueen and Burke A. Hendrix, "Tocqueville in Jacksonian Context: American Expansionism and Discourses of American Indian Nomadism in Democracy in America," *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 3 (September 2017): 663–77; Laura Janara, "Brothers and Others: Tocqueville and Beaumont, U.S. Genealogy, Democracy, and Racism," *Political Theory* 32, no. 6 (December 2004): 773–800; Jennie C. Ikuta and Trevor Latimer, "Aristocracy in America: Tocqueville on White Supremacy," *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 2 (2021): 547–59; Alvin B. Tillery, "Tocqueville as Critical Race Theorist: Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and the Limits of Jacksonian Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (December 2009): 639–52.

[7] I follow, for example, Christine Henderson, who argues that Tocqueville's treatment of racial and gendered hierarchy illuminates his account of the kind of soft despotism he fears will envelop democratic societies. "Revisiting Tocqueville's American Woman," *Political Theory* 51, no. 5 (October 1, 2023): 767–89; Christine Dunn Henderson, "Beyond the 'Formidable Circle': Race and the Limits of Democratic Inclusion in Tocqueville's Democracy in America," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2022): 94–115.

[8] Tocqueville, *DA* 633.

world of aristocratic, personal servants to the tutelary condition of democratic, depersonalized servitude.

This chapter begins by treating Tocqueville's interpretation of aristocratic feudalism and his account of its decline. It then outlines three conceptual motifs that guide the discussion that follows. Section three turns to the household, reconstructing Tocqueville's account of how democracy transforms father-son and master-servant relationships. Sections four and five take up aspects of civil society, treating the democratization of the market and public opinion. Throughout, I highlight the contrast Tocqueville draws between democratic and feudal civil society to emphasize two recurring themes of Tocqueville's argument. The first concerns the psychic character of the new depersonalized social control—how both the powerful and the weak are unable to coherently conceptualize their real condition. The second is the claim that transformed self-understandings of social reality further brutalize social relations. By theorizing the ideological nature of that degradation, Tocqueville identifies a connection between the belief in moral equality and consequent forms of mystified, tutelary dependence.

1. Feudalism and Aristocracy

The very titles of many prominent books on Tocqueville emphasize his ambivalent aristocratic liberalism, a politics that sits between the old world and the new.[9] Tocqueville's project is to understand the characteristic dangers of democracy by appreciating afresh the characteristic advantages of aristocracy. Democratic substitutes must be found for many of the forms, practices, and mores that proliferated in aristocratic Europe.

[9] Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

Something should be said here concerning the relationship between aristocracy and feudalism. Tocqueville himself does not insist on a strong distinction between the two. When he speaks of aristocracy, he refers to the actual institutional forms of the feudal Middle Ages: the hereditary monarchy, landed lords, incorporated guilds, and established church. Some contemporary commentators are at home with the language of aristocracy, looking to Tocqueville as a champion of an abstracted ideal of distinction, greatness, or authority. Fewer are comfortable speaking of Tocqueville's "feudal" liberalism or the "feudal" sources of liberty. That discomfort, I suspect, turns on the fact that we can speak metaphorically about aristocracy in a way we cannot of feudalism. Aristocracy might be democratized, but feudalism—with its juridic hierarchy and formal relations of dependence—cannot. Aristocracy can connote certain virtues—excellence, beauty, leisure, the arts, etc.—but feudalism calls to mind oppression, hierarchy, and dependence. For the democrat, insisting that Tocqueville finds inspiration in feudalism makes him less sympathetic and more reactionary.

Understanding that discomfort is part of the theme this chapter takes up. The implicit distinction we make between feudalism and aristocracy reflects an egalitarian inclination to reformulate hierarchical relationships into a language consistent with democratic equality. Readers who hope to learn something from Tocqueville, however, cannot lose sight of the fact that when Tocqueville speaks of aristocratic virtues, he has in mind the historic, feudal practices from which they arose. The attempt to restore aristocratic forms in a democratic age as Tocqueville recommends we do is difficult and perhaps impossible precisely because of our discomfort with that fact.

In the *Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, Tocqueville develops an account of the transformation of modern Europe through three stages: (1) Medieval feudalism; (2) The centralized, monarchical *Ancien Regime*; (3) The providentially inevitable democratic future. The French

Revolution, he famously argues, must be understood not as a rebellion against the *Ancien Regime*, but the logical culmination of its program for legal rationalization and political consolidation.[10] The essence of medieval feudalism, in contrast, was its diversity: "diverse in its rules, diverse in its authority, a true hodgepodge of powers." Governance was distributed chaotically across "bodies and officials, none fully subordinate to other, and all participating in government by some right they had purchased which could not be reclaimed."[11] As with Marx's skepticism of the rationalization of law codes in the early 1840s, Tocqueville praises the cacophony of medieval authority. The manifest inefficiency of these societies was bound up with their freedom. Because there was no single, centralized authority, liberty emerged between the cracks of overlapping and imperfect institutions. More importantly still, the partial authority granted to the various powers of the kingdom produced a healthy jealousy. The guilds, aristocracy, and church fought to preserve their prerogatives, and so resisted the centralizing ambitions of the monarchy. Throughout, Tocqueville closely follows Montesquieu, who famously insisted that monarchies could only remain free so long as they fostered a variety of mediating institutions that could check the emergence of despotism:

> Intermediate, subordinate, and dependent powers constitute the nature of monarhical government, that is, of the government in which one alone governs by fundamental laws. I have said intermediate, subordinate, and dependent powers; indeed, in a monarchy, the prince is the source of all political and civil power. These fundamental laws necessarily assume mediate channels through which power flows; for, if in the state there is only the momentary and capricious will of one alone, nothing can be fixed and consequently there is no fundamental law.

---

[10] Tocqueville, *AR* 26-7.

[11] Tocqueville, *AR* 40.

> The most natural intermediate, subordinate power is that of the nobility. In a way, the nobility is of the essence of monarchy, whose fundamental maxim is: *no monarch, no nobility: no nobility, no monarch*; rather, one has a despot.[12]

Tocqueville contrasts the diversity of the feudal regime with the "individualism" celebrated by liberal democracy. We are tempted to link these two ideals. But that, Tocqueville insists, is a mistake. Individualism breaks down corporate diversity and leads to centralized despotism and spiritual conformism. True diversity is communal, centered around nodes of authority powerful enough to resist the centripetal force of administration:

> Our fathers did not have the word *individualism*, which we have forged for our own use, because in their day there was no such thing as an individual who did not belong to a group and could see himself as standing absolutely alone … It was, if I may put it in this way, a sort of collective individualism, which prepared souls for the true individualism that we have come to know.[13]

With the rise of the powerful monarchies of the eighteenth century, this feudal order collapsed. In opposition to the spirit of medievalism, the *Ancien Regime* produces homogenization. In this regard. Tocqueville famously argues, post-feudal monarchism and republicanism are kindred spirits.[14] They both strive "to eliminate immunities and abolish privileges," to "blur distinctions of rank, equalize conditions, replace the aristocracy with functionaries, substitute uniform rules for local privileges, and impose unified government where once there was a diversity of powers."[15] Feudalism had paradoxically secured liberty through fragmentation. The modern state—be it monarchical or

---

[12] Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17–18.

[13] Tocqueville, *AR* 91.

[14] This analysis echoes some of the arguments from German reactionaries and romantics treated in chapter one.

[15] Tocqueville, *AR* 18

republican—destroys liberty by replacing jealous political competition and local self-government with bureaucratic and administrative regulation.[16]

This decline of feudalism, Tocqueville argues, accompanies a new egalitarian ethos that is hateful of any established forms of inequality. Though he does not loathe with the intensity of Carlyle, Tocqueville is sharply critical of the French aristocracy of the nineteenth century. Though the pomp of noble rank persisted, the aristocratic principle itself had come to be a tree with dead roots, easily toppled by the wind.[17] Once they were stripped of their constitutional prerogatives, the lords were left only with economic privileges. These privileges could no longer be tolerated by the people because they were relics of brute material unfairness no longer legitimized by some deeper principle. It was the political *weakness* of the aristocracy, guilds, and church that made these institutions so hateful to the people of France. As Tocqueville summarizes, "Feudalism had remained the greatest of our civil institutions while ceasing to be a political institution. Thus diminished, it aroused far more hatred than before."[18]

In the past, the feudal lord's privileges were paired with "great burdens"—the blood tax of military service and the "responsibility to aid the indigent within the limits of his domains."[19] But as the centralizing monarchy assumes responsibility for the welfare of the peasantry and as the lord-peasant relationship becomes merely difference of wealth, the perceived legitimacy of social hierarchy breaks down. The people come to prefer bureaucratic centralization as a surer means of

---

[16] One of the various medieval authorities Tocqueville praises is the township, which he argues wielded some power of democratic self-government under feudalism that would be destroyed by the centralization of the eighteenth century. Tocqueville, *AR* 47-54.

[17] Tocqueville, *DA* 1021-3.

[18] Tocqueville, *AR* 38.

[19] Tocqueville, *AR* 45.

securing material comfort. The administrative *intendants* represent the king and render the church, aristocracy, towns, and guilds obsolete. Centralization did deliver one important form of liberty—the liberty we saw in chapter one demanded by Enlightenment figures like Adam Smith. Even before the French Revolution, Tocqueville writes, the peasant was "no longer prey to petty feudal despots … he enjoyed civil liberty and owned a portion of land." At the same time, however, the peasant became more isolated and defenseless than ever before.[20]

The destruction of the feudal order brings about a new psychological orientation. The French subject of the eighteenth century and the American citizen of the nineteenth century have never experienced a world of legitimate pluralism and difference. Such people have fallen under the sway of an egalitarian skepticism that makes them instinctively hostile to any form of inequality or distinction. That ethic arose historically with the decline of feudalism, but it continues to dominate the minds of democratic subjects.

2. Motifs of Tutelary Despotism

An heir to the French moralist, *pensées* tradition, Tocqueville does not write systematically in the manner of Hegel or Mill. It is therefore unwise if not impossible to construct a "Tocquevillian theory" of democracy. Tocqueville understands democracy impressionistically, not as a set of institutions or principles, but as what Sheldon Wolin calls a "life form."[21] He requests that we read him "with the same spirit that presided over my work, and … judge this book by the general impression that it leaves."[22] Nevertheless, Tocqueville's corpus is marked by several recurring patterns of thought. The "generating fact" of equality gives the providential march of history a

[20] Tocqueville, *AR* 112.

[21] Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, 132–48.

[22] Tocqueville, *DA* 31.

recognizable shape, even as contingencies temper certain tendencies inherent to a democratic social state.[23]

Tocqueville hopes that America has discovered a workable equilibrium that can serve as a model for Europe's transition to democracy. Yet his work is marked by darker premonitions about the effects of social stratification, *ressentiment*, and psychological disorientation.[24] In these moments, Tocqueville sounds like the fatalistic, monistic historians he claims proliferate in democratic centuries.[25] At times he suggests that these difficulties belong to a transitional period between aristocracy and democracy. His worries, however, escape clean compartmentalization thus continue to speak to contemporary liberal democracies. American democracy summons forth resources—religion, associational life, participatory government—to resist its own excesses, yet these loci of liberty appear to offer little resistance to the master forces of the age. Among those forces we can count three of particular significance.

The first is the *dialectic of democratic independence*: Democratic citizens are characterized by a spirit of egalitarian self-reliance, yet this very spirit produces the isolation from which a new depersonalized despotism emerges. This inversion of equality is perhaps Tocqueville's most famous thesis and constitutes a central subject for many of the most prominent studies of Tocqueville,

---

[23] Tocqueville, *DA* 4.

[24] If anything, the pessimism of *Democracy in America* deepened in the decades following its publication. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeremy Jennings, "The Third Democracy: Tocqueville's Views of America after 1840," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 3 (August 2004): 391–404.

[25] Tocqueville, *DA* 854. Tocqueville's moments of pessimism and suggested determinism run against his own stated conviction to move beyond the tired nostalgia that characterizes much analysis of democracy: "A new political science is needed for a world entirely new. But that is what we scarcely consider; placed in the middle of a rapid river, we obstinately fix our eyes on some debris that we still see on the bank, while the current carries us away and pushes us backwards toward the abyss." *DA* 16-7.

including those of Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, Roger Boesche, and Sheldon Wolin.[26] Equality severs the traditional bonds of interdependence that characterized feudal-aristocratic societies. The resulting ethic of self-reliance is what Tocqueville found most attractive about American democracy. Through voluntary associations and participatory politics, democratic citizens achieve collective ends, even if moved by "self-interest well understood."[27] Nevertheless, active cooperation can be suffocated by a darker form of democratic individualism—a retreat from public life that leaves citizens alienated and weak. The "legitimate passion for equality that incites men to be strong and esteemed" risks being outmatched by the "depraved taste for equality" that demands levelling and mediocrity.[28] Isolated equals prefer equality in servitude over inequality in freedom. For Tocqueville, "the vices given birth by despotism are precisely those that equality favors. The two things complement each other and help one another in a fatal way."[29]

As we have seen, this development begins with the centralizing state projects of early modern absolutism. Louis XVI's identification of himself with the state would be reformulated into a democratic theory of popular sovereignty. Tocqueville thus identifies the "revolutionary and democratic temperament" of the nineteenth century with the *philosophes* and physiocrats of the eighteenth: "Not only do they hate certain privileges but diversity itself is odious to them: They would worship equality even in servitude."[30]

---

[26] Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, 339-364; Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 237ff.; and Mansfield and Winthrop's introduction to *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), lxiii–lxvi.

[27] Tocqueville, *DA* 918.

[28] Tocqueville, *DA* 89.

[29] Tocqueville, *DA* 889.

[30] Tocqueville, *AR* 144.

Especially salient is the impersonal character of the new social dependence. Where medieval obligation was tied to the "very person of the lord," democrats become patriots, replacing loyalty to a human family with loyalty to the state.[31] Cartesian democrats reject the judgment of personal authorities and place their trust in an abstract "common opinion."[32] In religion, democrats abandon creedal dogmas, liturgical rituals, and ecclesial authorities, gravitating toward a pantheism that provides a simple "idea of unity" to explain creation.[33] In the economy, laborers are emancipated from feudal duties, but their material fortunes come to be dictated by mystifying market forces. Finally, and most famously, the despotic bureaucracy usurps the powers once distributed across juridical authorities. The tutelary administration governs through enervating regulations, accepted by a pacified people.[34]

A second motif is the demand for *formless simplicity*. Democratic citizens reject symbolic markers of hierarchy. Concretizing the theoretical commitments of the philosophes, democrats "replace the complex traditional customs that governed society … with certain simple, elementary rules, which could be deduced from reason and natural law."[35] Rather than deal politely and delicately with one another, democrats speak with frankness and directness. Manners characteristic of aristocratic society are suspected as "puerile artifices that you use to veil or keep from their eyes truths that it would be more natural to show them entirely naked and in the full light of day."[36]

---

[31] Tocqueville, *DA* 1099-1100.

[32] Tocqueville, *DA* 718.

[33] Tocqueville, *DA* 758.

[34] Tocqueville, *DA* 1250-2.

[35] Tocqueville, *AR* 128.

[36] Tocqueville, *DA* 750.

These conventions—which Burke defended as the "decent drapery of life"— appear to the democrat as masks for subordination and hierarchy.[37]

As Mansfield puts it, citizens prefer the "formality" of democratic equality to the "forms" of aristocratic difference.[38] The democratization of language offers a paradigmatic example of this resistance to forms.[39] In aristocratic ages, language differs along lines of wealth, class, and education. Democrats object to such distinctions from a negative appeal to authority—none have the right to establish the bounds between courtly and demotic speech.[40] Democrats refuse to adopt conventions because they reject the premise of social distinction. This linguistic egalitarianism is meant literally, as aristocratic grammatic precision is replaced by democratic grammatic indifference.[41] The point can be generalized, however. Simple, formal categories like "wage" or "contract" replace the complex, discriminating relations that predominated under feudalism.

The final motif is the *quasi-autonomy of material and ideological equality*. The material fact of mobility upends traditional, formal conventions and has much to do with the development of the American's egalitarian worldview. But an ideology of democratic equality is not merely superstructural. It persists even in conditions of material inequality and stasis. Central to Tocqueville's account of the American "social state" is the dynamism of the New World. Today's

---

[37] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Francis Canavan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 171. Burke insists that this drapery is needed to render obedience gentle and non-coercive. Tocqueville sympathizes with the Burkean attachment to forms, though he retains some Rousseuian sympathy for brusque democratic sincerity. Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 165–76.

[38] Harvey C. Mansfield, "The Forms and Formalities of Liberty," *The Public Interest* 70 (1983): 121–31. For a similar interpretation, see Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, *Why We Are Restless: The Modern Quest for Contentment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 140–75.

[39] Tocqueville, *DA* 818.

[40] Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, 194.

[41] Richard Avramenko, "The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy," *Political Theory* 45, no. 4 (2017): 495–523.

rich will be tomorrow's poor and vice versa. Money circulates rapidly, and "it is rare to see two generations reap the rewards of wealth."[42] Europe's rigid class distinctions led to the development of cultural identities within each social stratum. Their places set by an intergenerational chain, peasants and aristocrats understood the rights and prerogatives appropriate to their station. The emergence of the market and the opening of economic opportunity unleash a new passion for equality and independence. The mere possibility of class ascent or descent modifies social relationships, which can no longer be premised on set expectations.[43]

The democratic ethos of self-reliance is not merely a function of economic conditions, nor does the spirit of egalitarian independence require capitalist dynamism to be sustained. A combination of political, spiritual, and economic changes produces a worldview which once established commands independent moral and historical force. We have already seen an example of this phenomenon in Tocqueville's treatment of the decline of the feudal aristocracy. It was not the rise of the market economy but the disappearance of traditional feudal political prerogatives that made the institution intolerable. Nor does this democratic ethos require capitalist dynamism to be sustained. The contractual bond of employment is partly a product of expanding economic opportunity. It is impossible for the rich man to see a servant as a permanent part of his household when that servant could end up richer than the family he serves. At the same time, Tocqueville sees

---

[42] Tocqueville, *DA* 85.

[43] The Jacksonian republicans Tocqueville encountered prided themselves on this constant mobility. Today we prize upward social mobility, but the Jacksonians went a step further in prizing downward mobility as well. As an 1844 tract puts it: "Money and property, we know, among us, are constantly changing hands. A man has only to work on, and wait patiently, and with industry and enterprise, he is sure to get both. The wheel of American fortune is perpetually and steadily turning, and those at bottom today, will be moving up tomorrow, and will ere long be at the top. The rich man of this year, may be poor the next, and the wealthy family of this generation, is likely to dissipate its fortune in the next. Scarcely ever does it remain in the same line to the third generation. ... All property, among us, tends to the hands of those who work and wait for it. They are as sure to get it, as the sun is to rise and set." Calvin Colton, *The Junius Tracts* (Greeley & McElrath, 1844), 6. For a fine study, see Alex Zakaras, *The Roots of American Individualism: Political Myth in the Age of Jackson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 203–40.

in some sectors of the economy the hardening of a permanent proletariat governed by a fixed "manufacturing aristocracy."[44] Given the rigidity of these class dynamics, the old vocabulary of feudal mastery would seem to acquire new relevance. But propelled by the ideology of equality, exploiter and exploited alike speak as equals. It is this condition that most frightens Tocqueville: a new despotism in political and economic life that (1) lacks the vocabulary that humanized medieval hierarchical interdependence; (2) speaks of itself as a bond of free and equal citizens; and (3) quietly breeds vicious, class hatred in the face of obvious contradictions.

All three of these motifs point to the same master paradox Tocqueville raises throughout his writings: democratic citizens are suspicious of inequality, yet they submit to amorphous modes of discipline, which they legitimize with a language of equality. On the hunt for illicit hierarchies, democrats are susceptible to depersonalized domination at the hands of the market, bureaucracy, and public opinion. An inner logic of equality is responsible for leveling particular inequalities while mystifying and welcoming abstract, depersonalized control. This dynamic is made clear when we turn to particular sites of social life.

3. Democratic Sons and Servants

Tocqueville declares that in the United States, "the family, taking this word in its Roman and aristocratic sense, does not exist."[45] That remark comes amid a discussion of the way democracy refashions intimate mores and reaches into the very bosom of private life. In the course of these reflections, Tocqueville develops his account of American gender relations—girls and women are fiercely independent in America, yet they guard their chastity more fastidiously and devote

[44] Tocqueville, *DA* 984.

[45] Tocqueville, *DA* 1032.

themselves in marriage more completely than do aristocratic European women. This description has prompted a wide range of interpretation and debate. Delba Winthrop argues that Tocqueville's treatment of women actually serves as a critique of democratic political superficiality. The private home is not simply where women are relegated in American democracy but serves as a refuge from the stultification of public affairs.[46] That framing of Tocquevillian gender dynamics rests on a distinction between the public and private spheres, while inverting the normative valence typical of republican theory.[47]

Importantly, however, much of Tocqueville's work dissolves the distinction between public and private. Janara argues that the interplay between equality and subjugation within Tocqueville's democratic household is emblematic of the family's embeddedness within democratic culture. Domestic subordination takes on a new, distinctive character in democracies.[48] Henderson likewise demonstrates that gendered hierarchy for Tocqueville is best understood not as a relic of traditional or republican patriarchal mores, but as a species of the new democratic soft despotism. The choice to submit to the husband's authority is typical of the kind of coercion that proliferates in a democratic society—a tyranny that derives from the moral power of public opinion.

3.1 Democratic Sons

Following Henderson and Janara in rejecting a separation of public from private, we find a similar dynamic characterizing the parallel transformation of sons and servants within the

---

[46] Delba Winthrop, "'Tocqueville's American Woman and 'The True Conception of Democratic Progress,'" *Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (May 1986): 239–61.

[47] Women were often presented as a destabilizing source of aristocratic private corruption in the public sphere. Welch, *De Tocqueville*: 199-200.

[48] Laura Janara, "Democracy's Family Values: Alexis de Tocqueville on Anxiety, Fear and Desire," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 3 (2001): 551-578.

democratic household. Family in the traditional sense does not exist in America, Tocqueville argues, because the American family has become *purely natural*. Family was once a capacious social and political institution, not a nucleus of blood-ties. Historically, the family existed across time, knitting together the living, the dead, and the unborn. Vertically, the family reached down to include servants, whose families served the household for generations. Horizontally, the aristocratic family was linked in an extended chain with other families who shared a similar lineage and a class identity.

The paternalism of the traditional family derives from these myriad social identities. Within the home, the father wields the juridical authority to command his dependents and the mimetic authority to model the adulthood he transmits to his children. This authority, Tocqueville argues, is not natural but political. Paternalism does not derive from brute biological fact, but from a social recognition of the father's authority. The democratized family is therefore more natural than the ritualized aristocratic family, though with his Burkean instincts, Tocqueville does not accept the standard of nature as decisively normative. As Pierre Manent puts it: "aristocracy is on the side of convention, while democracy is on the side of nature.[49] In the aristocratic family, the father serves as the ruler of the home, the representative of the family to society, and the guardian of memory and identity, the "bond between the past and the present."[50]

The democratization of the home, Tocqueville explains, is characterized by the disappearance of paternal authority.[51] Juridically, the father ceases to speak for his children. Fathers

---

[49] Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 69–71. Recall Hobbes' claim that the "natural" parental right—so far as it exists—is the claim of the mother not the father. Patriarchy is social and political, not natural. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 140.

[50] Tocqueville, *DA* 1037.

[51] For a study of liberal political philosophy's attempt to reconcile parental authority and the family with the premises of egalitarianism and freedom, see Rita Koganzon, *Liberal States, Authoritarian Families: Childhood and Education in Early Modern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

and sons are equal in the eyes of the law, as the father is merely "a citizen older and richer than his sons." Sons possess the "incontestable right" to assert their independence as equal citizens.[52] Mimetic and moral authority also vanishes. The father no longer wields the "power of opinion" over his children, for democratic citizens are required to judge and think for themselves. Cut off from the past, the family sees no need to inherit the traditions, customs, and mores of the ancestors. The father's memories of that inheritance no longer ground special authority but are merely the charming recollections of an old man.[53]

What paternal authority remains in America is reserved for children in their minority. As the son approaches adulthood, "the bonds of filial obedience loosen day by day."[54] Worries about the egalitarian subversion of the family are not new. Plato warns that democracy inverts the roles of father and son.[55] Engels denounces the bourgeois economy for emasculating the father by turning his wife and children (with their thin fingers well suited for the industrial loom) into the family's breadwinners.[56] Resisting a more totalizing assessment of domestic anarchy, however, Tocqueville does not claim that father-son roles have been inverted. He claims merely that they have been equalized. He notes the possibility of equalization leading to "anarchy and corruption," wherein the father is brought down to the level of his sons. Striving to please and flatter his children, the father "reduces his maturity to the level of their juvenile passions" and becomes a "vile comrade of

---

[52] Tocqueville, *DA* 1033-5.

[53] Tocqueville, *DA* 1037.

[54] Tocqueville, *DA* 1033.

[55] "A father, for example, gets used to being like a child, and being afraid of his sons. A son gets used to being like his father. He feels no respect or fear for his parents. All he wants is to be free." Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 562e.

[56] Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England* in *MECW* 4.436-40.

debauchery" with them.[57] A competitive spirit enters between fathers and sons, for one of the drivers of American commercial energy is the son's fear of being poorer than his father.[58] Yet in his day, Tocqueville writes, the egalitarian American family has not descended into the industrial barbarism Engels found in Manchester.

Indeed, Tocqueville is keen to praise the American home, especially as compared contemporaneous reactionaries' treatment of the democratized family.[59] Aristocratic families were held together by intergenerational bonds of interest and honor. Democratic families, on the other hand, are held together by affection and intimacy: "it is by the community of memories and the free sympathy of opinions and tastes that democracy attaches brothers to each other. It divides their inheritance, but it allows their souls to blend."[60] The reference to inheritance recalls Tocqueville's discussion of the democratic "social state" in Volume I. There he argues that "it was the law of inheritance that pushed equality to its last stage." These laws, which belong at the "head of all political institutions" dissolved the social and political unity of the American family.[61] The equal division of property among sons inhibits the possibility of amassing great fortunes or great estates. Even more importantly, Tocqueville argues, it severs the bond between family and land.[62]

---

[57] Tocqueville, *DA* 1038.

[58] Tocqueville, *DA* 974. Mentor consoled Telemachus by observing that sons are worse than their fathers: Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 1996), 102. Nothing terrifies democratic sons more than the prospect of being poorer than their fathers.

[59] Boesche, *Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 50; Welch, *De Tocqueville*, 196.

[60] Tocqueville, *DA* 1039.

[61] Tocqueville, *DA* 78-9.

[62] Tocqueville, *DA* 83.

The disappearance of the landed estate renders incoherent any idea of the family as a social institution. The honor and formality that once structured domestic family life have no place in America. Yet the freedom and familiarity with which democratic sons treat their fathers does not breed haughty contempt. Natural warmth replaces the cold rigidity of aristocratic family norms. Tocqueville the Rousseauian recognizes the vanity of aristocratic politeness and appreciates the intimacy fostered by the fragmentation of family identity. Democracy replaces servile "courtesy" with "manly" sincerity.[63] The democratization of the household, he concludes, "loosens social bonds, but it tightens natural bonds. It brings family members closer together at the same time that it separates citizens."[64]

3.2 Servants in Democracy

While natural intimacy brings sons closer to their fathers, the abolition of social bonds severs the ties that once united servants and masters. The traditional servant relationship disappears with the rise of the "natural" family. Feudal household authority, on Tocqueville's view, was an image of authority more broadly.[65] The tie between lord and vassal was not a link of blood or nature, but a conventional chain forged over generations of mutual service. In aristocratic societies, Tocqueville explains, the master and servant classes develop as distinct societies, conjoined through a shared history and an ideology of legitimized inequality. The paradox of aristocracy is that the unbridgeable *inequality* between the ranks made their union possible.[66] The closeness of master and servant derives from their permanent separation. The servant's knowledge of his permanent inferiority internalizes

[63] Tocqueville, *DA* 1001.

[64] Tocqueville, *DA* 1040.

[65] Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, 125ff; Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 29ff.

[66] Tocqueville, *DA* 1011.

his experience of dependence. An unnatural hierarchy is reified by social convention. This bond reaches an obscene extreme when the servant "transfers himself entirely to his master," fully identifying with the aristocratic family he serves, sharing in its joys and sorrows. Tocqueville cannot celebrate this aristocratic domination, and he calls the servant's devotion simultaneously "touching and ridiculous in such a strange confusion of two existences."[67] For democrats, such a *de jure* interpersonal hierarchy is unthinkable, as foreign to us as the conditions of Roman slavery.

Aristocratic class structures were so fine grained that even within the servant class we find complex networks of authority. The dynamics of the aristocratic home reflect the imbrication of public and private identities. All persons within the household—from father to steward to lackey—are understood not simply as individuals, but as representatives of distinct social roles. The master, Tocqueville argues, is obeyed *qua* class, not simply *qua* man. The servants "revere in him, not only the master, but the class of masters. He presses on their will with all the weight of the aristocracy."[68]

The understanding of the household as political and social produced a hierarchical intimacy no longer possible in the natural, democratic home. Servants are alienated from their masters, unable to conceptualize their relationship in terms of intergenerational service and loyalty. Instead, Tocqueville claims, "the servant always considers himself as a passerby in the houses of his masters. He has not known their ancestors and will not see their descendants. …Why should he confuse his existence with theirs?"[69] The only bond joining master and servant is the cash-nexus.

---

[67] Tocqueville, *DA* 1012-3. Recall in this connection the relationship between Gurth and Cedric in *Ivanhoe*, praised by Carlyle.

[68] Tocqueville, *DA* 1011.

[69] Tocqueville, *DA* 1016.

Contract translates objective hierarchy into a language of equality. What grounds reciprocal debts of service is not tradition, convention, or nature, but voluntary agreement. The bond consists in the "temporary and free agreement of their two wills … within the limits of this contract, one is the servant and the other the master; outside, they are two citizens, two men."[70] Ideologized equality forces this most explicitly unequal relationship to be interpreted as an expression of free and equal choice. An imagined equality of contract allows democrats to think in terms of mutually beneficial exchange rather than hierarchical service and dependence. For Tocqueville, this "confused and incomplete image of equality" satisfies neither the masters nor the servants:

> In the secrecy of his soul, the master still considers that he is a particular and superior species; but he does not dare to say so, and he allows himself to be drawn trembling toward the standard level. His command becomes at the very same time timid and hard. … He wants his servant, who is only so to speak passing through domestic service, to contract regular and permanent habits, to show himself satisfied with and proud of a servile position.[71]

The servants, likewise, harden against the masters: "they revolt against an inferiority to which they have subjected themselves and from which they profit. They consent to serve, and they are ashamed to obey."[72] The servants partly see through the absurd equivocation of their social position—linguistically and juridically an equal, but materially and objectively an inferior. Yet they are also convinced that they profit from this voluntary arrangement.

---

[70] Tocqueville, *DA* 1014. Locke is among the first to reconfigure the master-servant relation as a matter of contract not family: "a Free-man makes himself a Servant to another, by selling him for a certain time, the Service he undertakes to do, in exchange for Wages he is to receive: And though this commonly puts him into the Family of his Master, and under the ordinary Discipline thereof; yet it gives the Master but a Temporary Power over him, and no greater than what is contained in the *Contract* between 'em." *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 322.

[71] Tocqueville, *DA* 1017-8.

[72] Tocqueville, *DA* 1018.

Democratic peoples do not lord over servants but rather hire equal employees. More precisely, democratic peoples refuse to think of themselves as inhabiting relations of personal mastery or dependence. Abraham Lincoln summarized this principle in a famous fragment: "As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy."[73] Contemporary democrats chafe at the suggestion of having servants to cook or chauffer them. These tasks are outsourced to anonymized food delivery and car-sharing services, ostensibly staffed by voluntary, contractual partners. Horrified at the idea of having servants at their employ, the middle and upper classes opt instead for armies of interchangeable laborers whose existence they are rarely forced to acknowledge.[74]

In part this refusal is a mark of moral progress. It is a fine thing indeed that all honest work in democracy is considered honorable.[75] The duty and dignity of work constitutes an important means of instilling an ethic of independence and self-mastery. But taken too far, a refusal to acknowledge social distinction becomes a vehicle for egalitarian mystification—social conformism or the illusion of the contract—that gives rise to a new depersonalized dependence. In the market, the rich and powerful are liberated from traditional debts of service, imagining themselves the equals of the laborers at their employ. The poor and weak come to hate their condition of *de facto* subordination, a subordination they are unable to directly identify by name. A brutal indifference dominates the souls of the great, while a new degradation forms in the souls of the weak.

---

[73] Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*, ed. Don Fehrenbach (New York: Library of America, 1989), 484 (emphasis original).

[74] This reality has been made painfully obvious in recent years for those privileged enough to rely on delivery services during the COVID lockdowns.

[75] Tocqueville, *DA* 969-72.

Thus, Tocqueville argues, democracy reconceptualizes two paradigmatic forms of personal subordination: the relation of sons to fathers and servants to masters. All parties see themselves as equals, despite occupying objectively unequal relations. Tocqueville's point here is not to romanticize feudal hierarchy, for he celebrates the moral progress that comes with these democratized roles. His point is to emphasize the psychic uneasiness of democracy's egalitarian settlement. Democratizing the household, Tocqueville writes, is "analogous to the sad spectacle that political society presents. A hidden and internal war goes on constantly between always suspicious and rival powers."[76] A new disfigurement marks a culture that speaks with a language of equality to describe a reality of hierarchy. The temporary nature of the contract linking master and servant divests the two of traditional bonds, leading to hidden class competition. The employer becomes "timid and hard," while the servant revolts internally to an arrangement he externally accepts. The new condition of servitude remains a form of domination, but the refusal of either party to view it as such depersonalizes the resulting social discipline and control. Command and obedience are replaced with contract and service.

4. From Household to Workplace

The condition of servants typifies what Tocqueville sees as a broader transformation of democratic class relations. The servant ceases to be part of the home and becomes a temporary contractor, a stranger in the household of the rich. This pattern holds true for all economic relationships. Feudalism, Tocqueville claims, made possible a moral economy of reciprocal if hierarchical protection.[77] Offering the example of landlord-tenant relationships, he argues that in aristocracies "rents are paid not only in money, but also in respect, in affection and in services. In

[76] Tocqueville, *DA* 1019.

[77] Tocqueville, *DA* 990.

democratic countries, they are paid only in money."[78] In democracies, leases grow shorter, and contractual relations become temporary and estranged. The "lord-peasant" relationship thus transforms into the "landlord-laborer" relationship. Like domestic servants, rural dependents experience their economic condition as a kind of homelessness. While liberated from the "petty feudal despots" of the medieval past, Tocqueville claims that the peasant of the eighteenth century lived "more isolated, perhaps, than had ever been the case anywhere else in the world. His oppression was of a new and singular sort."[79] No longer able to draw a sense of identity from an intergenerational familial link to an aristocratic house, the peasant lost any tie to the past and the land. As Tocqueville observes in a parallel discussion of ecclesial centralization, once someone's tie to the land is severed, "he no longer belongs to any particular place. In the land in which he happens by accident to have been born, he lives as a stranger in the midst of civil society."[80]

4.1 The Emerging Industrial Aristocracy

Democratic citizens relate to their employers in contractual, instrumental terms. They take any marker of class inequality as a species of unjust, arbitrary privilege. In part, Tocqueville continues, their fierce egalitarianism complements the economic dynamism of their society. Tocqueville articulates a liberal optimism about the improved material situation of laborers in the market economy. His economic thinking is marked by an early debt to classical economists in the tradition of Adam Smith like Jean-Baptiste Say. His departure from that tradition was moral, not economic, centering on the dangerous spiritual consequences of a universalized spirit of industrial

[78] Tocqueville, *DA* 1020.

[79] Tocqueville, *AR* 112.

[80] Tocqueville, *AR* 105.

labor and materialist consumption.[81] Unlike more radical economic critics, Tocqueville does not think that market wages tend to fall to subsistence levels. On the contrary, he claims that a competitive labor market drives wages up, as capitalists compete to attract workers. Independent citizens refuse to settle for salaries beneath their dignity, and thus the "equality of conditions tends to lead to the gradual elevation of salaries, and in turn, the elevation of salaries constantly increases equality of conditions."[82]

The promise of economic dynamism and social mobility is not chimeric. America's fluid class structure is partly a product of real opportunities for upward and downward mobility. When Tocqueville speaks of an "aristocracy of money," he does not imply a static oligarchy. Poor men of talent and ambition can rise to prominence. Those at the top live in permanent fear of losing their momentary privilege: "as the social value of men is no longer fixed by blood … ranks always exist, but you no longer see clearly and at first glance those who occupy those ranks."[83] The churn of economic activity mitigates some of the harsher possibilities of class conflict. The servant, as we have seen, understands himself to be a stranger in the home of the wealthy because he aspires and even expects to one day acquire a fortune and to employ servants of his own. The corresponding psychological disorientation of the working classes—speaking in the language of equality while occupying a position of *de facto* subordination—might similarly be reserved for the transitional period from aristocracy to democracy. If democratic societies are as dynamic as Tocqueville insists,

---

[81] Richard Swedberg, *Tocqueville's Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 32–33; Michael Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 36–53.

[82] Tocqueville, *DA* 1026.

[83] Tocqueville, *DA* 996.

class antagonism of this kind may fade away with time or serve as passing experiences that do not deeply threaten social solidarity.[84]

Despite his general optimism regarding class fluidity, however, Tocqueville's economic commentary is marked by a darker premonition concerning the durability of class inequalities. The poor as a class remain a permanent feature of democratic society, even if the composition of that class changes with time. What's more, returning to the quasi-autonomy of material and ideological equality described above, Tocqueville warns that at least one sector of the economy is an exception to the general pattern of rising wages in the market. In the emerging manufacturing aristocracy, capitalists conspire to depress wages. The factory relies on intensive specialization and sophisticated division of labor. Workers in such settings cannot distinguish themselves and have no means of competing for higher wages. Moreover, in a clear rebuke of Smith, Tocqueville adds that a career spent in one stage of the pinhead production line dements laborers, making them unsuited for any other kind of work. Specialization perfects the worker and degrades the man, turning him into a mechanized beast.[85] Factory labor creates a vicious cycle of downward mobility: "These men in general have little enlightenment, industry and resources; so they are almost at the mercy of their master," who responds to external competitive forces by reducing their wages.[86]

Tocqueville finds in a particular sector the laws of immiseration that Marx claims will characterize the whole of the bourgeois economy. More worryingly still, this industrial sector is the

---

[84] For this reason, Henderson insists on the difference between class and racial based exclusion in Tocqueville's analysis of democratic despotism. "Beyond the 'Formidable Circle,'" 100.

[85] Tocqueville, *DA* 982.

[86] Tocqueville, *DA* 1029.

most significant for nineteenth-century America and Europe. Its dehumanizing consequences are already on full display in England's Manchester, which Tocqueville describes as follows:

> A thousand noises disturb this damp, dark labyrinth, but they are not at all the ordinary sounds one hears in great cities. The footsteps of a busy crowd, the crunching wheels of machinery, the shriek of steam from boilers, the regular beat of the looms, the heavy rumble of carts, those are the noises from which you can never escape in the sombre half-light of these streets. From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles and civilized man is turned back into a savage.[87]

Within the industrial aristocracy, Tocqueville sees a growing material gap between the capitalist few and the laboring many. Lacking the social supports that once protected the medieval guild-artisan and the feudal dependent, the industrial wage-laborer depends for his livelihood entirely on market forces. The abolition of the medieval guild economy does away with guarantees of economic stability and plunges workers into a condition of "anarchy."[88] The feudal peasant was tied to his lord in a complex relation of reciprocal rights and duties. The guild-artisan likewise was formally in a position of apprenticeship and dependence, and he could rely on his superiors for support and stability. The specialized laborer, on the other hand, "depends in general on the master, but not on a particular master." Connected only by contract, the master-worker dynamic becomes purely instrumental: "the one does not commit himself to protecting, nor the other to defending, and they are not linked in a permanent way, either by habit or by duty."[89] Industrial aristocracy shares with

---

[87] Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, trans. George Lawrence and K.P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 107. Cf. Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 62–65.

[88] Tocqueville, *AR* 170.

[89] Tocqueville, *DA* 984.

feudalism a clear hierarchy, yet the imaginary equality of contract abolishes *noblesse oblige*, leaving the workman brutely dependent on the impersonal invisible hand.

4.2 Sismondi and the Vision of Medieval Balance

Michael Drolet argues that Tocqueville's critique of the new industrial aristocracy draws on the more systematic economic writings of the reactionary, Alban de Villenueve-Bargemont.[90] Tocqueville's *Memoirs on Pauperism* cite the legitimist's critique of liberal political economy, and his core diagnosis echoes not only Villeneuve-Bargemont but an established tradition of Catholic, conservative responses to the liberalism of Smith and Say.[91] This conservative critique can ultimately be traced to the influential work of, Jean Charles Leonard de Sismondi, a Swiss historian and political economist who offered one of the most important early responses to Adam Smith.[92] Interestingly, Sismondi was also an influence on the early economic thinking of Thomas Carlyle, who translated an article of Sismondi's on "Political Economy" in 1824.[93]

Sismondi is most famous today, perhaps, as a representative of what Marx and Engels denounce as "petty-bourgeois socialism" in the *Communist Manifesto*.[94] That abuse notwithstanding, it

---

[90] Drolet *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 95-111.

[91] Swedburg is more skeptical about a claim of direct influence between Tocqueville and Villeneuve-Bargemont. *Tocqueville's Political Economy*, 83–86..

[92] One clear statement of Villeneuve-Bargemont's debt to Sismondi can be found in Jérôme-Adolphe Blanqui's 1837 *History of Political Economy in Europe*. Unlike his brother, the radical, revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui, Jérôme-Adolphe was a moderate liberal whose political instincts are similar to Tocqueville's. He writes that Villeneuve-Bargemont is "among the most intelligent advocates of [Sismondi's] doctrines," and he praises him for capturing the suffering and plight of the new pauper class. Blanqui ultimately critiques the legitimist for offering an insufficiently serious economic prescription, appealing instead to Christian therapeutic moralism rather than positive institutional reform. Blanqui Adolphe-Jérôme, *History of Political Economy in Europe* (Putnam, 1880), 476. This failing ultimately applies to Sismondi, and likely Blanqui would have found it in Tocqueville too. Cf. Mao-Lan Tuan, *Simonde de Sismondi as an Economist,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), 136–47.

[93] Jordan, "Carlyle and Political Economy" 293.

[94] Marx and Engels, *CM*, *MECW* 6.509.

is clear that Sismondi is the source of many of Marx's most influential economic doctrines,[95] including his treatment of surplus value and exploitation,[96] the industrial reserve army,[97] and the mystification of M-C-M commodification.[98] Returning to what Villeneuve-Bargemont and by extension Tocqueville found useful, Sismondi champions a vision of economic balance and harmony indebted to a romanticized account of the medieval economy. Strikingly, he also seems to be one of the first systematic theorists of what we today would term "third way" economics—balancing the benefits of capitalist production with a morally just system of distribution and production. His *New Principles of Political Economy* begins by elaborating on an earlier article he published in the *Edinburgh Review* praising Adam Smith's critique of mercantilism, labor theory of value, and historical-inductive methodology (as distinguished from the more abstract economic theory of Ricardo and Say). Yet he adds that he departs from Smith on questions of distributive and productive justice: "one will no doubt be astonished to learn that the practical results of the doctrine we take from [Smith], appeared to us often diametrically opposed to those he drew from it."[99] In this regard Sismondi may be counted among the first of today's "left-Smithians."

In his preface to the second edition of *New Principles*, Sismondi begins by noting the shocking contradiction of modern England, which combines unprecedented economic wealth with unprecedented proletarian misery. This is the same paradox that occasions both Carlyle's turn to the

---

[95] These connections are described by Richard Hyse in the introduction to his translation of Sismondi's *New Principles of Political Economy*. Marx cites Sismondi more than any other economist in *Capital*, yet he rarely cites to acknowledge an intellectual debt. Hyse's instructive and amusing footnotes highlight specific lines of implicit influence.

[96] Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde Sismondi, *New Principles of Political Economy: Of Wealth in Its Relation to Population*, trans. Richard Hyse (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 83–93.

[97] Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde Sismondi, *Political Economy, and the Philosophy of Government: A Series of Essays Selected from the Works of M. de Sismondi* (London: J. Chapman, 1847), 144.

[98] Sismondi, *New Principles* 113.

[99] Sismondi, *New Principles* 52.

"condition of England" question and Tocqueville's work in his *Memoirs on Pauperism*. Political economy, on Sismondi's view, must pursue the "double goal" of (1) seeking "the means of securing to [men] the highest degree of felicity compatible with their nature" while (2) "allowing the greatest number of individuals to partake in that felicity."[100] We must add, in other words, a theory of just distribution to Smith's driving emphasis on economic production and national wealth.[101] Mocking the liberal political economists in one especially sharp remark, he writes: "Wealth is everywhere, men are absolutely nothing? What? … In truth, then, there is nothing more to wish for than that the king, remaining alone on the island, by constantly turning a crank, might produce, through automata, all the output of England."[102]

The central positive argument Sismondi develops is that economic wealth must be distributed on a much wider basis, primarily through agricultural freeholding. This is desirable for moral reasons of justice as well as political considerations of stability. A large, dispersed, property-owning class will lessen the chance of revolution:

> The strongest safeguard of an established order may lie in the existence of a numerous class of proprietors. However advantageous it may be for a society to safeguard property, it is an abstract idea difficult to grasp by those to whom it seems only to guarantee privation. When land ownership is taken from the cultivator, and the ownership of factories from workers, all those who create wealth, and who see it passing through their hands without end, are strangers to all its benefits. They form by far the most numerous part of the nation; they see themselves as the most useful part, and they feel disinherited. Constant envy stirs them up against the rich; one can hardly dare to discuss civil rights before them, because one must always be afraid

---

[100] Sismondi, *New Principles* 21.

[101] An early English translator writes that Sismondi rebukes liberal political economy for taking a nation's aggregate wealth "as the test of its prosperity without regard to its distribution … Sismondi contends that one of the main objects of political economy should be to regulate this very unequal distribution of wealth. "Preliminary Essay" in Sismondi, *Political Economy and the Philosophy of Government*, 67-8.

[102] Sismondi, *New Principles* 563. Sismondi is consistently skeptical of the benefits of labor-saving technology on these grounds.

> they will go from this discussion to that of property rights, and that they will demand the distribution of possessions and land.[103]

The *Ancien Regime*'s failure to secure a widespread distribution of property is responsible for the Revolution, which Sismondi experienced first-hand.[104] Large, consolidated agricultural estates—of the type Smith favored for their superior efficiency—fail to adequately disperse wealth and therefore destroy "that happy independence, that happy mediocrity, which was long the object of the wishes of the wise."[105] Nadia Urbinati points to this theme as a central parallel between Tocqueville and Sismondi, whom she characterizes as an "aristocratic republican," a formulation that readily applies to Tocqueville as well.[106] For both thinkers, the precarity of modern labor represents, in one respect, a decline from the ethic of stability and concern that were found in the in the otherwise more vicious conditions of medieval Europe:

> In the entirely barbaric and inhumane society of feudal countries, of slaveholding countries, this basic principle of justice has not been ignored. Never has a lord dreamt to make his vassals, his serfs, his slaves a burden of the province in their misfortunes, their old age, and their sicknesses; he has strongly felt that it was up to him alone to provide for the needs of those who experienced them only for his own benefit.[107]

Sismondi favors an economic regime characterized by widespread property ownership and independence. In a sense this is a return to the model offered by the medieval guild economy, in which social support and stability were prioritized above considerations of abstract economic

---

[103] Sismondi, *New Principles* 146.

[104] Sismondi and his family fled Switzerland for England to escape the revolution. They returned briefly to Geneva to hide an aristocratic friend of theirs, who was ultimately found, arrested, and executed by the revolutionary army. This is recounted in Mignet's biographical essay on Sismondi in *Political Economy and the Philosophy of Government*, 5.

[105] Sismondi, "Introduction to Inquiries," in *Political Economy and the Philosophy of Government*, 146.

[106] Nadia Urbinati, "Sismonde de Sismondi's Aristocratic Republicanism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 160.

[107] Sismondi, *New Principles* 579.

efficiency. In modern conditions, this guild economy is restored through cooperative relations of labor and capital, a solution Tocqueville gestures at as well.[108] Initially, Sismondi also favored more stringent legal limits on the rights of the poor to marry to curb the production of a Malthusian excess population. He later dropped that proposal suggesting more modestly that guild-like cooperative labor and economic independence will naturally curb proletarian population growth.[109]

In Sismondi, we find a systematic articulation of Tocqueville's implicit if comparatively underdeveloped economic thinking. Widespread property ownership with a decidedly agricultural bias and economic forms of harmonious codetermination promise to limit the growth of a degraded and politically volatile pauper class. The medieval guild economy serves as a partial model for this program, now reproduced in modern forms. Sismondi also offers a precedent for Tocqueville's skepticism of public charity. Sismondi's critique of state-administered poor relief centers on a wariness of subsidizing the growth of a pauper class.[110] That Malthusian emphasis is less central for Tocqueville, however, who targets the psychic consequences of dependence on a distant, centralized state.

4.3 Tocqueville Against Public Charity

Tocqueville's rejection of public charity as a response to working-class immiseration makes it tempting to assimilate him into familiar conservative and neoliberal critiques of the welfare state. Friedrich Hayek invokes Tocqueville to critique a form of egalitarianism that he fears will culminate

---

[108] Ibid., 551. Tocqueville's suggestive comment in favor of something like worker cooperatives can be found in *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings: Poverty, Public Welfare, and Inequality*, trans. Christine Dunn Henderson (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 36. Henceforth *MP*.

[109] Sismondi, *New Principles* 520, 573.

[110] Sismondi, *New Principles*, 549.

in statist welfare.[111] Gertrude Himmelfarb similarly aligns Tocqueville's economic criticism with conservative arguments for welfare reform in the 1990s.[112] There is truth in such readings, for Tocqueville insists that "any regularized, permanent, administrative system" of poor relief "will give birth to more miseries than it is able to heal."[113] Evincing a fear of the hardening of class inequality, he warns that public charity "does not prevent there being a class of poor and a class of rich in society … far from tending to unite into a single people these two rival nations," institutionalized poor relief dissolves the possibility of social harmony and prepares both classes for "combat."[114] This description of the rich and poor as "two rival nations" makes clear that Tocqueville's worry is not restricted to state-sponsored support. He fears that this class divide will remain a durable feature of any modern society. The degrading dependence on public charity mirrors the degrading dependence on anonymous market forces. These two forms of domination may even complementary: "the manufacturing aristocracy of today, after impoverishing and brutalizing the men it uses, delivers them in times of crisis to public charity to be fed."[115]

The deepest worry here is not just the condition of the pauper class. Tocqueville also highlights the dangers of material prosperity sustained by tutelary bureaucracy. Passive acquiescence to administrative control is connected to the elevation of material satisfaction over political excellence. Tocqueville laments that the modern French lack the "manly virtues" of their

---

[111] See, for example, Friedrich Hayek, "Individualism: True And False," in *Studies on the Abuse and Decline of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 46–74. Tocqueville's famous warning of tutelary despotism serves as the epigraph of Hayek's treatment of "Freedom in the Welfare State" in *The Constitution of Liberty*, 367.

[112] Gertrude Himmelfarb, introduction to Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoir on Pauperism*, trans. Seymour Drescher (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1997).

[113] Tocqueville, *MP 27*.

[114] Tocqueville, *MP* 19.

[115] Tocqueville, *DA* 984, cf. *AR* 39-45.

forefathers, the "true spirit of independence, a yearning for greatness."[116] Democratic peoples sacrifice political freedom for equalized, material comfort administered from above.[117] Caring only for their private affairs and interests, men "neglect the principal [affair] which is to remain their own masters."[118]

In drawing attention to the symmetrical failings of bureaucratized public charity and the industrial economy, Tocqueville argues that the instabilities and pathologies of the private market and the bureaucratic welfare state flow from the same egalitarian source. Civic disfigurement is the perverse consequence of a particular egalitarian logic, one that turns the democratic subject inward and renders him unable to directly confront the relations of unequal, mutual dependence he inhabits. Tocqueville's guiding contrast is not state and society, but human/local and tutelary/centralized institutions.[119] His hostility is to the pacification produced by both state and market, and his solutions revolve around the need to cultivate an ethic of active ownership.[120]

In some respects, this treatment of the flattening and disciplinary character of modern institutions parallels contemporary radical critics of neoliberal political economy. This is perhaps

---

[116] Tocqueville, *AR* 5. For a broader discussion, see Gianna Englert, "Tocqueville's Politics of Grandeur," *Political Theory* 50, no. 3 (2022): 477–503. Englert and others have explored how Tocqueville turned to imperialism as a potential means of cultivating an ethos of national greatness. See also Kevin Duong, "The Demands of Glory: Tocqueville and Terror in Algeria," *The Review of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 31–55; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), chap. 7.

[117] In America the "taste for material gratifications" becomes "the primary source of that secret restlessness revealed by the actions of Americans and the inconstancy they exhibit every day." Tocqueville, *DA* 626. For a time, American self-interest rightly understood induces them to use their liberty for the sake of their material comfort. But with time, the materialism suffocates the spirit of liberty.

[118] Tocqueville, *DA* 951. For a discussion of materialism supplanting mastery in Tocqueville, see Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 85–93, 115–38.

[119] Dana Villa, "Tocqueville and Civil Society," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 216–44.

[120] For a fine discussion, see Gianna Englert, "'The Idea of Rights': Tocqueville on The Social Question," *The Review of Politics* 79, no. 4 (2017): 649–74.

most evident in the work of Sheldon Wolin. For Wolin, Tocqueville shows that the market and state together produce a depoliticized form of democratic administration over a pacified people.[121] Developing a Tocquevillian critique of the welfare state, Wolin argues elsewhere that social democracy destroys the power of marginalized subjects to resist statist domination.[122] Though Michel Foucault does not draw on Tocqueville in the same manner, an analogous anxiety underwrites his argument that the ostensibly free, *homo oeconomicus* proves "eminently governable," the ideal object of governmental control.[123]

For Tocqueville, the refusal to acknowledge one's social and class position fosters a new depersonalized dependence. It is therefore a mistake to over-moralize capitalist inequality as the fault of the rapacious rich, for they too have simply internalized a public commitment to equality. While interpersonal abuses persist, the key feature of the modern economy is that the laborer is dominated by the class of masters rather than any master in particular. The subtlety of Tocqueville's diagnosis consists in locating the source of this structural domination not in laws of economics, but in a genuinely democratic embrace of equality.

Abstract equality, Tocqueville writes in one suggestive passage, is "like a box with a false bottom; you put the ideas that you want into it, and you take them out without anyone seeing."[124] No longer able to acknowledge inequality, neither superior nor inferior recognizes their true position. Obscuring objective dependence distorts both parties' sense of their duties and

---

[121] Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between two Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 347-9.

[122] Sheldon Wolin, "Democracy and the Welfare State: The Political and Theoretical Connections between Staatsräson and Wohlfahrtsstaatsräson," *Political Theory* 15, no. 4 (November 1987): 467–500.

[123] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), 270.

[124] Tocqueville, *DA* 829.

prerogatives and thereby alters the social relationship itself. When fathers, landlords, and employers speak of their children, tenants, and employees as equals, they take leave of the traditional obligations that were built into their position of superiority.

De jure equals but *de facto* inferiors acquire contempt for those who abandoned them. The contradiction between discursive equality and material inferiority breeds, Tocqueville claims, a class hatred that cannot be directly spoken of. Few will long be satisfied with the imaginary equality promised by the market. The rich treat the poor as equals in public. They refuse to openly display their superiority "and they will not part without shaking hands." Beneath this pretense, however, the rich harbor "great disgust for the democratic institutions of their country. The people are a power that they fear and despise."[125] Abstract egalitarian formulas go into the box, contempt is withdrawn but kept hidden from public eyes. The poor and laboring classes, moreover, are unable to properly comprehend their class position. Their material dependence on market forces and state welfare is itself tied to a psychic servitude and resentment that derives in part from their professed egalitarianism.

Tocqueville's repudiation of market-induced dependence rhymes with his rejection of state-induced bureaucratic dependence because both derive from a faith in "imaginary" equality. The invisible hand of the market and the tutelary bureaucracy of the state are in this regard democratic cousins. Democratic soft despotism derives from a publicly professed if incompletely realized egalitarian faith. The transparent status of the personal, feudal servant is replaced by an ideology of equality and a reality of impersonal, democratic servitude. This servitude depends on an egalitarian deference to public opinion and that same public opinion's enforcement of a belief in equality.

---

[125] Tocqueville, *DA* 288.

5: Equality and Public Opinion

The reduction of economic relations to bonds of temporary, contractual exchange generalizes the changing status of servants within the democratic home. The second transformation within the home is also replicated across democratic civil society. Tocqueville claims that the patriarchal father's mimetic, moral authority over his children gave way to an assumption of the children's rights as equal, independent citizens. In like manner, social elites lose their moral authority over the beliefs of the public and become instead unwitting flatterers of public opinion.

5.1 Epistemic Equality and Intellectual Authority

Tocqueville opens the second volume of *Democracy in America* with this epistemological transformation. In a feudal aristocracy, rigid, recognized inequalities lead subjects to "take as a guide for their opinions the superior reason of one man or one class."[126] As with paternalism, this intellectual authority is conventional not natural, a consequence of social practice. Democracy rejects claims of epistemic privilege, because, as Tocqueville argues, "as citizens become more equal and more similar, the tendency of each blindly to believe a certain man or a certain class decreases."[127] As he famously puts it, no American has read Descartes, yet all Americans have become perfect Cartesians. That is precisely what we would expect from the ethic of independence Tocqueville associates with America's democratic culture. At the same time, however, just as the mimetic authority of particular persons collapses, the authority of an abstract "public opinion" acquires unprecedented strength:

> The disposition to believe the mass increases, and more and more it is opinion that leads the world. … In times of equality, men, because of their similarity, have no

[126] Tocqueville, *DA* 717.

[127] Tocqueville, *DA* 718.

> faith in each other; but this very similarity gives them an almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public; for it does not seem likely to them that, since all have similar enlightenment, truth is not found on the side of the greatest number.[128]

Democratic opinion-making does have some salutary effects. The introduction of *Democracy in America* associates the equality of conditions with the progress of minds.[129] Likewise, a democratic orator can address the nation in a manner that "enlarges thought and elevates language."[130] These momentary hopes notwithstanding, Tocqueville's general assessment is deeply pessimistic. His account of democratic epistemology shows how an admirable spirit of American Cartesianism begins by spreading a demand for citizens to "judge for themselves," yet concludes in a conformist dependence on "the idea of a single social power, simple and the same for all."[131]

This simple, social power is what Tocqueville terms the "moral power" of the majority.[132] An egalitarian point of departure implies that no particular man or class wields more wisdom than the people taken together. This is, he explains, the "theory of equality applied to minds."[133] Democratic citizens do not flatter masters the way French subjects flatter kings, yet they sacrifice their judgment to the wisdom of the majority. The slavish spirit of the courtier is universalized, not

---

[128] Tocqueville, *DA* 718-9. Cf. *DA* 414.

[129] Tocqueville, *DA*, 7.

[130] Tocqueville, *DA*, 868.

[131] Tocqueville, *DA*, 754.

[132] Tocqueville, *DA*, 416. Tocqueville echoes Kierkegaard's magisterial discussion of public opinion in 1846: "The category 'public' is reflection's mirage delusively making the individuals conceited, since everyone can arrogate to himself this mammoth, compared to which the concretions of actuality seem paltry. The public is the fairytale of an age of prudence, leading individuals to fancy themselves greater than kings, but again the public is the cruel abstraction by which individuals will be religiously educated—or be destroyed." Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age A Literary Review*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 93.

[133] Tocqueville, *DA* 404.

abolished, for none dares criticize the judgment of the people.[134] Americans do not give their monarch "their wives and daughters so that he would deign to elevate them to the rank of his mistresses; but by sacrificing their opinions to him, they prostitute themselves."[135] We find here a psychological variant of majority tyranny. Private judgment is not a sure source of independence, but rather delivers the individual "isolated and defenseless to the action of the greatest number."[136] The individual conforms not because of the fear of persecution, but out of an awe for the apparent wisdom of the mass. When the "public governs," Tocqueville insists, "there is no man who does not feel the value of the public's regard and who does not seek to win it by gaining the esteem and affection of those among whom he must live."[137] Not even a powerful monarch can resist public opinion. Louis XVI spoke "as a master, but in reality he himself was obedient to public opinion, which daily either inspired or swept him along, and which he regularly consulted, feared, and flattered."[138]

This purported freedom of thought and speech takes Americans from "extreme independence to extreme servitude."[139] There is no need for violent censorship, for the supremacy of public opinion makes it unthinkable to challenge the majority's judgment in the first place. Tocqueville's chief concern is the subtle means by which democratic culture tyrannizes the soul. The

---

[134] Consider the contemporary inclination to invoke polling results as evidence of the rectitude of our opinions. Or, more extreme still, the belief that electoral outcomes we oppose must have been the result of fraudulent manipulation. The charge of mass voter fraud—which is reasonably recognized as a threat to the integrity of democratic institutions—derives from an extreme identification of one's own views, the true views, and the public's views.

[135] Tocqueville, *DA* 423.

[136] Tocqueville, *DA* 719.

[137] Tocqueville, *DA* 889.

[138] Tocqueville, *AR* 156.

[139] Tocqueville, *DA* 291.

majority tyranny described in Volume I of *Democracy in America* is closely connected to the tutelary despotism described in Volume II. The description of epistemic servitude in the first volume is closely paralleled by the psychic analysis of despotism in the second.[140]

As Tocqueville puts it, there is "no country where, in general, there reigns less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America."[141] Within a sphere of acceptable opinion, Americans have unlimited freedom; but beyond that sphere no man dares to tread. The democratized Cartesian method ultimately counsels submission to mass prejudice. The "equality of conditions, at the same time that it makes men feel their independence, shows them their weakness," Tocqueville writes. Despite a public ideology of self-reliance, egalitarianism reveals man's dependence on his fellows.[142] Democrats recognize their personal weaknesses, refuse to defer to proper epistemic authorities, and finally succumb to the judgment of the impersonal crowd:

> As all men resemble each other more, each one feels more and more weak in the face of all. Not finding anything that raises him very far above them and that distinguishes him from them, he mistrusts himself as soon as they fight him; not only does he doubt his strength, but he also comes to doubt his right, and he is very close to acknowledging that he is wrong, when the greatest number assert it. The majority does not need to constrain him; it convinces him.[143]

It is worth reflecting on Tocqueville's account of democratic mass opinion formation in the context of America's contemporary discursive climate. Rather than converge, public opinion has been polarized in a dramatic fashion. Yet the Tocquevillian account continues to make a good deal of sense. Conspiracy theorizing, for example, reflects a proud assertion of independent judgment—a

---

[140] Compare here Tocqueville, *DA* 418 and *DA* 1259-61.

[141] Tocqueville, *DA* 417.

[142] Tocqueville, *DA* 1006.

[143] Tocqueville, *DA* 1148.

refusal to defer to epistemic elites or trusted authorities—yet it remains unmistakably a mass social phenomenon. The epistemic fracturing of the contemporary public sphere is an example of Tocquevillian democratic conformism masquerading as Cartesian skepticism. Importantly, for Tocqueville, these instances of ideological hardening are not the product of manipulative elites manufacturing consent or foreign provocateurs sowing discord through their control of society's media institutions. Much more worrying, Tocqueville claims, this tendency to irrational conformism is a product of egalitarianism itself, equality applied to minds.

5.2 Tocqueville Against the Enlightened Public Sphere

This wariness of public opinion contrasts markedly with the optimistic defense of intellectual freedom common among eighteenth-century *philosophes*. Tocqueville observes that it was they who popularized an ideal of free, individual judgment, which first emerged in the Reformation.[144] In so doing, these Enlightenment thinkers theorized a connection between the freedom of thought, the primacy of public opinion, and the discovery of rational truths. Dumarsais' entry on "the *philosophe*" for Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, for example, insists on a connection between philosophical reason and public opinion.[145] True reason, Dumarsais argues, consists in the prudent recognition of the limits of one's own capacity to judge. That recognition of one's own limited reason does not imply deference to particular epistemic authorities. Instead, the entry emphasizes the necessity of conforming to the judgments of society. Rejecting an ideal of the philosopher who stands in conflict with social life, he writes that for the *philosophe* "civil society is, as it were, a divinity on earth; he flatters it, he honors it by his probity, by an exact attention to his duties, and by a sincere desire not to be a useless or

[144] Tocqueville, *DA* 702-5.

[145] Cesar Chesneau Du Marsais, "Philosopher," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative*, trans. Dena Goodman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2002).

embarrassing member of it." Tocqueville shares this description of the divinized majority, but not Dumarsais' enthusiasm: "the people are like the divinity from this new world; everything emanates from and returns to them."[146]

The Enlightenment's celebration of reason rejects the aristocratic insistence on the wisdom of the few. Even a skeptic like David Hume cannot escape an epistemic deference to the aggregative powers of the people. He argues in "Of the Standard of Taste" that some aesthetic judgments are, indeed, truer than others, that these are "questions of fact, not sentiment."[147] Nevertheless, Hume continues, it is impossible to reliably detect those who are truly "qualified to give judgment on any work of art." Fortunately, with time, public opinion will reliably discover and celebrate that which is truly excellent. The "beauties of eloquence and poetry" will invariably win "public applause, which they maintain forever."

Jürgen Habermas is the most prominent recent defender of this Enlightenment faith in the convergence of public opinion and true judgment. The public sphere rested on the egalitarian epistemic assumption that "everyone was entitled to judge." Critics, Habermas explains, were not scornful of crude majoritarian judgment, but became "spokesmen for the public." The "better argument" is not defined with reference to a philosophical standard, but to the capacity to persuade the people.[148] Habermas' Enlightenment held out faith that that "*opinion publique* alone had insight into and made visible the *ordre naturel*."[149] As Habermas summarizes: "*Public debate was supposed to*

---

[146] Tocqueville, *DA* 85.

[147] David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays*, 241–42.

[148] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 41.

[149] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 55.

transform voluntas *into a* ratio *that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all.*"[150]

Tocqueville observes in democratic America the effective truth of this belief in a convergence of popular and true judgment. Americans believe that "enlightenment, like power, is disseminated in all the parts of this vast country. There, the beams of human intelligence, instead of coming from a common center, cut across each other in all directions."[151] Epistemic egalitarians refuse to submit to those of superior judgment, waiting instead for the aggregative discoveries of ordinary, democratic opinions. Where the Enlightenment saw that aggregation as a mark of progress, Tocqueville worries that it may come to constitute a slavish tyranny over the mind. Deference to public opinion leads democratic subjects to internalize their conformism. The sovereignty of the people perfects the tools of despotism, which no longer needs to coerce the body, for it touches the soul directly.

Conclusion

Tocqueville offers an unsettling account of how the abolition of feudal, personal authority offers an illusion of freedom and equality while concluding in social conformism and depersonalized dependence. Personal subjection violates the core promise of an egalitarian social state. And yet, as Tocqueville puts it, democrats "seemed to love liberty, but it turns out that they only hated the master."[152] They reject the personal dependence embodied by the servant relationship, but they run headlong into a new servitude at the tutelary hands of the state, the despotism of public opinion, and the invisible hand of the market. Ideological conformism and alienating class conflict emerge,

---

[150] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 83.

[151] Tocqueville, *DA* 295.

[152] Tocqueville, *AR* 151.

Tocqueville claims, from the logic of equality itself. A nation of equals refuses to acknowledge rank or privilege, yet the fact of inequality is never fully done away with. The resulting cognitive dissonance distorts our sense of social life and reworks the nature of inequality.

Tocqueville is at his most conservative in his insistence that deep inequalities will inevitably persist in democratic societies. He argues that democracy must find ways to legitimize those inequalities with a new egalitarian logic. For Tocqueville, "authority must always be found somewhere in the intellectual and moral world. Its place is variable, but it necessarily has a place."[153] Egalitarians will be troubled by Tocqueville's insistence on the ineradicability of inequality. He throws cold water on the ambition of establishing a society of full, genuine equals. More dangerous still, his proposed revitalization of personal forms of distinction—even in a democratic mode—runs the risk of justifying the hierarchical relationships liberalism and democracy reject.

Even if Tocqueville is right that the tutelary state and impersonal market pose a distinct threat to human freedom, they may remain improvements over the noxious status hierarchies and personal dependence that flourish in intimate, small-scale settings. For these reasons Tocqueville himself concludes *Democracy in America* by acknowledging that whatever brilliance and virtue may have been lost with the decline of aristocratic society, democratic equality remains unequivocally more just.[154] Nevertheless, Tocqueville's warning of democracy's penchant for impersonal power has proved remarkably prescient. Democrats wary of these developments must respond to Tocqueville's disconcerting charge that the source of the problem lies with the psychology of equality itself.

---

[153] Tocqueville, *DA* 716.

[154] Tocqueville, *DA*, 1282.

Chapter Five: Three Paths Forward

I have attempted to show how Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville appeal to idealized accounts of medieval feudalism to develop a series of parallel critiques of the modern state and market economy. Unlike the neo-medievalists treated in chapter one, they do not identify the liberal state or market economy with the plutocratic rule of neo-feudal elites. Modern society is best understood, they argue, as a kind of anarchy. The coercion experienced by modern subjects does not derive from the will of rulers or elites, but from amorphous and impersonal forces. The market economy is not subject to the control of the capitalists but answers to laws of competition. Private belief is not directed by state persecution or clerical superstition but is conditioned by the power of public opinion. Democratic politics fails to realize the decisive will of the people and drifts toward bureaucratism and proceduralism.

It is striking that such similar critiques come from master representatives of such diverse traditions. It is important, however, not to overstate these similarities. Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville articulate parallel complaints, but in important respects their critiques and certainly their positive programs are wildly incompatible. We must return here to what G.K. Chesterton termed the "medical mistake" of social and political criticism. Superficial agreement about what has gone wrong does not simply give rise to divergent prescriptions, it masks deeper disagreement over the very meaning of health:

> This is the arresting and dominant fact about modern social discussion; that the quarrel is not merely about the difficulties, but about the aim. We agree about the evil; it is about the good that we should tear each other's eyes out. We all admit that a lazy aristocracy is a bad thing. We should not by any means all admit that an active aristocracy would be a good thing. We all feel angry with an irreligious priesthood; but some of us would go mad with disgust at a really religious one. Everyone is indignant if our army is weak, including the people who would be even more indignant if it were strong. The social case is exactly the opposite of the medical case.

> We do not disagree, like doctors, about the precise nature of the illness, while agreeing about the nature of health. On the contrary, we all agree that England is unhealthy, but half of us would not look at her in what the other half would call blooming health.[1]

Carlyle, Marx, and Tocqueville lament the new anarchy, but they are drawn to entirely different visions of just authority. They critique laissez-faire but share no view about the correct relationship of politics and economics. They fear impersonality but do not agree in the least about what an appropriately re-personalized polity might look like.

This chapter treats the programs that flow from each thinker. Dividing our central theme in two parts, my hope is to reconstruct what each takes to be the source of modern servitude before turning to their respective visions of restoring mastery. Building on the interpretive work of the previous three chapters, my aim in this chapter is more directly critical and presentist. Much of today's discontent with liberal politics, I suggest, might be better understood when viewed through the political visions of these thinkers.

Carlyle identifies atheism and disenchantment as the source of the modern "rule of no-rule."[2] Laissez faire economics and sham politics will only be overcome with the rise of true religion—not the dead corpse of Christianity, but the worship of heroes. Carlyle points to the emerging "captains of industry" as the figures worthy of commanding reverent obedience, and he hopes to reconfigure "nomadic" laborers into disciplined, soldier-like workers.

This proposal invariably strikes modern readers as morally and practically preposterous. We are rightly allergic to any demand to formally institutionalize juridical hierarchy in this way, and

---

[1] G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, in G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 41.

[2] Carlyle, *LDP* 1.

Carlyle's preferred military metaphor in particular seems a decidedly wicked model for social organization. It is worth emphasizing, however, how attractive this Carlylean project once was not only to fascists, but to vanguardist communists and even conservative liberals like Max Weber. Weberian charismatic leadership atop routinized party-machines is a clear heir of Carlyle's project. More to the point, Carlyle offers an instructive if harsh rebuke of certain tendencies in contemporary political science and theory. We are tempted to think that political dysfunction today be fixed by clever institutional remedies. We are wary of populism and the destruction of norms, but we are inclined to imagine these developments as elite-driven corruptions that might be remedied with straightforward fixes. Carlyle's more pessimistic diagnosis should be taken seriously as a reminder that our current problems cannot be handily addressed with technocratic reforms.

Karl Marx identifies the problem of the modern world as the impotence of democratic will in the face of the structural power of capitalism. He does not blame modern servitude on disenchantment or atheism but targets the tyranny of the private sphere. We labor under the "slavery of civil society," he writes, a slavery that emerges from the bourgeois freedom characteristic of the liberty of the moderns.[3] Marx is frustratingly vague about the content of communist emancipation. He joins Carlyle in demanding that social life be placed under the conscious mastery of a ruling class. Unlike Carlyle, however, that ruling class is universal, the proletariat, not the select captains of industry.

Marx continues to have many admirers in contemporary political philosophy, though it is notable that this demand of collective mastery—the "dictatorship of the proletariat"—has fallen out

[3] Marx, "Critical Marginal Notes on the Article by a Prussian," (1844) *MECW* 3.198.

of favor.[4] Most of his contemporary followers develop theories of distributive and productive justice in line with various canonical Marxist declarations. Marxism remains instructive in emphasizing the centrality of *de facto* constraints on political sovereignty imposed by structural features of the modern capitalist economy. Nevertheless, the core Marxist revolutionary project has proven a failure. This failure centers on two quasi-theological errors: A fideistic approach to history, and an apophatic vision of emancipation. In subtle ways, both errors persist in much contemporary political philosophy.

Alexis de Tocqueville is in various respects the most relevant of these thinkers for our times. Unlike Carlyle and Marx, he remains a liberal—however tortured—and his reputation has flourished with the collapse of the twentieth century's experiments with fascism and communism. That success makes his pessimism all the more disconcerting. In 1856, he lamented the powerlessness of modern peoples: "I see around me nations whose souls seem to weaken as their prosperity and physical force grow, nations that remain, to borrow Hobbes' phrase, robust children who deserve only to be treated by means of the stick and the carrot."[5] As we have grown ever richer and stronger, Tocqueville may well have found in contemporary liberal democracies an even greater servile, infantile dependence on faceless bureaucracies and conformist public opinion.

Tocqueville's broad prescription remains quite popular. Communitarian enthusiasts for localism, civil society, and religion turn to Tocqueville's critique of social atomization and bureaucratic despotism. There is wisdom in his suggestion that we abandon the quest for mastery (collective or elitist) of society from above. The Tocquevillian emphasizes the need to rejuvenate

---

[4] For an exception, see Lea Ypi, "Democratic Dictatorship: Political Legitimacy in Marxist Perspective," *European Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2020): 277–91.

[5] Letter to Francis Lieber, 9/1/1856. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 182.

society from below through a restoration of pluralistic, human-scale forms of life that cultivate responsible and strong citizens.

There remain difficulties with this project, however. The institutions Tocqueville celebrates as sites of resistance to tutelary despotism have been in a state of decline for almost a century. What's more, Tocqueville's enthusiasm for civil society is too quickly assimilated into a bland and predictable anti-statism, a fact which explains his celebrity on the political right. Most fundamentally, Tocqueville's central diagnosis is often neglected even by his champions. As we have seen, Tocqueville blames modern servitude on an unbalanced love of equality. Contemporary political theorists are devoted to hunting out the remaining sources of inequality in American life. Tocqueville's challenge is that those worried about impersonal dependence should take a far more critical view of the reigning egalitarianism of our time.

1. Marx: From Market Anarchy to Collective Mastery

Since at least Louis Althusser, it has been standard to separate Marx's early humanistic philosophy from his mature scientific political economy.[6] Claims of an "epistemological break" are plausible given the differences between the systematic dissection of modern capitalism developed in *Capital* and the theoretical critiques of liberalism laid out in "On the Jewish Question," the critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and his 1842-3 journalistic writings. My general view is that claims of rupture are overstated, though I do not advance that argument here. My narrower suggestion is that certain fundamental commitments—that the bourgeois, market society is best understood as a condition of anarchy and that communist emancipation will require an imposition of collective mastery—persist across his corpus.

[6] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, ed. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979).

I argued in chapter three that Marx's theorization of medieval feudalism as the "democracy of unfreedom" helps us to understand an important dimension of "true democracy" and "human emancipation." Where political, economic, and religious life were unified in the Middle Ages, they have been fragmented and privatized under bourgeois liberalism. The central task is to overcome the bifurcated "two-fold life" of public citizenship and private atomization by doing away with the "rule by private property" and establishing a collective version of the "rule by man," the rule of the proletariat. This ambition animates virtually everything Marx writes.

The *German Ideology* proclaims that political fortunes are ruled by the "invisible hand" of the global market, but under communism men will "once more gain control of exchange, production and the way they behave to one another."[7] In an 1856 speech, Marx points to the "one great fact, characteristic of this our 19th century, a fact which no party dares deny." This fact, Marx explains, is that even as mankind has mastered nature through transformative economic and technological advances, it has come under the enslavement of the very forces it has brought to life. We must not respond by resisting modern productive powers, Marx explains, but by mastering them: "We know that to work well the newfangled forces of society, they only want to be mastered by newfangled men—and such are the working men."[8] In *Capital*, Marx repeats that we must not understand the modern economy as the tyranny of the individual capitalist, for he too is subject to "immanent laws of capitalist production" that confront him "as a coercive force external to him."[9] Capital is itself the master of modern times, "a social power, with the capitalist as its functionary … an alienated social

[7] Marx, *GI*, *MECW* 5.48.

[8] Marx, "Speech at the Anniversary of the *People's Paper*" (1856) *MECW* 14.655-6.

[9] Marx, *Capital* 381.

power which has gained an autonomous position and confronts society as a thing."[10] The mastery of capital by the universal proletariat is the sole means of overcoming alienation.

To attain mastery, the proletariat must undergo a program of maturation. For Marx, this maturation proceeds by accelerating the complexity unleashed by bourgeois capitalism. His polemical writings against rival socialists reveal Marx's embrace of technological progress, productive complexity, and universal dependence. Rather than turn to worker cooperatives or other utopian escapes, Marx insists that the proletariat must conquer capitalism's productive forces.

1.1 Revolutionary Cooperation

A crucial step in the program of proletarian maturation is the realization that economic conditions do not derive from natural laws beyond human control but are the product of human labor. Because labor is social, not individual, it can be made subject to deliberate, collective control. For this reason, the proletariat must come to understand the revolutionary power of cooperation. Conversely, they must not be fooled by the illusory promise of cooperation that underwrites the worker cooperative movement. In his inaugural address to the First International, Marx praises cooperatives for proving, by deed not theory, that labor can be organized on a large scale without the direction of bourgeois capital and market forces. He is wary, however, that socialists might draw the wrong lesson from these achievements. If workers remain wedded to cooperatives, they will "never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries."[11]

---

[10] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 3*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1993), 373.

[11] Marx, "Inaugural Address to the Working Men's International Association" (1864) *MECW* 20.12.

Socialists like Proudhon, for example, fetishize local, intimate, small-scale production, thereby reproducing the errors of utopian socialists and reactionaries nostalgic for the medieval guild economy. Such thinkers "want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles necessarily resulting therefrom. They desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating element."[12] Capitalism is responsible for unprecedented cooperation, but that cooperation is unconscious and anarchic. Consider, for example, a passage from Adam Smith on the complexity of modern production:

> If we examine, I say, all these things, and consider what a variety of labour is employed about each of them, we shall be sensible that without the assistance and cooperation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to, what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated.[13]

That claim remains a common feature of contemporary arguments for the globalized market economy. Leonard Read observed in a parable made famous by Milton Friedman that no single person could produce something as simple as the ordinary pencil, which is in fact the product of thousands of laborers across the world connected through invisible global supply chains.[14] The capitalist economy produces staggering cooperation without conscious design. For Marx, communists must not reject mass, impersonal coordination and retreat to primitive, parochial,

---

[12] Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy, MECW* 6.513.

[13] Smith, *WN* 23.

[14] Leonard E. Read, "I, Pencil," *The Freeman* 8, no. 12 (1958): 32–37. An earlier, amusing version of the argument is deployed by Walter Lippmann, who argued that an individual mind lacks the capacity to understand where his breakfast comes from, let alone understand the complexity of global economics: "The thinker, as he sits in his study drawing his plans for the direction of society, will do no thinking if his breakfast has not been produced for him by a social process which is beyond his detailed comprehension. He knows that his breakfast depends on workers on the coffee plantations of Brazil, the citrus groves of Florida, the sugar fields of Cuba, the wheat farms of the Dakotas, the dairies of New York; that it has been assembled by ships, railroads, and trucks, has been cooked with coal from Pennsylvania in utensils made of aluminum, china, steel, and glass. But the intricacy of one breakfast, if every process that brought it to the table had deliberately to be planned, would be beyond the understanding of any mind." Walter Lippmann, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society,* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), 30.

human-scale cooperation. Rather, they must embrace, radicalize, and master the anarchic cooperation of the market.

Capitalist cooperation is alienating and oppressive. Smith's "invisible hand" is an autonomous, alien force that dominates men by directing their labor. This domination will be overcome "by the individuals again subjecting these material forces to themselves." Capitalism produces an "illusory community" in which cooperation is experienced as masterless enslavement. Only through the "real community" of conscious, collective control, Marx argues, can "individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association."[15] Radicalizing the achievement of capitalism, the communist revolution replaces "*all-round* dependence" with "the control and conscious mastery" of man's productive powers.[16]

Three different concepts of cooperation should be distinguished here. Bourgeois capitalism produces global interdependence that, by means of the invisible hand and division of labor, operates in an unconscious manner. Utopian socialists and champions of worker cooperatives rebel against that alienating mode of cooperation, rejecting mass institutions and favoring intimate, human-scale economic life. Neither model is satisfactory for Marx. We must embrace capitalism's world-historical achievement of mass-cooperation but place it under the conscious direction of the revolutionary proletariat. To bring this mastery about, Marx emphasizes the necessity of trade unions, which are superior to worker cooperatives in facilitating proletarian self-education and maturation.

Proceeding through "the stern but steeling school of *labour*," the working class comes to understand its destiny: "*what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically

---

[15] Marx, *GI MECW* 5.78.

[16] Marx, *GI*, *MECW* 5.51.

be compelled to do."[17] Trade unionism is a crucial vehicle for this transformation of consciousness, serving a primarily political not economic function.[18] Unions are not valuable because they meaningfully improve working conditions—an impossibility, Marx thinks, within the market economy. Unions are valuable only insofar as they produce a specific kind of revolutionary subject.

Union activity, Marx argues, must channel and discipline class struggle, producing "a veritable civil war. … Once it has reached this point, association takes on a political character."[19] A union might begin with the aim of bargaining for higher wages and better hours. With time, however, this ambition must expand—building alliances of workers from across industry to achieve systematic transformation rather than meliorative improvements. The strike in particular, Marx explains, is especially valuable in forming proletarian solidarity.[20] As Marx and Engels put it in the *Manifesto*, unions may originally form "in order to keep up the rate of wages," and they may even be temporarily successful in that respect. Nevertheless, the "real fruit of their battle lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers."[21]

Under the influence of Malthus and the "wage-fund" theory of classical economics, a tradition of socialists from Proudhon to Lassalle argue that the iron laws of capitalist competition make it scientifically impossible for unions to influence wages. Even if a strike were to succeed in raising nominal wages, prices would be driven up by an equivalent amount. Proudhon declares "it is

---

[17] Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family* (1845) *MECW* 4.37.

[18] Shlomo Avineri provides a helpful discussion of the dialectical nature of revolutionary praxis. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, 143.

[19] Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy MECW* 6.211.

[20] Some of Marx's clearest statements to this effect come in his newspaper writings. See *MECW* 12.334 and 12.448.

[21] Marx and Engels, *CM*, *MECW* 6.493.

impossible for strikes followed by an increase of wages to end otherwise than in a general rise in prices: that is as certain as that two and two make four."[22]

Though he critiques Proudhon and Lasalle, Marx does not fundamentally disagree with their economic assessment of unionization. He too believes that unions are unable to resist the market's compulsion of wages to fall to subsistence levels, yet he defends their political importance nonetheless.[23] Marx's clearest statement comes in his critique of an Owenite, John Weston, delivered to the First International in 1865 and later published as *Value, Price and Profit*.[24] Here we find the difference between Marx's account of union organizing and contemporary defenses of trade unions. The standard argument for unions today is that by marshalling collective power, they can overcome the asymmetry in bargaining power between labor and capital and achieve higher wages and better conditions for their workers.

Marx thinks any such material victories would be short-lived. More fundamentally, even if a union were able to achieve such results, they would still be unable to overcome the basic degradation of capitalist wage slavery. Capitalist domination is a matter of political impotence not just material deprivation. Under capitalism, the proletariat will never receive its full collective product, accepting instead a partial wage set by an imaginary law of the market. As Engels summarizes, "it is not the highness or lowness of wages which constitutes the economical

---

[22] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *System of Economical Contradictions: Or, The Philosophy of Misery* (Boston: Tucker, 1888), 153.

[23] By "subsistence," Marx does not mean a biologically determined minimum level of life. He means rather a socially determined minimum. Part of his critique of Proudhon and Lasalle centers on their adoption of Malthusian accounts of subsistence as literally the minimum level needed to sustain life. Recognizing that wages fall to a socially determined level of subsistence is important, Marx argues, because it reveals that market forces are not natural laws, but are human creations that can be mastered by society.

[24] William Clare Roberts provides a helpful treatment of this debate. *Marx's Inferno*, 172–76.

degradation of the working class."[25] Marx puts the point in even stronger terms: "the system of wage labour is a system of slavery, and indeed of a slavery which becomes more severe in proportion as the social productive forces of labour develop whether the worker receives better or worse payment."[26]

To overcome wage slavery, the proletariat must struggle constantly against capitalism. To be satisfied with higher wages or improved working conditions is to become, Marx writes, a "mass of broken wretches past salvation."[27] This then is the purpose of trade union agitation: Not the achievement of improved conditions, but an education in (1) The slavery of capitalism; (2) The impossibility of meaningfully reforming capitalism; and (3) The proletariat's necessary role in overthrowing capitalism and establishing a wholly different economic regime. This is why Marx thinks that even failed union activity is crucial in facilitating the revolutionary education of the proletariat:

> There exists a class of philanthropists, and even of socialists, who consider strikes as very mischievous to the interests of the 'workingman himself,' and whose great aim consists in finding out a method of securing permanent average wages. … I am, on the very contrary, convinced that the alternative rise and fall of wages, and the continual conflicts between masters and men resulting therefrom, are, in the present organization of industry, the indispensable means of holding up the spirit of the laboring classes, of combining them into one great association against the encroachments of the ruling class, and of preventing them from becoming apathetic, thoughtless, more or less well-fed instruments of production.[28]

---

[25] Engels, "The Wages System" (1881) *MECW* 24.381.

[26] Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program" (1891) *MECW* 24.92.

[27] Marx, *Value, Price, and Profit*, *MECW* 20.148.

[28] *MECW* 12.169. For an example of a liberal socialist who believes that union activity ultimately harms the economic interests of the workers, see Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, *MCW* 3.936.

Trade unions and strikes are important because they facilitate the proletariat's acquisition of a revolutionary consciousness. Through organized struggle, the proletariat will come to understand the slavery attached to the wage system. The workers will be encouraged and compelled to demand ever-more radical transformations of the economic regime. At some point, they will be spiritually and materially prepared to overthrow bourgeois capitalism and to impose a new, revolutionary mastery over global economic forces.

1.2 Historical Fideism and Apophatic Emancipation

This abbreviated reconstruction of Marx's treatment of trade unionism aims to bring out a pattern in his thought: If the problem of bourgeois liberalism and the capitalist economy is the establishment of social and economic anarchy, the solution will consist in establishing revolutionary, collective mastery over the conditions of life. For Marx, this mastery must not be elitist—he is critical of labor aristocratism—it must instead be a form of universal mastery, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Marx's vision of proletarian organization and maturation is a story of self-education, or as he puts it in his 1843 letter to Ruge, "self-clarification."[29] The proletariat is not hierarchically instructed by theorists like Marx but comes to learn for itself the necessity of revolutionary transformation.[30] This is why Marx rebukes his critics for attempting to write recipes for the restaurants of the

[29] "Letter to Ruge," *MECW* 3.144.

[30] Georg Lukács offers the most famous account of this interpretation—proletarian self-knowledge consists in the recognition of itself as a fully reified commodity. That knowledge transforms the proletariat into the world-historical, revolutionary subject. *History and Class Consciousness; Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. He summarizes the view in a 1919 essay: "the mere fact of knowledge produces an essential modification in the object known: thanks to the act of consciousness, of knowledge. … the distinction between subject and object disappears, and with it, therefore, the distinction between theory and practice. Without sacrificing any of its purity, impartiality or truth, theory becomes action, practice" *Tactics and Ethics: 1919-1929* (London: Verso, 2014), 15.

future.[31] Speculative reflections about justice cannot be deployed to design an emancipatory regime in the abstract. We cannot imagine what ingredients tomorrow will offer until we have been liberated from the constraints of today's kitchen.[32]

There is an old debate about whether Marx provides contemporary political philosophy with a workable, moral theory of justice.[33] There is no doubt that within his corpus, elements of such a theory may be found. But it is important to emphasize why Marx himself could not pursue such a course. We must take seriously two central facts about his vision of emancipation: First, a fideistic approach to history and, specifically, to the maturation of the proletariat's revolutionary consciousness. And second, an apophatic refusal to specify what communist emancipation consists in.

The model of working-class self-education outlined above attempts to show that through the struggles and failures of organization, the working class will be transformed into a revolutionary subject. The argument schematically proceeds as follows: (1) Through organization, the working class comes to feel its own power and to better see that it is responsible for the productive forces experienced anarchically under bourgeois capitalism; (2) The class struggle will reveal to the working class the futility of reforming working conditions within the constraints of capitalist competition; (3) The proletariat will acquire the will and capacity to overthrow capitalism and place the productive forces under conscious collective control.

---

[31] Marx, *Capital* 99.

[32] Though he is sympathetic in broad terms, G.A. Cohen warns that "unless we write recipes for future kitchens, there's no reason to think we'll get the food we like." *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're so Rich?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 77.

[33] See, most notably, the conflicting views of Marx and justice defended by Cohen and Wood. G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Allen W. Wood, "The Marxian Critique of Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 244–82.

There are evident difficulties with this argument. The second premise—the impossibility of overcoming degradation and alienation within the market economy—is contested by non-Marxist socialists and liberals. But the deeper difficulty is the extraordinary ellipsis between the second premise and the conclusion. How do we know that the school of labor will produce the revolutionary consciousness Marx demands? How can we be sure that the workers will not simply become the "apathetic, thoughtless, more or less well-fed instruments of production" Marx warns of? And what is a Marxist to do when it seems that the proletariat is not, of its own, coming to understand its world-historical destiny? It seems clear as an interpretive matter that Marx has absolute faith in the transformation of the proletariat into a revolutionary class. It seems equally clear as a matter of history that no such transformation has occurred.

History, consequently, cannot play the role that Marx demands of it. Put another way, history is not directing the transformation of the proletariat in the direction he wishes. Marx comes closest to recognizing this fact in his evocative descriptions of the lumpenproletariat, especially in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. In his sensitive discussion of the failure of the June Days, the collapse of the Second Republic, and the coup of Napoleon III, Marx anticipates the bond between charismatic leadership and mass popular support that will be a staple of European history for the next century. In this respect Marx's narration of historical complexity is more instructive than his theoretical faith in historical progress. The working class's repeated rejection of communist revolution can only be reconciled with Marxist theory through the construction of increasingly unprincipled and implausible conceptual epicycles.

The failure of historical fideism is a species of a more general difficulty in Marx's positive vision. We might refer to that failure in theological terms as well: his apophatic account of emancipation. Marx's refusal to write recipes for the future derives from a recognition that we

cannot theorize communism *ex ante*. As he and Engels put it, communism is a movement not a doctrine: "The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes."[34] Marx knows what communism will not be like: It will not be commodifying, it will not be alienating, it will not be irrational. But he prescinds from offering much by way of positive content.

In his extraordinary study, Leszek Kolakowski argues that Marx is always dedicated to three "motifs:" (1) A romantic vision of a humanistic and non-commodified social life; (2) A Faustian-Promethean or voluntarist vision of society under the conscious mastery of the proletariat; and (3) A rationalistic faith in the inevitability of emancipation and the scientific direction of economic life under communism.[35] There is an interesting parallel here to the three intellectual currents Lenin took Marx to synthesize: English political economy, French revolutionary socialism, and German Hegelian philosophy.[36]

Each of Kolakowski's motifs remains apophatic for Marx. Romantic humanism is a rebellion against commodified community, Promethean voluntarism a rebellion against anarchy, and scientific rationalism a rebellion against capitalist overproduction and crisis. As a historical and economic rationalist, Marx demands an ever-greater intensification of globalized, mass, economic cooperation. Trade unions are to be embraced insofar as they help the proletariat better understand the social

---

[34] Marx and Engels, *CM*, *MECW* 6.498. Cf. Engels *MECW* 6.303-4.

[35] Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*, trans. Paul Stephen Falla (New York: Norton & Company, 2005), 335–41.

[36] There is no one-to-one mapping between these two sets of three, but they provide two overlapping ways to think about Marx's project.

nature of wealth and the possibility of rationally organizing modern production. As a Promethean, he defers to the creativity and spontaneity of the working class once it has acquired the revolutionary consciousness. Particular institutional forms create a new kind of proletariat—rational, disciplined, and courageous—but once that proletariat is created, it will discover for itself the means of building a new kind of society. Finally, as a romantic humanist, he promises that the Promethean-scientific proletariat will establish a society of human emancipation, the world in which the free development of each will genuinely be the condition for the free development of all.[37] Marx never proposes a plausible way of reconciling the three demands, and for that reason he promises that history will provide a synthesis that theoretical reflection never can. In this philosophical apophaticism, we find the fundamental irresponsibility of the Marxist program. The discordant trajectories of Marxism in theory and practice reveal the dangers of appealing to history as a substitute for coherence.

1.3 Negative Marxist Lessons

Marx is seductive because he promises synthesis and reconciliation, an emancipatory whole—scientific, moral, collective mastery—that overcomes the alienation and anarchy of a depersonalized capitalist society. History and the maturation of revolutionary proletariat consciousness is meant to prove through practice what political philosophers could never discover through detached theory. The failure of that history is consequently the sole refutation Marx himself could accept. Nevertheless, there remain certain instructive lessons in Marx's diagnosis of anarchy and prescription of collective, rational mastery.

[37] These contrasting motifs animated subsequent generations of intra-Marxist debate. Indeed, an instructive way to study the differences between Vanguardists, ethical Marxists, central planners, etc. is to track which of the motifs they devote themselves to most completely.

Marx is most instructive in his emphasis on the structural constraints that implicitly bind liberal democracy. In his case, these constraints are derived from the capitalist economy and its imperatives of accumulation and competition. By establishing or joining a market system, liberal democracies adopt a system of impersonal economic discipline. By understanding liberal democracy in these terms, Marxists ought to be inoculated from the conspiracist tendencies that characterize much popular and academic criticism today. There is no elite class pulling the strings, rigging the system, or subverting democratic will. In a market society, all parties—the government and corporations included—are bound by amorphous market forces.

For Marx, these *de facto* fetters on democratic will are intolerable. The basic conditions of social life should not be removed from the conscious control of the people. His Prometheanism offers the promise of a society that overcomes political impotence and anarchy. We must be more circumspect in our evaluation of market discipline. As the next chapter will treat at greater length, there are good reasons to remove certain powers from the reach of the state. Marx is helpful, however, in reminding us that these are in fact political choices and should be acknowledged as such. We should not mistake market discipline for a natural, reified law of economic reality. Democratic governments may have good, decisive reasons to limit their own power, but they must recognize honestly that the decision to marketize today binds future generations in ways contemporary voters may not fully understand.

In a well-known exchange with James Madison, Thomas Jefferson denied the right of the current generation to bind the future: "'*the earth belongs in usufruct to the living*' … the dead have neither powers nor rights over it."[38] Consequently, Jefferson proposes that all laws and constitutions be sunsetted, so that new generations may choose freely to continue or revise them. Madison famously

[38] Jefferson to Madison, September 6, 1789. Jefferson and Smith, *The Republic of Letters*, 632.

replies in a related context that so doing would undermine the reverence of the law needed for any regime to function.[39] This debate is remembered as a testament to the complicated relationship between constitutionalism and democracy. Neglected, however, is Jefferson's focus on public debt as a means of improperly and undemocratically binding the future.[40] It is illegitimate for the present generation to build up a public debt whose necessary maintenance will restrict the political freedom of future generations. With the financialization of public debt as global capital, we see today with particular clarity the force of this Jeffersonian anxiety. The transition from tax to debt-financed public spending is popular, but it establishes a dependency that can bring down governments and render irrelevant electoral mandates.[41]

Self-binding is not in itself objectionable. In the case of constitutionalism, Madison is correct that it is, in fact, a necessary feature of responsible government. But the power of contemporary global bond markets highlights a danger of trading short-term advantage for long-term fetters. There is a tendency for democracies to sleep-walk into future constraints they do not publicly acknowledge or adequately debate. If there are good reasons to commit to self-binding, there are also good reasons to reserve a right to reconsider those constraints in the future. Prometheanism in its Marxian and Jeffersonian varieties may offer an exaggerated or irresponsible vision of democratic sovereignty, but self-imposed helplessness is little better.

---

[39] Publius, *Federalist Papers*, Paper 49.

[40] Jefferson writes: "with respect to future debts, would it not be wise & just for that nation to declare, in the constitution they are forming, that neither the legislature, nor the nation itself, can validly contract more debt than they may pay within their own age, or within the term of 19. years? and that all future contracts will be deemed void as to what shall remain unpaid at the end of 19. years from their date?" *The Republic of Letters*, 634.

[41] Historically, this form of impersonal discipline constrained socialist governments. The most recent example of this dynamic, however, was the downfall of Truss' liberalizing premiership in Britain. A structural status quo bias preserves a centrist economic consensus that resists reform from both left and right.

There is a related truth in Marx's interpretation of wage slavery as a condition of political impotence rather than economic degradation. Marx departs from moralized critiques of the market that focus on the low wages or brutal working conditions. There is no question today that wages and conditions have improved dramatically. The Western world has profited from material improvements Marx did not think possible, and many of his most powerful concepts—the very idea of the "working class" even—do not seem particularly apt as descriptions of contemporary capitalism. Yet Marx's fundamental preoccupation is not material wellbeing but the capacity of a people to wield mastery over a common life. This central concern loses much of its emotional force as material conditions improve, but that may prove to be a danger of prosperity. Marx's historical determinism does not admit the possibility of a permanent exchange of commercial prosperity for political freedom. His materialism rejects spiritualized interpretations of alienation and ultimately does not provide a satisfactory account of ideology. By remaining more attentive to the psychological forces of liberal equality, Carlyle and Tocqueville have proved more prescient.

Finally, we should derive from Marx's failed attempt to reconcile will, reason, and community a skepticism of any theory that promises to synthesize all political goods. Much of contemporary democratic theory takes on a worryingly monistic character. Democracy is defended (1) as a uniquely legitimate form of political authority; (2) as an epistemically rational mode of discovering good policies; and (3) as a regime that instantiates a just community of equals. We see here the same triadic synthesis that characterized Marx's project. Nineteenth-century liberals had no difficulty recognizing a tension between democratic government and liberal justice. Many of the leading books of the period warn that popular government will produce irrational and unjust

governance.[42] For many contemporary democratic theorists, in contrast, "liberal democracy" is a redundancy, not a tension. The next chapter will take this up in greater detail, but it seems that embracing the unity of political goods does little for the cause of conceptual clarity. The example of Marxism alone gives us reason to prefer theories that emphasize tradeoffs and tensions over those that promise reconciliation and harmony. A more avowedly pluralistic political philosophy would allow us to do what Marx rejects: Weigh and balance competing and potentially incompatible ideals.

2. Carlyle: Heroic Leadership and Disciplined Obedience

The root of masterless servitude in the modern world, Carlyle argues, is the disappearance of faith and the rise of atheism. By atheism, he does not mean the decline of Christianity, for Christianity itself has long been atheistic on Carlyle's account. He means instead something akin to what Weber will later call disenchantment: The rise of methodical rationality and a corresponding iron cage. True faith, for Carlyle, is not a matter of creeds or liturgies, but a reverence for heroic men. He sees no hope for the rise of new heroes in parliament or from the remnants of the landed aristocracy. He is fixated instead with a new type of hero characteristic of the modern age: The Captain of Industry.

The most obvious manifestation of modern servitude for Carlyle is laissez-faire economics, an almost literal rendering of "no government." He refers to the working class as living in a condition of "nomadism," and he is contemptuous of liberal political economy for celebrating their abandonment and neglect. If the shepherdless working class is to be pitied, the aristocracy and parliamentary class is to be held in contempt. As Carlyle summarizes in the opening of the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, "These rulers were not ruling at all; they had merely got on the attributes and clothes of

[42] A central theme of the work of James Fitzjames Stephen, Henry Maine, William Lecky, and John Stuart Mill is the tension between liberty and popular government.

rulers, and were surreptitiously drawing the wages, while the work remained undone."[43] The emergence of pauperism makes visible a spiritual crisis that follows the rise of mechanism and the disappearance of religion.

2.1 Evolving Historical Catastrophism

Carlyle wavers throughout his corpus between two visions of history. At times, he suggests that the atheism of the present will soon collapse and give rise to a new heroism. Just as the *Ancien Regime* gave rise to the French Revolution and Napoleon, so too will the catastrophic condition of the English working class inevitably produce an overthrow of the age. Yet elsewhere Carlyle retreats from historical determinism. He suggests that the age of rationalistic mechanism, sham-rule, and nomadism constitutes a stable if contemptible historical settlement. Carlyle does not write systematically enough for us to cleanly trace evolution in his thought on this point, for both possibilities are present in his earlier and later works. But it is fair to say that his later writings incline toward the interpretation of pessimistic stability, while the earlier writings emphasize deterministic, historical catastrophism.

Modern man, Carlyle argues, is enslaved by a set of spiritual forces that flow from the rationalistic, atheistic nature of the "age of mechanism." Methodical calculation and atheism produce the gospels of dilettantism and mammon. Enraptured by hedonistic materialism and liberal doctrines of equality, the few abdicate their duty to govern the many. This abdication cannot be undone with institutional reforms because it is symptomatic of a deeper spiritual sickness: "the Government cannot do, by all its signalling and commanding, what the Society is radically indisposed to do. In the long-run every Government is the exact symbol of its People, with their wisdom and unwisdom; we

[43] Carlyle, *LDP* 11.

have to say, Like People like Government."[44] This is why Carlyle rejects "Morrison Pill" miracle-cure solutions. Radical spiritual restoration is necessary to overcome disenchantment and no-government.

Given his contempt for the "logic mill" style of philosophy, it is unsurprising that Carlyle does not offer a systematic statement of what true religion consists in, how the modern world lost its primeval faith, and how a spiritual revival might begin.[45] In his more determinist moments, Carlyle argues schematically as follows: (1) The modern age is wrong to suppose that men act on the basis of pain and pleasure, that egoism and calculation direct motivation. Human nature is essentially religious. All societies can only be understood by identifying the religious core of the culture. The great movements of recent memory—the French Revolution and Chartism, for example—are religious in orientation; (2) Contemporary society has forgotten the ineradicable force of religion. It imagines itself operating under the power of interest and competition. The age of Mechanism is a function of an ideological delusion that human nature has changed; (3) Consequently, the Age of Mechanism cannot hold. A new religion and therefore heroism will soon emerge. In his more pessimistic writings—"Shooting Niagara" and the *Latter Day Pamphlets* for example—this prophetic conclusion becomes less prominent, as Carlyle begins to countenance the stability of the disenchanted world of no-rule.

This mistake of the age of Mechanism is partly anthropological. Benthamites imagine that human beings are motivated by egoism alone. For that reason, they proceed through a calculus of pain and pleasure, aiming to alchemically convert the pursuit of self-interest into a system of social

---

[44] Carlyle, *PP* 265.

[45] "Our favorite Philosophers have no love and no hatred; they stand among us not to do, nor to create anything, but as a sort of Logic-mills to grind out the true causes and effects of all that is done and created." Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 16.

life. Modern utilitarians and rationalists reduce "this God's world to a dead brute Steam-engine, the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains."[46] This view of human nature is refuted by history, which teaches that:

> the checks and balances of Profit and Loss have never been the grand agents with men; that they have never been roused into deep, thorough, all-pervading efforts by any computable prospect of Profit and Loss, for any visible, finite object; but always for some invisible and infinite one. The Crusades took their rise in Religion; their visible object was, commercially speaking, worth nothing. It was the boundless Invisible world that was laid bare in the imaginations of those men; and in its burning light, the visible shrunk as a scroll. Not mechanical, nor produced by mechanical means was this vast movement … The French Revolution itself had something higher in it than cheap bread and a Habeas-corpus act. Here too was an Idea: a Dynamic, not a Mechanic force. It was a struggle, though a blind and at last an insane one, for the infinite, divine nature of Right, of Freedom, of Country.[47]

Carlyle is attracted in part to the savage revolutionaries because he finds in them a religious repudiation of mechanism. Liberals and Whigs, on the other hand, favor institutional reforms because they identify popular discontent with a philosophy of the stomach. They fail to see that working-class agitation is a spiritual rebellion against "no-government." For the working class, revolt is the response to "a blind No-God of Necessity and Mechanism, that held them like a hideous World-Steamengine, like a hideous Phalaris' Bull, imprisoned in its own iron belly."[48]

At the same time, Carlyle insists that the spirit of mechanism has transformed society and human consciousness. Faith has disappeared in modern Europe: "there is no religion; there is no God; man has lost his soul and vainly seeks antiseptic salt. Vainly: in killing Kings, in passing

---

[46] Carlyle, *Hero Worship*, 65.

[47] Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *EPS* 13-4.

[48] Carlyle, "Chartism," *EPS* 85.

Reform Bills, in French Revolutions, Manchester Insurrections, is found no remedy."[49] Here we find the central ambiguity in Carlyle's polemic. Has the age of Mechanism killed religion and spread disenchantment, or has it merely temporarily distracted man from his true nature? Have the Gospels of Mammon and Dilettantism suffocated hero-worship, or are they periods of transition? This ambiguity at the level of diagnosis explains Carlyle's wavering between two possibilities: A catastrophist vision of inevitable revolution and a despairing possibility of Nietzschean last men. The question, in other words, is how stable the generative core of a disenchanted, mechanistic world is. For Carlyle, all societies are marked by some guiding spirit:

> Every Society, every Polity, has a spiritual principle; is the embodiment, tentative and more or less complete, of an Idea: all its tendencies of endeavour, specialties of custom, its laws, politics and whole procedure (as the glance of some Montesquieu, across innumerable superficial entanglements, can partly decipher), are prescribed by an Idea, and flow naturally from it, as movements from the living source of motion. This Idea, be it of devotion to a man or class of men, to a creed, to an institution, or even, as in more ancient times, to a piece of land, is ever a true Loyalty; has in it something of a religious, paramount, quite infinite character; it is properly the Soul of the State, its Life; as mysterious as other forms of Life, and like these working secretly, and in a depth beyond that of consciousness.[50]

Even if Mechanism is a Carlylean "Sham Religion," it animates contemporary society in a manner akin to religions past. In a sense, liberal and utilitarian formulas become the religious core of an age of Mechanism.[51] In *Hero Worship*, Carlyle acknowledges that Benthanism "has something complete, manful, in such fearless committal of itself to what it finds true; you may call it Heroic, though a Heroism with its *eyes* put out."[52] Is modern disenchantment and mechanism so obviously a sham

---

[49] Carlyle, *PP* 140.

[50] Carlyle, "Characteristics, *EPS* 32.

[51] Carlyle, *PP* 139.

[52] Carlyle, *Hero Worship*, 148.

that it must necessarily collapse and be replaced by true heroism? Or is the mediocrity, spiritual anarchy, and atheism of this world a tragic but stable end of history? Carlyle never gives a definitive answer.

2.2 The Military Metaphor

Carlyle is less confident than Marx that history will overcome the alienation and degradation of the bourgeois world. But he joins Marx in insisting that history renders obsolete all past forms of authority. In *Past and Present*, he writes that democracy makes it impossible to reimpose traditional hierarchy: "no man is, or can henceforth be, the brass-collar thrall of any man; you will have to bind him by other, far nobler and cunninger methods."[53] Carlyle's "Shooting Niagara," written in response to the 1862 Reform Bill opens with the same declaration—democracy, liberty, and laissez-faire are the unstoppable forces of the age.[54] The question then is what kind of new heroes might emerge to bring an end to modern anarchy. As he puts it in "Chartism," with the "supreme triumph of Cash, a changed time has entered; there must a changed Aristocracy enter."[55]

In *Past and Present*, Carlyle begins to outline who these new aristocrats must be: The captains of industry. The old feudal lords emerged from the martial aristocracy that arose with the fall of Rome. The new lords must replace that fighting spirit with its modern equivalent—the spirit of work. Unlike the idle "unworking" landed aristocracy, the emerging class of industrialists is disciplined and focused, and it has proved itself capable of answering that most fundamental

---

[53] Carlyle, *PP* 247.

[54] "That England would have to take the Niagara leap of completed Democracy one day, was also a plain prophecy, though uncertain as to time." Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara," *EPS* 266.

[55] Carlyle, "Chartism" *EPS* 97.

"Problem of the whole Future," the organization of labor.[56] The new industrialists are uniquely capable of establishing mastery over society. The chivalry of medieval romance shall be replaced with a "Chivalry of Work" that is in fact "far nobler than any Chivalry of Fighting was."[57]

If the industrialists are to be the new captains, the workers must be the new soldiers. As we have seen, Carlyle divinizes work—*ora et labora*—and celebrates the emergence of a devoted, disciplined, sacral obedience among workers. Unlike the nomadic paupers, the new proletariat will be unified and organized, applying to the conditions of industrial labor the spirit of the monks of St. Edmundsbury. As Carlyle puts it, "not as a bewildered bewildering mob; but as a firm regimented mass, with real captains over them, will these men march."[58]

Carlyle offers his most evocative statement of the militaristic reorganization of society in the *Latter Day Pamphlets*. He closes the first of these essays with an imaginary speech given by a heroic prime minister to the "floods of Irish and other Beggars … the Pauper Populations of these Realms."[59] The speech dismisses the empty promises of democratic self-government. Democracy can no more glorify the working classes than suffrage could ennoble horses. These men must understand, Carlyle writes, that emancipation will only deliver further degradation:

> You are of the nature of *slaves*,--or if you prefer the word, of *nomadic, and now even vagrant and vagabond servants that can find no master on those terms*; which seems to me a much uglier word. Emancipation? You have been "emancipated" with a vengeance! Foolish souls, I say the whole world cannot emancipate you. Fealty to ignorant Unruliness, to gluttonous sluggish Improvidence, to the Beerpot and the Devil, who

---

[56] Carlyle, *PP* 254. Similarly, in the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, he writes: "the 'Organisation of Labour' (*not* organizable by the mad methods tried hitherto) is the the universal vital Problem of the world. To bring these hordes of outcast captainless soldiers under due captaincy? This is really the question of questions." *LDP* 36.

[57] Carlyle, *PP* 268.

[58] Carlyle, *PP*, 270.

[59] Carlyle, *LDP* 38.

> is there that can emancipate a man in that predicament? Not a whole Reform Bill, a whole French Revolution executed for his behoof alone: nothing but God the Maker can emancipate him by making him anew.[60]

The only way for these men to be saved is by being transformed into soldiers. They must "become, from a nomadic Banditti of Idleness, Soldiers of Industry!"[61] Only through "wise obedience and wise command," he explains in a later pamphlet, can Britain become "a Governed Commonwealth, and *Civitas Dei*, if it please God!"[62] Carlyle is aware of how reactionary his proposal is, and he ridicules the protests of humanitarian moralists, constitutional lawyers, and professors of the dismal science. In this complete rejection of British liberty and constitutionalism, we see how unrelentingly modern his proposal is. The conservative tradition canvassed in chapter one is skeptical of modern industry and hostile to political centralization. It praised the medieval nature of the English constitution, sought to restore the diffuse, pluralistic regime of the feudal estate system, and favored the intimate, personal guild economy to the modern factory.

For Carlyle, mastery and spiritual revival comes through coordinated, consolidated, industrial discipline. The workers will be privately organized under industrialists, who will cooperate with the central government and its "public Captains."[63] There will be a seamless unity of private and state power. This will not replicate the medieval model of competing nodes of imperfect and overlapping authority. Nor will there be any independent clerisy to check and regulate the various sites of command and obedience. All authority—spiritual, economic, and political—will be linked in the fashion of a unitary, hierarchical military.

---

[60] Carlyle, *LDP*, 42.

[61] Carlyle, *LDP*, 45.

[62] Carlyle, *LDP*, 166.

[63] Carlyle, *LDP* 166.

Carlyle provides in systematic and unvarnished form an anticipation of fascism. One particularly sharp parallel can be found in the thought of Ernst Jünger, a representative of the German "conservative revolution" who broke with Hitler while articulating his own denunciation of liberal society. In a series of early writings, "On Pain," *The Worker*, and most influentially *The Storm of Steel*, Jünger identifies the disciplined, obedient, soldier produced by the military experience of the First World War as the model future subject. Liberalism, Jünger writes, is averse to pain and struggle. Grand cafés have become the "true palaces of democracy. Here one senses the dream-like, painless, and oddly agitated ease that fills the air like a narcotic."[64] Following Nietzsche, Jünger writes this is an age of convenience, prosperity, and frivolity. But unlike Nietzsche, he claims that the Great War has brought this age to an end. The experience of so many German men on the front has initiated an irreversible, permanent desensitization. Pain ceases to be a thing avoided and becomes an object of mastery: "life strives incessantly to stay in contact with pain. Indeed, discipline means nothing other than this, whether it is of the priestly-ascetic kind directed toward abnegation or of the warlike-heroic kind directed toward hardening oneself like steel."[65] With that Carlylean comparison, Jünger celebrates a new ethic of mass, disciplined soldiery.

Where liberals warn of the moral costs that accompany a desensitization to pain and violence, Jünger welcomes the transformation. In *The Worker*, he echoes Carlyle in celebrating the discipline of modern labor. Repudiating humanistic and moral critics of industrial alienation, Jünger believes the disciplined, desensitized, obedient worker created by mass industry is the new model man. Freedom ceases to mean romantic self-creation or liberal individuality. For the worker,

---

[64] Ernst Jünger, *On Pain*, trans. David C. Durst (New York: Telos Press, 2008), 12–13. This description of liberalism's "oddly agitated ease" recalls Tocqueville's famous discussion of "Why the Americans appear so restless amid their wellbeing." *DA* 942-7.

[65] Jünger, *On Pain* 16–17.

freedom is identical with the "demand for work. This means that the extent of the freedom of the individual corresponds exactly to the extent to which he is a worker. To be a worker … means to take part in a new humanity destined for dominion."[66]

Nietzsche, not Carlyle, is Jünger's master in these works. While Carlyle was widely read by European fascists of the early twentieth century, I know of no direct evidence linking Carlyle to Jünger in particular. My aim in offering this comparison is to point out the homology, not the genealogy of the metaphor of the worker as soldier, which animated many of the fascists Herf treats under his label, "reactionary modernism."[67] Fascism, however, does not hold a monopoly on the martial metaphor. Disgust with liberalism led many on the Marxist left to also embrace the image. With the failure of the working class to acquire the revolutionary consciousness Marx predicted, the central question for communists became the role of the Party. Lenin develops the most consequential version of party theory with his account of revolutionary vanguardism, but even in critics of Lenin like Antonio Gramsci we find parallel maneuvers.

Gramsci rebukes Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg for placing their faith in spontaneous, leaderless revolution. Crisis alone, he writes, "cannot give the attacking forces the ability to organize with lightning speed in time and in space; still less can it endow them with fighting spirit."[68] To succeed, the communist party must become a disciplined, organized army. Like an army, the party will be composed of "a mass element … whose participation takes the form of discipline and loyalty, rather than any creative spirit or organizational ability." Above these disciplined soldiers, the party

---

[66] Ernst Jünger, *The Worker: Dominion and Form*, trans. Laurence Paul Hemming and Bogdan Costea (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 40.

[67] Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*.

[68] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 17.

requires a general staff that can "centralize, organize, and discipline" the members. Neither element alone is sufficient, yet finding a capable leadership class takes priority: "it is easier to form an army than to form generals."[69] This martial depiction of the party—which as in the case of Jünger blurs the line between metaphor and reality—evinces clear continuity with Carlylean categories. Gramsci famously reconceptualizes the party as a kind of Machiavellian Prince. As with Carlyle's captains of industry, the worker's obedience to the Party-Prince takes on a sacral character: "The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organizer of an intellectual and moral reform… In men's consciences, the Prince takes the place of the divinity or the categorical imperative."[70]

In Gramsci and Jünger, we see communist and fascist appropriations of Carlyle's disciplined, martial metaphor. The appeal of that imagery was felt even by some liberals. Weber—who cites Carlyle's vision of heroism in the opening pages of *The Protestant Ethic*—attempts in effect to reconcile Carlyle with liberal parliamentarism. Indeed, Weber's turn to charismatic authority above a bureaucratized party machine is a model of hero worship and soldier-like discipline.

Like Jünger, Weber is impressed by the experience of discipline made manifest by the Great War. Unlike Jünger and Carlyle, this model of discipline leads Weber to conclude that the mass public may be capable of responsible, orderly democratic citizenship. The ballot, he writes, remains "the *only* instrument of power which is at all *capable* of giving the people who are subject to bureaucratic rule a minimal right of co-determination in the affairs of the community."[71] Like labor

---

[69] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 152-3.

[70] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 133.

[71] Weber, "Suffrage and Democracy" in *WPW* 106.

unions—which he praises in similar terms[72]—party-structured mass democracy can make use of the discipline and unity of modern militarism.[73] The party provides "orderly *leadership* of the masses" which is necessary for "breaking *unregulated* rule by the street and leadership by chance demagogues."[74]

For Weber, the party conjoins charismatic leadership and mass discipline. Connecting plebiscitary and charismatic authority, Weber recognizes that the modern party machine produces a "loss of soul" for the membership. This "spiritual proletarianization" is necessary, however, as "the only choice lies between a leadership democracy with a 'machine' and a democracy without a leader, which means rule by the 'professional politician' who has no vocation, the type of man who lacks precisely those inner, charismatic qualities which make a leader."[75] Developing Carlyle's idiom, Weber attacks the "professional" political class for giving up on "working" and occupying itself instead with "talking."[76] The iron cage of rational calculation and technical bureaucratization can only be overcome with a unity of charismatic, heroic rule and disciplined, soldier-like obedience.

This martial reconceptualization of politics is a response to the anarchic nature of bourgeois liberalism. Carlyle is the first to envision a model of militaristic-capitalist discipline. Jünger, Gramsci, and Weber make use of that model in fascist, communist, and liberal-nationalist directions. Carlyle's

---

[72] "The feeling of honour, of comradeship among workmates and allies in a factory or in a branch of industry binds them in solidarity, and that is, after all, a feeling upon which the solidarity of military groweberup rests." Weber, "Socialism" in *WPW* 275.

[73] "the basis of democratization is everywhere purely military in character; it lies in the rise of disciplined infantry … The decisive fact was that military discipline proved its superiority over the battle between heroes. Military discipline meant the triumph of democracy because the community wished and was compelled to secure the cooperation of the non-aristocratic masses." Max Weber, *General Economic History* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950), 324–25.

[74] Weber, "Suffrage and Democracy," in *WPW* 125.

[75] Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *WPW* 351.

[76] Weber, "Parliament and Government," in *WPW* 177.

own contempt for liberal equality renders the fascist trajectory the most plausible as an interpretive matter, but that trajectory matters less than the surprisingly widespread allure the model commands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

There is, however, one importantly different program that flows from Carlyle's critique of nomadism. Perhaps Carlyle's most historically consequential disciple was John Ruskin, whose critiques of political economy proved enormously influential. A devoted follower of Carlyle, Ruskin too insists on a restoration of discipline and obedience. The "crowning grace of all the rest," he writes in 1849, is that principle "to which Polity owes its stability, Life its happiness, Faith its acceptance, Creation its continuance—Obedience."[77] Ruskin does not, however, propose the reorganization of society along martial lines. Instead, he turns to the ideal of the family—intimate, loving, reciprocal—as the critical foil for industrial, liberal capitalism. He consequently champions working-class education, the arts-and-crafts movement, and handicraft production in a manner that would inspire the likes of William Morris and Mohandas Gandhi. In this regard, Ruskin represents a return to pre-Carlylean, romantic Tory critiques of liberalism. Though he was arguably Carlyle's greatest student, his vision of social rejuvenation bears more in common with Tocqueville's communitarianism than with Carlyle's demand for mastery.

2.3 The Authoritarian Temptation

Of the thinkers treated in this dissertation, none match the literary force of Carlyle's depiction of the working class and the anarchy of industrial societies. Though he is less systematic and philosophically deep than Marx and Tocqueville, his gift for description mesmerized generations

[77] John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Wiley & Halsted, 1857), 165.

of artists, writers, and critics. John Morley, a Gladstonian liberal who embodied much of what Carlyle detested, appreciated this legacy in an 1888 essay:

> One of Mr. Carlyle's chief and just glories is, that for more than forty years he has clearly seen, and kept constantly and conspicuously in his own sight and that of the readers, the profoundly important crisis in the midst of which we are living. The moral and social dissolution in progress about us, and the enormous peril of sailing blindfold and haphazard without rudder or compass or chart, have always been fully visible to him … The relations between master and servant, between capitalist and labourer, between landlord and tenant, between governing race and subject race, between the feelings and intelligence of the legislature and the feelings and intelligence of the nation, between the spiritual power, literary and ecclesiastical, and those who are under it—the anarchy that prevails in all these, and the extreme danger of it, have been with Mr. Carlyle a never-ending theme.[78]

The imaginative power of Carlyle's writing no longer attracts modern readers as it once did. Even less does his fantastic faith in a soldier-like proletariat and the heroic captains of industry provoke or inspire political reflection in the twenty-first century. Contemporary readers have been too chastened by the experience of the past century to be drawn to charismatic leadership or hero worship. Carlyle's retrograde racial politics and total contempt for equality make it unlikely to see a revival of interest in his political vision.

Beyond that moral revulsion, there are good reasons to discount Carlyle's project. Like Marx and others of the nineteenth century, he plays with a form of historical catastrophism that no longer seems plausible. For Marx, history served as the salvific agent, destined to bring universal emancipation. For Carlyle, history will produce a new class of heroes and a revival of divinized mass obedience. Marxists respond to the failure of class revolution by theorizing how to speed up history. Carlyle's providentialism does not permit that possibility. His philosophy of history is committed to the coincidence of might and right. Heroes must emerge because the shambolic character of liberal

[78] Morley, *Critical Miscellanies*, 137–38.

anarchy is so weak. As Morley points out in his essay, the combination of providentialism and militarism underwrites the Thrasymachean and ultimately materialist core of his philosophy: "He identifies the physical with the moral order, confounds faithful conformity to the material conditions of success, with loyal adherence to virtuous rule and principle, and then appeals to material triumph as the sanction of nature and the ratification of high heaven."[79]

Carlyle's providentialism concludes in a worship of strength liberals can never accept. At the same time, much of liberalism remains implicitly committed to a kind of historicized theodicy and secularized providentialism. A faith in progressive history continues to mark the work of liberal philosophers who have long forgotten the theological assumptions that made sense of teleological history.[80] Those liberals too must reckon with Carlyle's problem—if history bends toward justice, how does might avoid becoming the standard of right?[81] These difficulties permanently afflict any philosophy where history plays—implicitly or explicitly—a load-bearing role. To borrow Eric Vogelin's famous slogan, these are the costs of immanentizing the eschaton.

The chief value of taking Carlyle seriously is to expose oneself to the purest possible condemnation the moral and political commitments that underlie modern liberal societies.[82] Like

---

[79] Morley, *Critical Miscellanies*, 137–38.

[80] A striking example is found in the final lines of Rawls' *The Law of Peoples*: "If a reasonably just Society of Peoples whose members subordinate their power to reasonable aims is not possible, and human beings are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask, with Kant, whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth." John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: With, the Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 128. On this broader theme see Eric Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[81] Chesterton makes a quip to this effect that seems to target liberal humanitarianism: "Carlyle's philosophy, more carefully considered, will be found to be dangerously optimist rather than pessimist. As a thinker Carlyle is not sad, but recklessly and rather unscrupulously satisfied. For he seems to have held the theory that good could not be definitely defeated in this world; and that everything in the long run finds its right level." G.K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (Williams and Norgate, 1913), 57.

[82] On the dangers of neglecting the power of such arguments, see Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353–78.

Nietzsche, reading Carlyle sympathetically allows one to feel the force of an unalloyed reactionary politics. Society, Carlyle insists, is not a watch-like mechanism that will operate soundly on its own with occasional technical adjustment. The present age seems to testify to Carlyle's lament that a mechanical philosophy produces irresponsible "no-rule," dressed up with performative shams and justified with jargonized, formulaic cant. The depth of our unfolding economic, political, and social crises reveals the emptiness of our slogans and the incapacity of our leaders. We are tempted, consequently, to repudiate our regime and its fraudulent spokesmen, and to hope that a proper leadership class might emerge to set things right.

One need not embrace Carlyle's contempt for liberalism or democracy to recognize the weakness of today's leaders.[83] Even so, there is something to be learned from Carlyle, and in particular from his repeated condemnation of "cant" formulas and "Morrison Pill" miracle cures. Carlyle surveys the crisis of the English pauper class and disdains the reformers and economists who propose drug-like solutions. As he puts it in *Past and Present*:

> What is to be done, what would you have us do? asks many a one, with a tone of impatience, almost of reproach; and then, if you mention some one thing, some two things, twenty things that might be done, turns round with a satirical tehee, and, "These are your remedies!" The state of mind indicated by such question, and such rejoinder, is worth reflecting on.
>
> It seems to be taken for granted, by these interrogative philosophers, that there is some 'thing,' or handful of 'things,' which could be done; some Act of Parliament, 'remedial measure' or the like, which could be passed, whereby the social malady

[83] In a provocative comparison, Chesterton identifies Carlyle as a prophet of socialism. Both inveigh against the social catastrophe of modern economic conditions and both ultimately reject democracy in attempting to address that catastrophe: "He is already the first prophet of the Socialists and the great voice against the social wrong. He has, indeed, almost all the qualities of the Socialists, their strenuousness, their steady protest, their single eye, also something of their Puritanism and their unconscious but instinctive dislike of democracy. Carlyle was the first who called in political inequality to remedy economic inequality, but he will not be the last." G. K. Chesterton, Introduction to Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), xi.

> were fairly fronted, conquered, put an end to; so that, with your remedial measure in your pocket, you could then go on triumphant, and be troubled no farther.[84]

A similar reformist mentality continues to afflict us. As American politics has degenerated over the past decades, political theorists and commentators assure us that democracy can be saved in a few relatively simple steps. Rank choice voting and the abolition of the electoral college will preserve us from both populist demagoguery and minority tyranny. Campaign finance reform will weaken the oligarchic power of the few while a more regulated media environment will limit the disinformed conspiracism of the many. Some propose weakening the power of our duopolistic parties, while others favor strengthening the parties to curtail the extremists therein. I do not mean to suggest that institutional reforms are pointless. Many of these efforts may well improve the quality of government. But a problem-solving approach to politics blinds us to the much deeper pathologies of contemporary society. Consideration of the sordid state of European liberal democracies—where we find in some form every one of these proposed miracle cures—should lead us to recognize that no simple solutions will adequately address our problems.

Carlyle is contemptuous of democracy, and he has no difficulty identifying the problem ultimately with the people. The quality of the leaders is a reflection of the quality of the people. We need not go all the way to take the point seriously. As democrats and liberals, we remain more comfortable excoriating corrupt elites than we are questioning the capacity of the people. There is some justice in that preference, for the possibility of responsible democratic politics has been proven in a way it had not in Carlyle's day. What has not been proven is the more sweeping hope that the right incentives and institutions are sufficient to capably direct the ship of state. The failings of American democracy cannot be simply credited to mechanical failures or elite malfeasance.

---

[84] Carlyle, *PP* 26.

Identifying political dysfunction with mass spiritual sickness does not yield straightforward solutions, but it may still be the correct diagnosis.

3. Tocqueville: Pluralism against Mastery

Tocqueville's account of "democratic despotism" remains one of the most acute critiques of liberal egalitarianism's affinity with social conformism and "tutelary" domination. "More extensive and milder" than traditional tyranny, democratic despotism serves to "degrade men without tormenting them."[85] As he summarizes it in a famous passage:

> Above those men arises an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-sighted and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for childhood; but on the contrary it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood … it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies, and finally it reduces each nation to being nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.[86]

Tocqueville identifies the source of this despotism with the love of equality itself. At its best, equality is paired with a devotion to independence, an ethic of self-reliance that jealously resists centralization. At its worst, equality pushes toward isolation, materialism, and an abdication of liberty. A deference to public opinion remains the chief social manifestation of equality-induced despotism, while the rise of impersonal bureaucracy serves as its political form. Unlike Marx and Carlyle, Tocqueville does not aim at the restoration of mastery over social life. Neither collective nor aristocratic dominion are attractive alternatives to democratic servitude. Both require a mass discipline that promises to reproduce and exacerbate the servitude and powerlessness of democratic

[85] Tocqueville, *DA* 1259-61.

[86] Tocqueville, *DA* 1250-2.

despotism. The path forward, for Tocqueville, is a rejuvenation of social life from below, not a conquest from above.

3.1 Aristocratic Function, Democratic Form

The rise of the centralized state under monarchical absolutism and then democracy paves the way for what Tocqueville terms "equality even in servitude."[87] As we have seen, Tocqueville defines this program of centralization in opposition to medieval feudalism, which was characterized by diversity and fragmentation. Political consolidation dissolves corporate identities, leaving subjects absorbed with the private self, isolated from their fellows, and disinterested in liberty. Freedom, Tocqueville writes, requires one to be accustomed to a life "full of agitation, change and danger; to keep alert the whole time with a restless eye on everything around."[88] Material comfort, restless individualism, and centralized administration are inimical to the education in active liberty needed to resist political servility.

Tocqueville joins Carlyle and Marx in insisting that history will not permit a return to the feudal, aristocratic past. Democratic equality, he famously asserts, is a providential fact. His introduction to volume one of *Democracy in America* outlines the movement of millennia culminating in modern democracy. It is correspondingly misguided to propose an institutionalized mixed constitution that cabins democracy to one estate or branch of government. In a striking dismissal of a venerable tradition, Tocqueville writes that the "government called mixed has always seemed to me a chimera. Truly speaking, there is no mixed government (in the sense that is given to this term), because in each society, you eventually discover a principle of action that dominates all others."[89]

---

[87] Tocqueville, *AR* 144. Cf. *DA* 874-5.

[88] Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, 116.

[89] Tocqueville, *DA* 411-12.

Mixed constitutionalism imagines that the various estates might be balanced and harmonized with one another. For Tocqueville, such a project makes a fetish of institutions, ignoring the "principle of action" that must inevitably rule any regime. In the case of democracy, that principle is the love of equality.

The goal for Tocqueville, consequently, is the discovery of institutions that can serve as functional substitutes for medieval bodies while operating within a democratic form. Referring to the problem of faction and majority tyranny, Publius famously writes in *Federalist 10* that America must find "a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government."[90] Tocqueville offers an analogous prescription for the problem of democratic, tutelary servitude:

> Use democracy to moderate democracy. That is the sole path of salvation that is open to us. Discern the sentiments, the ideas, the laws that, without being hostile to the principles of democracy, without being naturally incompatible with democracy, can however correct its unfortunate tendencies and, while modifying it, become incorporated with it. Beyond that everything is foolish and imprudent.[91]

Throughout *Democracy in America*, we find concrete examples of what it means for democracy to moderate itself. To resist despotism, democracy requires formal and informal institutions that draw citizens out of their narrow selves, strengthen their independence, and teach them to resist popular opinion and bureaucratization. This analysis derives from Montesquieu, who famously contrasts monarchy and despotism on these grounds. Monarchy in its medieval and feudal form was supplemented and curtailed by a bevy of mediating institutions (the church, landed aristocracy, *parlements*, guilds, corporations, municipal rights, etc.) Despotism, on the contrary, is a form of centralized mastery unchecked by mediating powers. It is a modern innovation unknown to the

---

[90] Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 10.48.

[91] Tocqueville, *DA* 1279nb. For a sharp discussion, see Craiutu and Jennings, "The Third Democracy."

Middle Ages that emerged with modern absolutist monarchies and is perfected by the French Revolution and the modern democratic state.

Democratic societies must find substitutes for pre-*Ancien Regime* feudal institutions. Tocqueville praises the American constitution insofar as it helps to realize that end. The constitution itself, Tocqueville notes, is the legacy of America's greatest aristocratic party—the Federalists of the early republic.[92] The indirect election of the Senate allows for men of distinction to be elevated, constructing a house of superior judgment founded on democratic election rather than aristocratic inheritance. Local government similarly checks the distant capital and, more importantly, educates citizens in the practice of self-government.[93] Political participation teaches democratic peoples to practice and value liberty: "town institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to knowledge: they put it within the grasp of the people; they give them a taste of its peaceful practice and accustom them to its use."[94] Strikingly, Tocqueville identifies local self-government with the feudal structure of the Middle Ages. Medieval municipal life, he writes, "was public and active; and citizens remained proud of their collective rights and quite jealous of their town's independence."[95] Energetic self-government is crucial to resist the temptation of passive submission to an omnipotent, distant administrative state.

Tocqueville praises other features of America's formal and informal constitution on similar grounds. He points to the role-ethical character of American lawyers and the educative function of

---

[92] Tocqueville, *DA* 283.

[93] Both Montesquieu and Tocqueville claim that the rise of a powerful national capital city undermines both moderate monarchy and republicanism, tending instead toward a consolidated national despotism. Tocqueville, *AR* 71-5, *DA* 454. Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, *My Thoughts* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), 540.

[94] Tocqueville, *DA* 102, cf. *DA* 261.

[95] Tocqueville, *AR* 47.

the jury system, for example. Cultivated by their education in precedent and tradition, lawyers become a kind of priestly class. Though democratic in respect to origin, lawyers are habituated into thinking and acting with the circumspection of an aristocracy.[96] The jury, a paradigmatically democratic institution, educates citizens in sobriety.[97] Its value consists not in its epistemic reliability but in the habits of responsibility and the culture of legalism it spreads throughout society.

America's religious regime plays a similar role. Though American Christianity largely rejects the *de jure*, clerical hierarchy found in Catholicism, it is ultimately far more religious than much of Catholic Europe. This is not accidental, for the quasi-democratic character of American churches (especially in Congregationalist New England) strengthens strict religious observance through the added force democratic legitimation. So established, America's churches disrupt democracy's penchant for materialism and individualism, compelling citizens to step out of themselves and consider more than personal satisfaction.[98] Christianity tutors and moderates mores, producing the moral formation necessary for republican government.[99]

Voluntary associations similarly serve as substitutes for the "powerful individuals that equality of conditions has made disappear."[100] Situated between the people and the state, they check

---

[96] Tocqueville, *DA* 430-42.

[97] Tocqueville, *DA* 442-50.

[98] Tocqueville, *DA*, 954-62.

[99] "Religion is much more necessary in the republic that [republicans] advocate than in the monarchy they attack, and in democratic republics more than in all others. How could society fail to perish if, while the political bond grows loose, the moral bond does not become tighter? And what to do with a people master of itself, if it is not subject to God." Tocqueville, *DA*, 478.

[100] Tocqueville, *DA*, 901. See also: "I believe firmly that you cannot establish an aristocracy again in the world; but I think that simple citizens by associating can together constitute very wealthy, very influential, very strong beings, in a word aristocratic persons. … the greatest political advantages of aristocracy would be obtained, without its injustices or its dangers" Tocqueville, *DA*, 1268-1269.

the power of an omnipotent state from below, and they tutor the otherwise savage force of the people. As Tocqueville puts it in one representative statement:

> There are no countries where associations are more necessary, to prevent the despotism of parties or the arbitrariness of the prince, than those where the social state is democratic. Among aristocratic nations, secondary bodies form natural associations that stop the abuses of power. In countries where such associations do not exist, if individuals cannot artificially and temporarily create something that resembles those natural associations, I no longer see any dike against any sort of tyranny.[101]

"Free associations," he writes in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, must "replace the individual power of the nobles" to resist the threat of tyranny.[102] Tocqueville's account of these democratized feudal institutions places him within the pluralist strand of modern liberalism.[103] As with subsequent pluralists, Tocqueville finds in medieval society a template for the arrangements needed to temper and instruct democratic peoples. Without these substitutes, democrats will find no means of resisting the provident, tutelary, bureaucratized state.

These examples are familiar, and I do not wish to dwell on them. What is important for our purposes is the two-part argument Tocqueville develops in defense of these institutional and social forms. The first is institutional: Local institutions and mediating authorities check the centripetal forces of centralization. Emphasizing legal and juridical institutions, this strand of the argument points in favor of federalism, bicameralism, judicial independence, and the bevy of other constitutional forms that obstruct centralization. The second part of the argument is spiritual. Tocqueville favors mediating institutions that replicate the mimetic, moral authority of aristocratic institutions. American associations are open to talent, and in that regard they are democratic. But

---

[101] Tocqueville, *DA*, 307.

[102] Tocqueville, *DA*, 20.

[103] One helpful study here is Jacob T. Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

they cultivate models of distinction and excellence, which in turn educate and moderate other members of the association and society in general. In that regard, they are aristocratic. Democratic citizens are suspicious of claims to epistemic distinction, but if that distinction is channeled through democratic forms, citizens will be more prepared to recognize the merit of those who rise through the ranks. Election is the most obvious example of a practice through which equal democratic citizens freely select a superior to obey.[104] But social institutions more broadly serve a similar function. Through democratic ratification, an elite emerges that can effectively command obedience and direct the formation of the citizenry.

What flows from Tocqueville is a tradition of pluralism and a skepticism of centralization that finds echoes in a variety of divergent political programs. On the left, we find Tocquevillian themes in the guild socialism of G.D.H. Cole, the worker cooperative tradition scorned by Marx, and radical critiques of the state like those of Sheldon Wolin and to some extent Hannah Arendt. There are parallels too in the Christian distributivism developed by Chesterton and Belloc and the Catholic development of a social tradition between capitalism and socialism.[105] Without question, however, the most consequential Tocquevillian legacy is to be found in the work of communitarian critics of liberal atomization. American conservatives in particular turn to Tocqueville to bolster their rejection of socialism, wariness of centralization, and emphasis on non-state forms of civil society.

---

[104] Instructive on this theme is Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[105] An especially instructive parallel is Otto Gierke, who develops a systematic critique of modern legal theory's simultaneous commitment to atomistic individualism and authoritarian, mechanical statism. Modern political philosophy, Gierke argues, cannot justify the medieval "fellowship" (*Genossenschaft*) that is neither a contractual association nor a legal construction of the state. Here we see a more directly reactionary trajectory of Tocquevillian ideals, especially in the tradition of political corporatism and its attempt to do away with the liberal state and to reconstruct medieval constitutional institutions in modern industrial conditions. See David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 34–63.

When Tocqueville is assimilated into this communitarianism, however, a crucial feature of his philosophical program is neglected. Tocqueville's defense of civil society centers on the necessity of restoring the spirit of aristocratic distinction within an egalitarian institutional form. To serve that function, these institutions must be *formative sources of authority* in modern life. In that regard they must resist the pressures of egalitarian levelling. Associations are not just expressions of individual preferences and the right to associate, but sites of excellence and mimetic moral authority. Herein lies the difference between John Stuart Mill and Tocqueville. Millian voluntary associations are individualistic "experiments in living." The association itself commands no special authority over the individual. In Albert Hirschman's terms, Mill favors exit and Tocqueville loyalty. Where Mill's vision is contractual and democratic, Tocqueville's is formative and aristocratic. If associations and other institutions cease to be sources of authority over individuals, they will be impotent against the forces of democratic centralization, social conformism, and tutelary despotism.

3.2 Tocqueville Against Discipline

In this emphasis on pluralistic social rejuvenation, Tocqueville offers a critique of the mass discipline championed by Carlyle and Marx. In different ways, both of those thinkers turn to large-scale solidarity to assert collective or hierarchical mastery over society. Tocqueville does not aim at mastery or discipline. If the problem of despotism is a drift toward mechanistic servitude, the goal must not be to wield the modern machine, but to break it. As he puts it in a fragmentary draft of the concluding chapter of *Democracy in America*, "I do not believe in the definitive organization of the government of the middle classes, and if I believed it possible, I would oppose myself to it."[106] The

[106] Tocqueville, *DA* 1278na.

Saint-Simonian demand for organization—found in both Carlyle and Marx—is anathema to the Tocquevillian project.

Tocqueville thus straddles the line between ancient and modern liberty. He fears that a fixation with private freedom will lead to atomization and therefore despotism, and he fears that radical political democracy will alternate between violent upheaval and tutelary domination.[107] Tocqueville's response to the problem of modern servitude is the cultivation of a spirit of independence that can resist homogenization and bureaucratization. Such an ethic can only survive when protected and tutored by functionally aristocratic sites of leadership and distinction. Consider in this connection Tocqueville's skeptical attitude toward the political party and labor union, two institutions which aim to develop a combination of mass solidarity and decisive leadership.

Party and union organizations were underdeveloped in Tocqueville's day, and there is some necessary anachronism here. Nevertheless, Tocqueville's comments on parties, the social question, and ceasaristic leadership furnish materials for a critique of the disciplined solidarity these institutions would later require. Tocqueville likely would have argued that mass institutional discipline deepens the slavish condition of anomie and despotism. His contempt for Napoleon III, hostility to the labor politics of his day, and suspicion of political parties make it unlikely he could have been impressed by heroic leadership and soldier-like obedience. In *Democracy in America*, for example, parties come in for markedly less praise than other voluntary associations:

> Great parties turn society upside down; small ones trouble it; the ones tear it apart and the others deprave it. Both have a common trait, however: to reach their ends, they hardly every use means that conscience approves completely. There are honest men in nearly all parties, but it can be said that no party should be called an honest

[107] It is worth noting that Constant, the most famous champion of the liberty of the moderns, is himself wary in precisely these terms. He warns that "absorbed in the enjoyment of our private independence, and in the pursuit of our particular interests, we should surrender our right to share in political power too easily." Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns," (1819) in *Political Writings*, 326.

> man. The first sometimes save society by shaking it up; the second always disturb it to no profit.[108]

Parties are a necessary evil, and great parties have some capacity to wield power responsibly. That concession notwithstanding, there is no suggestion here that the party is an especially important vehicle of democratic self-education. In his own political career, Tocqueville demanded a degree of independence that made him uniquely ill-suited for the disciplined, party-form of parliamentary government. Tocqueville's praise of the American constitution emphasizes federalism, bicameralism, and the separation of powers, but does not systematically take up the rise of party politics. The party machines that emerge after Tocqueville's death promise a means of institutionalizing and organizing popular opinion. For Tocqueville, a healthy, self-moderating democracy will weaken the tie between government and public opinion. More precisely, he hopes for democratic leaders who will cultivate and moderate public opinion, rather than mobilize and deploy it.[109]

A similar skepticism applies to the prospect of large-scale labor organization or trade unionism. Tocqueville's treatment of the social question is animated more by a fear of volcanic, working-class revolution than humanitarian concern for the paupers. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville warns that during times of revolution "men rush toward equality as toward a conquest, and they cling to it as to a precious good that someone wants to take away from them. The passion for equality penetrates the human heart from all directions, it spreads and fills it entirely."[110] The *Recollections* presents a scathing account of the Parisian working class—spurred by reckless demagogues—throughout the 1848 June Days. As with his approach to politics more generally, Tocqueville's response to the social question centers on local, intimate associations that could

---

[108] Tocqueville, *DA* 281.

[109] Tocqueville, *DA*, 321.

[110] Tocqueville, *DA*, 877.

inculcate moderation and restraint. He is open, in principle, to something like worker cooperatives, but we find no confidence in the prospect of mass union organization. Such a movement would likely begin with violent frenzy and conclude in bureaucratic despotism.

In the case of both working-class organization and party machinery, Tocqueville is skeptical that disciplined organization is possible or desirable. Something similar is true of the charismatic leadership favored by the Carlylean tradition. Neither the heroic captain of industry nor the responsible party vanguard seems a remotely attractive possibility. It is revealing here that Tocqueville—an aristocrat by temperament—has so little to say about political leadership. Given the shadow of Andrew Jackson, it is particularly remarkable the presidentialism is so relatively unimportant in *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville is wary of Jackson and the plebiscitary presidentialism he represents, but his interpretation of Jackson emphasizes his weakness in the face of public will: "General Jackson is the slave of the majority; he follows it in its will, in its desires, in its half-discovered instincts, or rather he divines it and runs to put himself at its head."[111] Charismatic leadership, he suggests, will not break the hold of public opinion and bureaucratism, but will instead be enslaved to it. Louis XIV, the most powerful of the *Ancien Regime* monarchs, was himself buffeted by popular pressure and an autonomous administrative structure. Perhaps these predictions were vindicated through the tenure of Napoleon III, which proved the incompetence of charismatic, Bonapartist leadership. Rather than deliver heroic authority, his example combined the worst of buffoonish show-rule and bureaucratic domination.[112]

---

[111] Tocqueville, *DA*, 625. Cf. *DA* 453.

[112] Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville and French Nineteenth-Century Conceptualizations of the Two Bonapartes and Their Empires," in *Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter (Washington DC: German Historical Institute, 2004), 83–102.

Mass politics of any kind is, for Tocqueville, an object of dread. The goal must be the cultivation of civic independence, and that ethos depends on functionally aristocratic forms of authority and distinction. The notables he hopes will emerge are not the heroic masters of masses, but a sober, responsible, and diffuse leadership class. He turns to institutions and professional role ethics rather than movements and charisma.

3.3 Resisting Social Democratization

Tocqueville's recurring call to rejuvenate non-state forms of civil society remains powerful for those wary of America's drift toward administrative bureaucratism. There is a great deal of wisdom and some naivete in this program. Tocqueville is extraordinarily prescient in anticipating many of the most significant developments of modern democracy, but his enthusiasm for localism, voluntary associations, and institutionalized religion seems woefully inadequate for the challenges he predicts. While these practices may have flourished in antebellum America, they have been in precipitous decline for at least the past century.

The kind of state Tocqueville dreads now seems to be an inevitability. What then is a Tocquevillian to do? Especially in the hands of his conservative champions, the program is always the same: Devolve power to state and local governments, reverse the growth of the administrative state, limit government. Follow these steps and civil society will reemerge, community will overcome alienation. It is not my purpose here to evaluate the merits of this program. It is sufficient to point out (1) these predictable proposals lack the creativity found in Tocqueville's meditations on the health of democracy; and (2) Tocqueville has been made suspiciously similar to the generic free-market critic of the modern state. A nineteenth-century liberal and vociferous critic of socialism,

there is no doubt a real affinity there.[113] But as we have seen, Tocqueville was acutely aware of the forms of discipline and depersonalized social control that emerge within a market economy.

If the growth of the state has suffocated the mediating institutions Tocqueville held dear, it is tempting to conclude with many conservatives that only a radical shrinking of the state will restore a vibrant civil society. Even if it is true that the expansion of the state killed civil society, however, it by no means follows that a retrenchment of the state will resurrect those bodies. There is a positive feedback mechanism at play here. Mediating bodies form a citizenry with the qualities and virtues needed to sustain a flourishing civil society. Institutions form citizens, citizens strengthen institutions. Without that necessary formation, it is difficult to see how citizens will be prepared to build or restore civil society. If the modern centralized state killed civil society, pulling out the knife will not obviously revive the victim.

A crude aversion to public authority in contrast to private civil society does not do justice to the subtlety and creativity of Tocqueville's thinking. Tocqueville did not live to see the rise of the modern, mass, industrial state he so feared. Had he lived to see it, perhaps he would have been plunged into an even deeper pessimism. Or, perhaps, he would have come to see new, emerging forms of life that represent creative modes of cultivating independence and resisting tutelary despotism. It is possible that he would have reached a different assessment of trade unions and political parties, for example. Or perhaps he would have recognized the rise of mass-scale, national, disciplined social movements as hopeful means of inculcating virtues of democratic responsibility.[114] This is speculation, but the important point is that if Tocqueville's program is to speak meaningfully

---

[113] See for example Tocqueville's speech on socialism in *Tocqueville on America after 1840*, 394–404.

[114] On this point, see Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

to our contemporary condition, we must demand rather more creativity from the Tocquevillians than we typically find in their paeans to farmers markets and bowling leagues.

One institution that may serve Tocquevillian purposes is the elite public university. Post-dating his study of America, these institutions remain carriers of civic identity. More important still, they serve to justify elite distinction on egalitarian foundations. Tony Judt puts the point well:

> By far the best thing about America is its universities. Not Harvard, Yale, *e tutti quanti*: though marvelous, they are not distinctively American—their roots reach across the ocean to Oxford, Heidelberg, and beyond. Nowhere else in the world, however, can boast such *public* universities. You drive for miles across a godforsaken midwestern scrubscape, pockmarked by billboards, Motel 6s, and a military parade of food chains, when—like some pedagogical mirage dreamed up by nineteenth-century English gentlemen—there appears…a library! And not just any library: at Bloomington, the University of Indiana boasts a 7.8-million-volume collection in more than nine hundred languages, housed in a magnificent double-towered mausoleum of Indiana limestone.[115]

Public universities are objects of regional pride, they are democratic in their foundations, and they are aristocratic in their purposes. Unlike elite private universities, which have fallen precipitously in public esteem, the flagship universities continue to command respect. In part this respect derives from a loyalty to college sports, a characteristically Tocquevillian redirection of public opinion, almost literally deploying passion to bolster reason. By prioritizing and subsidizing in-state students, public universities retain talent and human capital locally, resisting the centripetal force of nationalization and centralization. With their large student bodies and the ease of transferring from junior colleges, they offer high quality education to a democratic base. And with their selective honors programs, competitive merit scholarships, and world-class graduate and research programs, they celebrate excellence and distinction.

---

[115] Tony Judt, *The Memory Chalet* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 162.

These are precisely the kind of institutions a Tocquevillian democratic society should raise up and celebrate. Yet here again we are confronted with the instability of democratic psychology. To succeed, these institutions must justify excellence and distinction to a democratic people. That was historically accomplished with a commitment to meritocracy. Through competitive examinations, students from any background can compete and earn a place at these prestigious institutions. In elite circles—the circles most formed by and indebted to meritocracy—this traditional system seems increasingly unacceptable. John Rawls' influential critique of "careers open to talent" and defense of "fair equality of opportunity" is representative of a turn against meritocracy in political theory.[116] Meritocracy has become a dirty word,[117] accused of justifying an inegalitarian and therefore unjust social order.[118]

There are problems with some manifestations of meritocracy. When meritocrats view their social privilege as entirely private and deserved, they may grow cold, entitled, and disinterested in the

---

[116] For Rawls' discussion, see *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 63ff. Rawls himself did not necessarily recognize how radical his conception of fair equality of opportunity really was. But subsequent Rawlsians how shown, in effect, that taking the principle seriously eradicates any possibility of meritocracy, as it is traditionally understood. Today, any work of political philosophy on the topic of meritocracy can be assumed to be a critique. See for example Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019); Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, chap. 7. Of course, it is theoretically possible to preserve a place for meritocracy in university selection while distancing oneself from the doctrine in the rest of political and economic life. But as Tocqueville shows, a democratic attachment to simplicity makes that cabining presumptively arbitrary and therefore suspect.

[117] In a sense "meritocracy" has always been a dirty word. As is well known, Michael Young coined the term to reject a future society governed on undemocratic, epistocratic grounds. But again, we can reject that vision of total political reorganization while recognizing the special value of meritocratic academic institutions. Michael Dunlop Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).

[118] Rawls takes himself to be defending a truer form of equal opportunity. Yet the more radical implications of his preferred understanding comes close to eradicating the doctrine altogether. There is not much distance on this point between left Rawlsians and the more radical position amusingly articulated by John Schaar: "No policy formula is better designed to fortify the dominant institutions, values, and ends of the American social order than the formula of equality of opportunity, for it offers *everyone* a fair and equal chance to find a place within that order...The facile formula of equal opportunity...opens more and more opportunities for more and more people to contribute more and more energies toward the realization of a mass, bureaucratic, technological, privatized, militaristic, bored, and thrill-seeking, consumption-oriented society--a society of well-fed, congenial, and sybaritic monkeys surrounded by gadgets and pleasure-toys." John H. Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond," in *Equality* (Routledge, 1967), 231.

condition of those who have proved underserving of similar advantages. It would be good for meritocrats to understand their success as connected to a duty of concern for society, indeed such an ethic would be necessary for meritocracy to serve as a Tocquevillian substitute for aristocracy. That said, as Eric Nelson has argued, the Rawlsian turn against personal moral desert jettisoned the Pelagian theology and a corresponding philosophy on which liberalism was founded.[119] By connecting liberal theory with democratic practice, Tocqueville's analysis complicates Nelson's argument. A political commitment to equality begets an embarrassment of moral desert. A liberal, egalitarian society is permanently suspicious of distinction, however achieved, and even the wealthy and successful come to be ashamed of their own accomplishments.

This is especially striking in the case of academic meritocracy. To offer a somewhat trivial example, in most university departments today, graduate students are invited—even encouraged—to address their professors on a first-name basis. Such informality is defended on the grounds that it contributes to a culture of open, equal intellectual inquiry. Small signs of egalitarian respect promise to resist the noxious culture that has long characterized academia. At the same time, such displays of equality demonstrate a manifest contradiction. Few institutions in contemporary American society are as rigidly hierarchical as the university, where staff, students, and faculty are ranked by wealth and prerogatives. As contemporary struggles over graduate student and adjunct unionization make clear, discursive nods to equality sit uneasily alongside the fact of institutionalized hierarchy. In more

---

[119] Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*. Applied to the case of meritocracy, we find in the arguments of the Jansenist Augustinian Pierre Nicole grist for Nelson's mill. In his anti-Pelagianism, Nicole is unwilling to tolerate merited inequality: "If one became Great only by desert, the height of the great would be a continual noise in our ears, that they were prefer'd to the prejudice of others, whom we fancy more deserving than they ... But thus joyning Greatness with Birth, the pride of inferiours is allaid, and Greatness itself becomes a far less eye-sore. There is no shame to give place to another, when one may say, 'Tis his Birth I yield to. This reason convinces the mind without wounding it with spight or jealousie." Pierre Nicole, *Moral Essays Contain'd in Several Treatises on Many Important Duties.* (Samuel Manship, 1696), 95. An anti-Pelagian denial of desert can just as easily vindicate hereditary aristocracy as it can luck egalitarianism.

general terms, it is remarkable to see America's most selective, elite institutions boast of their commitment to inclusivity and openness.[120] We regularly hear elite universities argue that they are more democratic than they appear. We rarely hear them defend the necessity of their aristocratic place in democratic life.

We have here an example of democratic psychic instability. A medieval inheritance—the hierarchical university, structured around master-apprentice relations—is a source of embarrassment. Meritocratic arguments which once vindicated these institutions are losing their force. The institutions themselves seem unwilling to profess their value. To paraphrase Tocqueville again, this is democratic pseudo-humility, an unwillingness to take pride in those forms of excellence democracy most requires.[121]

Some decades ago, Michael Walzer defended a "complex equality" that granted the legitimacy of certain criteria of hierarchical distinction within appropriate spheres of life.[122] For Tocqueville, such complexity is difficult for the democratic mind to long entertain. Mediating bodies cease to matter if they become reflections of the democratic culture that they, at their best, should resist. For meritocracy to serve as a democratic means of moderating democratic levelling, its emblematic institutions must recover their self-confidence.

---

[120] Then Harvard president Lawrence Bacow issued a campus-wide missive in January 2018 that declared: "Let me be unequivocal: The College's admissions process does not discriminate against anybody." In context, Bacow was responding to the accusation that Harvard's affirmative action policies constituted an illegal form of racial discrimination, a defense that ultimately failed at the Supreme Court. By "discrimination" he referred to the invidious species at issue in the lawsuit. But the sweeping declaration—taken unequivocally as Bacow requests we do—is transparently absurd for an institution that boasts of its three percent admissions rate. President Bacow signed this and all his communications simply: "Larry."

[121] "So far from believing that humility must be recommended to our contemporaries, I would like you to try hard to give them a more vast idea of themselves and of their species; humility is not healthy for them; what they lack most, in my opinion, is pride. I would willingly give up several of our small virtues for this vice." Tocqueville, *DA* 1126.

[122] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

Chapter Six: Liberal Anti-Rule and Depoliticization

My goal in this final chapter is to connect the intellectual history developed over the preceding five chapters more directly with one of the central subjects of contemporary political theory: the problem of depoliticization. The language and critique of depoliticization is ubiquitous in our time.[1] As with many ubiquitous terms, however, its meaning remains thoroughly unclear. I aim to show that the most fruitful way of understanding depoliticization is as a species of the slaves-without-masters critique. The term describes a liberal aversion to arbitrary rule, a healthy instinct which can produce an unhealthy hostility to the category of rule itself. Institutionally, that tendency manifests itself in a program of fragmenting and constraining the political branches of government, elevating in their stead the market economy, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary.

The slaves-without-masters anxiety I have attempted to reconstruct is really two complaints. The first deals with the new form servitude that accompanies impersonal modes of power—the market, public opinion, tutelary dependence and the like. The second complaint concerns the disappearance of mastery; that is, the rise of invisible economic forces and leaderless bureaucracies, rather than the deliberate will of concrete, human rulers.[2]

Marx and Carlyle, in different ways, sought to restore mastery and overcome anarchy. In Carlyle's case, that mastery entailed the creation of a new class of heroes—captains of industry—to

---

[1] To my knowledge, Carl Schmitt is the first to critique liberalism specifically with the language of depoliticization: "Today nothing is more modern than the onslaught against the political. American financiers, industrial technicians, Marxist socialists, and anarchic-syndicalist revolutionaries unite in demanding that the biased rule of politics over unbiased economic management be done away with. There must no longer be political problems, only organizational-technical and economic-sociological tasks." Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 65. See also his essay, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations" in *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[2] Specific negative connotations are attached to the language of "mastery" in English. Such connotations do not apply, for example, in German, where *Herrschaft* can be reasonably rendered mastery, legitimate authority, domination, or rulership.

overthrow the sham rulers. For Marx, this mastery would be wielded collectively, by the proletariat, over the natural world, the means of production, and the organization of a common life. We can distinguish between two features of this demand for mastery. The first is a concern with political authority. Marx, Carlyle, and Tocqueville claim that liberalism and capitalism have done away with the categories of obedience and rule. Recall that one of the foundational ambitions of the liberal, constitutional project is to replace the rule of men with the rule of law. The rule of men—be they a heroic few or a proletarianized many—threatens to undermine reason, impartiality, and autonomy. If one of the perennial questions of political philosophy is "Who Governs," the liberal answer, in a sense, is "No One." To be a liberal citizen is to be free from the dominion of another will, be it the will of one, few, or many. Liberal institutions consequently establish what might be called "anti-rule," not exercising directive authority over society, but protecting free citizens from the rule of any person.[3]

Relatedly, Marx and Carlyle warn of a liberal tendency to curtail the reach of political control. This is the second feature of mastery. Liberalism, with its commitment to protecting the private sphere, sets strong constraints on what any government may do. Private rights, guarantees of pluralism, and deference to the market curtail the reach of the state. If the first dimension of political mastery concerns the question of who rules, the second dimension concerns the scope of that rule.

To repeat a familiar theme, this tendency to abolish the category of rule and limit the reach of political authority flows from liberalism's fundamental hostility to arbitrariness. Michael Walzer, for example, celebrates liberalism's commitment to an "art of separation," the erection of barriers

[3] One important departure from this general judgment is Melissa Lane, who insists on the ineradicability of rule and command in political life. *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

between different spheres of life in service of preserving individual freedom.[4] Unified mastery is the definition of tyranny.[5] Friedrich Hayek is sensitive to the dissatisfaction many have with this liberal program. As he soberly puts it, separating the state from civil society necessitates a "submission to the impersonal and seemingly irrational forces of the market." The only alternative, he explains, would be an even worse "submission to an equally uncontrollable and therefore arbitrary power of other men."[6] The dichotomy is between the unintelligible (yet rational) force of the market and the conscious (but arbitrary) will of a despot:

> the understandable craving for intelligibility produces illusory demands which no system can satisfy. Man in a complex society can have no choice but between adjusting himself to what to him must seem the blind forces of the social process and obeying the orders of a superior. So long as he knows only the hard discipline of the market, he may well think the direction of some other intelligent human brain preferable; but when he tries it, he soon discovers that the former still leaves him at least some choice, while the latter leaves him none, and that it is better to have a choice between several unpleasant alternatives than being coerced into one.[7]

John Rawls is somewhat more equivocal, though he too writes that the impersonality of the market may be a virtue of the liberal order: "a competitive scheme is impersonal and automatic in the details of its operation; its particular results do not express the conscious decision of individuals. But in many respects this is a virtue of the arrangement; and the use of the market system does not imply a lack of reasonable human autonomy."[8] This preference for unconscious, rational modes of

---

[4] Michael Walzer, "Liberalism and the Art of Separation," *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (1984): 315–30.

[5] In the words of *Federalist* 47: "The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, selfappointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny." *Federalist Papers* 47.249.

[6] Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 212.

[7] Hayek, "Individualism: True and False," in *Studies on the Abuse and Decline of Reason: Text and Documents*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 67–68.

[8] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 248.

organizing society—typified by the market—produced a corresponding liberal interest in limiting human rule. In this regard, at least rhetorically, liberalism comes apart from democracy. Democratic politics is at home with the language of authoritative rule. *We the people* constitute the sovereign fount of authority, and *we the people* must be entitled to organize society according to our will. There are familiar difficulties with the democratic defense of collective mastery. Is it possible for the people to govern, or is that ideal incoherent? Are the most obvious forms of direct popular rule—the referendum for example—so tainted by elite manipulation or background inequalities that they lose their authority? How can democratic leaders or parties represent the people without usurping rule? These difficulties may prove intractable, and there is wisdom in the liberal turn to unconscious impersonality over irrational will. My aim in this chapter is not to address that debate directly, but to outline how a discomfort with the category of rule produces an affinity with depoliticization.

Liberalism seeks to replace the arbitrary rule of man with the impersonal rule of law. In its most minimal (and uncontroversial) sense, the rule of law entails judicial and procedural protections for the rights of citizens. With time, however, the rule of law's scope has expanded. It begins to cover not only the impartial application of laws, subject to judicial guarantees, but a more sweeping wariness of the substantive and procedural respects in which any law might be arbitrary and capricious. An unfolding logic of anti-arbitrariness produces a preference for reason over will. The market is thus a more suitable means of organizing economic life than is the state. The judiciary is a more reliable defender of liberty than the legislature. And the expert, professional bureaucracy is a more rational site of governance than the elected head of government. These are all tendencies toward depoliticization. In what follows, I focus on the judiciary and bureaucracy rather than the market. I do so primarily because the contrast between political rule and market processes is more obvious than is the contrast I highlight between judicial-technocratic administration and political rule.

This chapter makes four points: (1) I give an account of liberal constitutionalism's aversion to the language of popular will and rule. (2) I clarify what I mean by "depoliticization." Contemporary discussions often associate "the political" with an agonistic civic spirit or the implicit and hidden imposition of contested value judgments. These usages do not yield especially interesting or plausible normative implications. When I speak of the political I refer to relations of authoritative rule. Democracy consequently can be one expression of the political, while liberalism's affinity for judicial and technocratic power is anti-political, a form of anti-rule. (3) I offer an ideal-typical distinction between the political and technocratic vocations. Even extremely powerful judges and bureaucrats can avoid becoming political authorities. And (4) I contrast Publius with contemporary democratic theory to motivate the possibility of a more political form of liberalism.

1. Liberal Constitutionalism and Popular Will

Liberal constitutionalism—both in its academic formulations and folk understanding—holds that certain domains must be insulated from the reach of politics. That insulation takes different forms and depends on a variety of justifications. Most obviously, constitutional rights-protections trump the decisions of the elected government and the bureaucratic agencies they create. Today in America, for example, it falls to the courts to establish and enforce constitutional guarantees through the exercise of judicial review. Below constitutional limits, we find bureaucratic institutions that exercise bounded independence in formulating and enforcing public policy. The legislature establishes agencies to carry out a particular mandate, but those agencies are given some freedom to interpret their mandate. The most extreme case here is the establishment of an independent central

bank,[9] but virtually all bureaucratic agencies require some discretionary freedom to formulate and implement rules and regulations not specified directly by the legislature.[10]

The discretion granted to these agencies is mediated by the political process of appointing agency leadership and the possibility of new overriding legislation. Prevailing American law since the quasi-constitutional Administrative Procedures Act of 1946 limits the power of political appointees to exercise control over their agencies,[11] for exacting rules and procedures must be followed for issuing or rescinding policies even after new leadership has been installed.[12] The prospect of new overriding legislation remains the ultimate check on bureaucratic independence, but that power can be tempered *de facto* by norms of bureaucratic deference, which discourage governments from intervening in the workings of agencies. Consider, in this connection, the independence of the Federal Reserve. Congress could easily legislate to take direct control of monetary policy or quantitative easing.[13] More minimally still, the Congress could audit the Federal Reserve Board to make public which private financial institutions it chooses to stimulate, how much it provides in

---

[9] Since the Great Recession, central bank independence has expanded to an extraordinary degree. The traditional settlement granted monetary policy power to central banks while reserving fiscal policy to the legislative process. To deal with the threat of deflation when interest rates are zero or negative, central banks began an unprecedented program of asset and securities purchasing known as quantitative easing. Perhaps such unconventional methods may still have been understood as a species of monetary policy when the goal was maintaining an inflation target when banks were operating at the zero-lower bound and interest rates cannot be further reduced. No such justification could be offered for the acceleration of these methods to provide direct liquidity during the COVID recession, however. Whatever the merit of this program, it has clearly dissolved the always-tenuous distinction between fiscal and monetary policy.

[10] Chiara Cordelli, *The Privatized State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 84–90.

[11] Noah Rosenblum has shown how the progressive architects of the New Deal and post-war administrative apparatus turned away from presidentialism (the more traditional progressive commitment) and toward bureaucratic insulation, in response to the rise of continental fascism. "The Antifascist Roots of Presidential Administration," *Columbia Law Review* 122, no. 1 (2022): 1–86.

[12] Consider for example the timeline of the potentially enormously consequential Supreme Court ruling in *West Virginia vs. EPA*. The ruling, which was issued in the summer of 2022, struck down environmental regulations issued by the Obama EPA eight years prior in 2014. The notable fact for our purposes is that these regulations were not reversed by the Trump EPA, which was compelled under the APA to maintain their implementation.

[13] In comparison, the European Union has constitutionalized the independence of the ECB, taking monetary policy fully out of the reach of ordinary politics.

direct liquidity, and what criteria it chooses to make such determinations. That such intervention is unprecedented in recent history—and indeed virtually unthinkable—points us to the third and perhaps most powerful form of depoliticization: a culture of deference.

The American political branches of government—the Presidency and Congress—refrain from interfering with monetary policy because of a stable, bipartisan consensus concerning the procedural desirability of institutional monetary independence and the substantive content of good monetary policy. They do not direct monetary policy because they do not wish to wield that power. They prefer to defer to the Federal Reserve, which they trust to carry out its work competently. Monetary independence from politics is thus secured by both a juridical grant of authority and a cultural commitment to presumptive bureaucratic independence.[14] Something similar may be true of the expansion of judicial power, which in many respects was welcomed by the political branches as a means of short-circuiting the difficult work of legislating.[15] The political branches defer to the courts because they wish to evade responsibility, even as they win public applause in regular denunciations of judicial activism.

Constitutional constraints, institutionalized statutory independence, and a culture of deference are different. What they share is something negative—an insulation (be it *de facto* or *de jure*)

---

[14] To speak of a shared consensus implicitly connotes a defense of such deference. Critics use different terms. President Obama's deputy national security advisor, Ben Rhodes, mocked the foreign policy establishment as a "blob." In a self-congratulatory interview, Obama praised his resistance to the blob, what he called the "Washington Playbook." In context, Obama was defending his decision to ignore the chemical warfare "red line" he had himself imposed on the Assad regime. It remains an open question just how effectively Obama did in fact resist the blob. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/. The most characteristic language in our time is a complaint about the "deep state," a term which emerged first from civil libertarians to attack the intelligence agencies and surveillance state, but which has now come to be associated with populist conservative rhetoric.

[15] Keith E. Whittington, "'Interpose Your Friendly Hand': Political Supports for the Exercise of Judicial Review by the United States Supreme Court," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 4 (November 2005): 583–96.

of policymaking from the reach of politics.[16] The most obvious reason to remove a policy area from political control is that so doing protects certain fundamental moral interests. The *Declaration of Independence* offers natural rights as the paradigmatic pre-political constraints on government. No government may legitimately violate these rights, and so they cabin the boundaries of political authority. Contemporary liberals tend to dislike the language of natural rights, but appeal instead to such ideals as individual autonomy, egalitarianism, and reasonable pluralism to theorize the rights that trump politics.[17] As Rawls puts it: "liberal principles meet the urgent political requirement to fix, once and for all, the content of basic rights and liberties, and to assign them special priority. Doing this takes these guarantees off the political agenda and puts them beyond the calculus of social interests."[18]

Any number of approaches can be taken to theorize and defend these rights. Most obviously, we could derive them from a perfectionist account of moral flourishing. That tends to be an unattractive path for contemporary liberals, however. Rawls arrives at these basic rights by means of a distinctive, constructivist political morality. Utilitarians could defend rights on rule-consequentialist grounds. Burkean conservatives can defend rights on grounds of prescription and inheritance. Originalists turn to the original understanding of the text of the constitution, averring implicitly the legitimating authority of the historic moment of constitutional enactment. Constitutional rights might also be defended as functionally necessary for the operation of the

---

[16] It may be said that central banks and the judiciary remain sensitive to public pressure, if not direct political oversight or control. Whatever the truth there, oblique deference to popular opinion in no way constitutes democratic legitimation, for all regimes hitherto known to man are, in some respect, responsive to public pressure.

[17] Ronald Dworkin remains the legal-moral theorist most openly committed to judicial interpretation as a direct species of applied liberal ethics. *Freedom's Law: The Moral Reading of the American Constitution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[18] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 161.

regime. Guarantees of free speech or, more obviously, the right to vote, can be defended as rights whose protection is a functional precondition of republican politics.[19] In short, any number of justifications may be offered in service of the same broad conclusion: the courts must limit the reach of the state when it threatens to violate certain fundamental, individual rights.

Considerations of political stability and administrative competence can also justify the removal of policy areas from ordinary political control. Here too we find a range of familiar arguments. In the case of monetary policy, we favor central bank independence because of the extraordinary danger of succumbing to the self-serving incentives of the political business cycles. Too many regimes have inflated their way to self-destruction for the sake of electoral victory. Independent central banks remove the temptation of using the money supply for short-term purposes—a justification associated with the image of Odysseus tying himself to the mast. Similar arguments can be offered for insulating regulatory policy from direct political control.[20]

Bureaucratic insulation can be defended for more mundane reasons. Abstruse regulatory policy might be offloaded to expert agencies because the political branches are not competent in the

---

[19] Robert Bork is famous for his critique of Warren Court jurisprudence and insistence that the Supreme Court rely on "neutral principles"—grounded in the original meaning of the constitution—when applying constitutional review to statutes. He mocks the moralism that underwrites much of modern rights jurisprudence. Interestingly, Bork also argues that constitutional rights can be enforced for a different reason: Political rights whose enjoyment is presupposed by republican government must be protected by the Court. Without appealing to originalist reasoning, Bork argues that the first amendment must be interpreted so as to defend political speech, but not any general right to free speech. Robert Bork, "Neutral Principles and Some First Amendment Problems," *Indiana Law Journal* 47, no. 1 (1971): 1–35.

[20] One statement of this kind of defense of bureaucratic insulation is developed by Stephen Breyer, *Breaking the Vicious Circle: Toward Effective Risk Regulation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). In his confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, Breyer was excoriated by then Senator Biden for his elitist disdain for political interference with regulatory expertise. Biden defended the right of the people to make decisions that Breyer's cost-benefit analysis would deem irrational: "we make those judgments every day. The American people have no doubt that more people die from coal dust than from nuclear reactors, but they fear the prospect of a nuclear reactor more than they do the empirical data that would suggest that more people die from coal dust … We made that judgment. I think it is incredibly presumptuous and elitist for political scientists to conclude that the American people's cultural values in fact are not the ones that lend themselves to a cost-benefit analysis." Joseph Biden, "Nomination of Stephen G. Breyer to be an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States." July 14, 1994, 310. Accessed at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CHRG-BREYER/pdf/GPO-CHRG-BREYER.pdf.

relevant policy area. Sometimes this argument is advanced by those who fear that without administrative discretion, necessary rules and regulations will not be promulgated. In other words, constraining the political branches can be a means of advancing a more muscular regulatory agenda. Interestingly, a parallel argument is commonly advanced to reach the opposite conclusion. A tradition of public choice political economy associated with Gordon Tullock and James Buchanan favors constraining the legislature to avoid economically irrational rent-seeking. Rather than defer to the independent bureaucracy, these anti-political arguments are advanced to entrench the free market.[21] The first of these arguments is associated with progressive liberals while the second is associated with libertarians and classical liberals. They differ in important ways, favoring alternatively the administrative state and the free market. What they share is a skepticism of the traditional political institutions of republican government.

There are good reasons to accept many of these justifications for some degree of constitutional and bureaucratic insulation. Some issues of justice do seem so important that they must be protected from the reach of government. The experience of inflation-financed-debt crises and the danger of short-termist legislating gives us reason to favor some degree monetary independence. Bureaucratic discretion in issuing quasi-legislative rules will remain necessary for any number of complex regulatory questions.

---

[21] Tullock and Buchanan's program of "constitutional political economy" is most famously developed in *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004). A similar fear of democratic rent-seeking (especially through powerful, focused special interests) underwrites Hayek's proposed constitutional program: "If [the government's] powers are not limited, it simply cannot confine itself to serving the agreed views of the majority of the electorate. It will be forced to bring together and keep together a majority by satisfying the demands of a multitude of special interests, each of which will consent to the special benefits granted to other groups only at the price of their own special interests being equally considered. Such a bargaining democracy has nothing to do with the conceptions used to justify the principle of democracy." Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 3: The Political Order of a Free People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 99.

The problem, as with all unimpeachable principles, is where to draw the lines. The question is whether too much has been removed from the domain of direct political contestation and control. A once limited set of moral rights and liberties has been gradually expanded. Liberal principles of justice—which Rawls took to legitimize a large range of political discretion—have been interpreted to be increasingly demanding.[22] Administrative independence has expanded to the point that many of our most pressing economic and regulatory decisions are made by technical experts shielded from direct public accountability. A democrat might reasonably be alarmed that the most consequential sites of governance in contemporary America are the Supreme Court and the Federal Reserve Board.

The expansion of judicial and bureaucratic power in practice has accompanied the disappearance of a once central category of democratic theory: popular will. This development is not a matter of terminological fashion; rather, it reflects a deeper feature of liberalism as a philosophy. Invocations of "the will of the people" are often considered misleading if not positively dangerous by political theorists and social scientists. Politicians who justify themselves in such terms threaten to undermine core constitutional safeguards and to legitimize an exclusionary vision of "the people." The referendum—perhaps the most intuitive expression of popular will—commands near universal disapproval among academic students of politics. Joseph Schumpeter influentially argued that the very concept of popular will is incoherent—there is no such thing as "the people" with a definite

[22] Rawls identified abortion, for example, as a matter open to popular decision: "disputed questions, such as that of abortion, may lead to a stand-off between different political conceptions, and citizens must simply vote on the question." Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, liii. Few contemporary Rawlsians accept that judgment. Relatedly, feminist responses criticize Rawls' insulation of the family from the basic structure of society and thus from the reach of the basic rights and liberties. Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). Gina Schouten has recently argued that Rawlsian liberalism does not merely permit but requires far more sweeping intervention in service of overcoming the gendered division of labor than many Rawlsians think. *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labor* (Oxford: University Press, 2019).

article and a definite will.[23] Others claim that what passes for popular will has been so disfigured by propaganda or prejudice as to have lost whatever moral authority it once commanded. Still others suggest that such invocations are simplistic and homogenizing, inadequate to capture the preferences of a diverse and pluralistic societies.[24]

This disappearance of "will-talk" is connected with liberalism's abandonment of politics as a form of sovereign authority and rule. Michel Foucault suggests that the understanding of law as an expression of sovereignty has been displaced by a liberal approach to governmental rationality. Rather than invoke the will of the people, modern liberalism speaks in terms of self-limitation and the balancing of interests: "Government is basically no longer to be exercised over subjects … government is now to be exercised over what we could call the phenomenal republic of interests."[25] Harvey Mansfield, no Foucauldian, offers a parallel description. Beginning with Machiavelli and Hobbes, liberal politics has increasingly become a mode of "indirect government."[26] An older approach to politics centered on the obligation of subjects to obey the ruler. Democratic politics identified the legitimate ruler as the people and its representatives. The new approach emphasizes protecting interests, defending pluralism, and discovering rational (non-political) modes of social organization.[27]

---

[23] For Schumpeter, the existence of a coherent popular will requires the existence of a rational, collectively endorsed common good. Absent such a common good, the "will of the people" is merely "an indeterminate bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions." Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 253.

[24] It is common to see the language of "preference" replace "will" in academic treatments of democracy. Where "will" is metaphysically suspect, preferences are measurable and aggregable.

[25] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 46.

[26] Harvey C. Mansfield, "Hobbes and the Science of Indirect Government," *The American Political Science Review* 65, no. 1 (1971): 97–110.

[27] This is one reason why Hobbes plays such a curious role in the history of political thought. There is no thinker more powerfully dedicated to the principle of sovereign command and authority than Hobbes. At the same time, Hobbesian representation radically reworks the traditional picture of authority by dissolving the category of obedience. The

Liberal politics is in this sense anarchic. To its defenders, anarchy is an achievement, an expression of what Niko Kolodny calls the "rule over none."[28] To its detractors, depoliticization can at best guarantee equality under alien, administrative management, what Hannah Arendt called "rule by nobody."[29] Developing a Tocquevillian argument, Pierre Manent argues that modern state abolishes the *archic* dimension of politics, doing away with rule and obedience, but delivering not freedom but an invisible if totalizing statist conformism.[30]

2. Concepts of Politicization

A liberalism wary of populist democracy finds its justification not in the will of the people, but in guarantees of moral interests, social stability, and pluralistic harmony. In response, principled and opportunistic democrats alike accuse liberalism of undermining democratic self-government by granting too much power to institutions like the Supreme Court and Federal Reserve. It is worth distinguishing the *democratic* and *political* dimensions of this complaint. It is most common to frame the charge in terms of democracy—hence the typical emphasis on unelected judges and bureaucrats. But we might also see the complaint in terms not just of democracy, but of the political. By the political, I mean an expression of direct, transparent authority in which those entrusted with the care of the community direct, through an act of will, the organization of social life. Judicial and

---

conceptual gap between ruler and ruled dissolves, as the people become the author of the laws commanding their submission.

[28] Kolodny, "Rule Over None I."

[29] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.

[30] "The more [the liberal subject] is shaped by the state and becomes incapable of commanding as well as obeying, and, moreover, of understanding what it means to command and to obey, the more he sees himself as self-commanding and obeying himself, then the more he situates himself and prides himself on this imaginary condition, that of a subject or an autonomous individual, an unrecognized but faithful product of the unperceived tyranny of the state." Pierre Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 68. Manent emphasizes Hobbes and Rousseau's roles in this story and the problem of a monistic "autonomy" replacing rule as dyadic command and obedience.

technocratic decision-making—insofar as it eschews explicit, transparent relations of rule and obedience—can be classified as both undemocratic and non-political.

It is almost axiomatic today that only democratic governments can be a legitimate expression of political authority. In part for that reason, the democratic and political critiques of judicial and technocratic power are often lumped together. But conceptually, political authority can be understood without reference to any particular form of government. The political is the domain of authority and rule, and democracy serves only as one candidate form of that rule. Indeed, non-democratic regimes too can be understood as depoliticizing areas of governance.[31]

Politics concerns the question of Who can do What to Whom. The first question—Who Rules—has been since at least Herodotus' Persian Debate one of the guiding questions of political philosophy. The traditional answers are the One, the Few, the Many, or some combination thereof. Democracy as a form of *kratos* is political insofar as it claims that the people in their collective capacity ought to wield the authority to govern society.[32] Liberalism, on the other hand, offers a theory of the *What*. It attempts to constrain the ruler—be it one, few, or many—with principles of rights, liberty, justice, pluralism and the rest. For Karl Popper, we must replace the traditional political question: "Who should rule" with the new, liberal question: "How can we so organize

[31] Hence it can make sense to speak of Soviet Russia or contemporary China as having depoliticizing, technocratic tendencies.

[32] For a debate concerning the ancient Athenian understanding of the relationship between democracy and majority rule, see Josiah Ober, *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chap. 2; Daniela Cammack, "Kratos and Other Forms of Power in the Two Constitutions of the Athenians," *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 39, no. 3 (September 7, 2022): 466–97.

political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?"[33] Liberal politics aims at limiting rather than justifying rule.[34]

It is partly for this reason that an illiberal reactionary like Thomas Carlyle can sound at times like an illiberal radical like Karl Marx. They both seek to recover a politics of mastery over an anarchic society. They differ as to the content of that mastery, but they both claim that liberalism has succeeded not simply in undermining democracy, but in undermining the political itself. It is pointless to argue over who has the right to steer the ship of state if the ship is not under human control in the first place.[35]

My usage of "democracy" and "the political" is idiosyncratic. A peculiar implication of my conceptualization of these terms is that many if not most contemporary accounts of democracy are unpolitical and undemocratic in my sense. Contemporary democratic theorists, with important exceptions, tend to understand democracy less as an expression of self-rule, and more as a general instantiation of moral equality. Elizabeth Anderson, for example, distinguishes three levels of democracy: Democracy as a membership organization (a guarantee of formal equality to the citizenry), a mode of government ("government by discussion among equals"), and a culture ("the

---

[33] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: University Press, 2013), 115.

[34] My point here is a matter of emphasis. Giving an account of the proper limits on government is a way of justifying authority within its proper domain. As Rawls puts it: "Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason" Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 137. But the emphatic difference remains significant. Where liberalism begins with a presumptive suspicion of authority, other traditions begin with a presumptive faith in legitimate authority.

[35] Consider the mantra for Brexit: Take back control. Supporters of Brexit had in mind the restoration of democratic control from an illegitimate caste of European administrators. But perhaps the deeper implicit claim was that the European Union is not under any deliberate, authoritative human control at all. By design, it has locked member states into constitutional political and economic arrangements that resist alteration. For an analysis of the European Union in these terms, see Chris J. Bickerton, *European Integration: From Nation-States to Member States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

freewheeling cooperative interaction of citizens from all walks of life on terms of equality.")[36] Only the second of these levels—democracy as a mode of government—corresponds to my description of democracy as political authority. Even there, Anderson emphasizes discussion, rather than majority rule. In a certain sense, discussion is antithetical to authority, because truly egalitarian discussion entails no relations of authority, but implicitly identifies reasoned (and hypothetical) persuasion as the standard of governance.[37] Anderson's express project is to displace the priority of voting in our understanding of democratic government.[38]

Contemporary political theory and broader political rhetoric does not offer any stable understanding of politicization and depoliticization. We commonly hear that the Supreme Court and Federal Reserve are non-political institutions. We also commonly hear that such institutions are politicized. Sometimes these institutions are defended because they are non-political (and criticized for being politicized). And sometimes these institutions are criticized for being depoliticizing (corresponding to a demand that we politicize them). We likewise hear critiques of the hyper-political tenor of contemporary culture. At the same time, we hear laments that modern citizens are apathetic and depoliticized. By understanding depoliticization as the triumph of reason over will and

---

[36] Elizabeth Anderson, "Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value," in *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 214.

[37] For this reason Schmitt, following Carlyle, identifies liberalism with a commitment to endless, indecisive discussion. *The Concept of the Political*, 71–72. In one especially vivid moment, he draws on Donoso de Cortes to rebuke liberal discussion as a means of always evading decision: "Liberalism, with its contradictions and compromises, existed for Donoso Cortes only in that short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question 'Christ or Barabbas?' with a proposal to adjourn or appoint a committee of investigation." *Political Theology*, 62. Liberals do, indeed, remain fond of establishing committees.

[38] A similar instinct may be said to underwrite a number of recent strands of democratic theory: epistocrats, lottocrats, and deliberative democrats all downplay the importance of the vote as the paradigmatic institutional expression of democracy. For a response and debate, see Richard Tuck, "Against (Many Kinds of) Representation," in *Sceptical Perspectives on the Changing Constitution of the United Kingdom*, ed. Yuan Yi Zhu and Richard Johnson (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2023), 363–80. The argument is further developed in Tuck's forthcoming *Active and Passive Citizens: A Defense of Majoritarian Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).

a corresponding dissolution of authority and obedience, I hope to identify the theoretical issue beneath these convoluted complaints.

In what follows, I distinguish among a few senses in which the language of "politicization" and "the political" is deployed. My point is not that some of these uses are wrong. My aim is rather threefold: (1) I want to offer conceptual clarity on the way these terms are used; (2) I want to suggest that these understandings raise divergent normative considerations of varying importance; and (3) I want to motivate why my understanding of the political can productively illuminate a salient feature of contemporary institutions and ideology—the abolition of transparent relations of authority.

Here is an overview of the five different understandings I describe below:

(1) Politicization/the political as partisan loyalty or prejudice.
(2) Politicization/the political as a spirit of contestation and energetic citizenship.
(3) Politicization/the political as governing for the sake of partisan gain.
(4) Politicization/the political as the imposition of controversial value judgments in an ostensibly neutral domain.
(5) Politicization/the political as authoritative, conscious human rule.

The fifth is my preferred account, but before turning to it, let's treat the first four. These might be organized with the following matrix along two axes: The locus of the phenomenon (the individual psyche/society versus the state) and the kind of phenomenon (partisan prejudice versus the injection of non-neutral values):

	Partisan prejudice/blinding	Non-neutral values
A psychic-social locus	(1) Politicization/the political as partisan loyalty or prejudice.	(2) Politicization/the political as a spirit of contestation and energetic citizenship.
A state-institutional locus	(3) Politicization/the political as governing for the sake of partisan gain.	(4) Politicization/the political as the imposition of controversial value judgments in an ostensibly neutral domain.

(1) Politicization/the political as partisan loyalty or prejudice

This is the most common understanding of the term "politicization" in general usage. It is the kind of thing people mean, for example, when they complain that "everything today is political." Ordinary social relationships have been polarized by partisan loyalties.[39] To use Walzerian language, non-political spheres have been corrupted by politics. Empirical work on "affective polarization," for example, finds that partisanship has come to reach deep into private life, shaping attitudes and relationships that we might take to be properly non-political. Americans report increasingly high levels of personal antipathy to out-partisans and a growing disapproval of cross-partisan marriages.[40] Beyond being socially unpleasant, this kind of politicization can be consequential. When we say, for example, that attitudes toward COVID have been "politicized," we mean that citizens have decided how to respond to a set of scientific facts through a partisan lens. The decision of whether to wear a mask or be vaccinated is not made with reference to appropriate health precautions, but as a means of signaling party loyalty or identity.

This interpretation of the political is what is typically meant in critical discussions of the politicization of the media or universities. Conservative humanists, for example, lament that all literature is now interpreted in narrowly political terms. Great works of art may have important political teachings, but the impulse to assimilate everything into our parochial political categories

---

[39] Hobbes' *De Cive* offers a wonderful description of the social consequences of the democratic need to take a view on all issues. "To see the proposal of a man whom we despise preferred to our own; to see our wisdom ignored before our eyes; to incur certain enmity in an uncertain struggle for empty glory; to hate and be hated because of differences of opinion (which cannot be avoided, whether we win or lose); to reveal our plans and wishes when there is no need to and to get nothing by it; to neglect our public affairs. These, I say are disadvantages" of democracy. Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 122.

[40] Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707.

corrupts more than it illumines.[41] The university as an institution is similarly said to be politicized when its proper standards of academic excellence are set aside in favor of political criteria. Such politicization is most blatant when the state coerces a university to make hiring, research, and teaching decisions in conformity with propagandistic purposes. McCarthyism and academic blacklisting remain the paradigmatic examples of this kind of state pressure on academic life. A recent example can be found in the example of Narendra Modi's treatment of Ashoka University. Even absent that kind of deliberate state censorship or coercion, conservatives in particular lament that American universities have become to overtly dedicated to liberal political ends. They claim that hiring practices, admission standards, and course offerings are no longer set according to academic considerations, but with an eye toward improperly ideological criteria.

Something similar is meant by accusations that the media has been politicized. The charge is that journalistic standards of neutrality (an old-fashioned "just the facts" approach) have been displaced by a more explicitly editorialized, biased orientation. Defenders of the media reply with one of two (and sometimes both) incompatible arguments. First they say that their news reporting is not biased, second they say that there is no such thing as unbiased reporting. More specifically, they suggest that contemporary challenges require a departure from traditional journalistic standards. In dangerous times, it is said to be politically irresponsible for journalists to operate from a naïve commitment to objectivity. As one *New York Times* editor wrote concerning the paper's coverage of Donald Trump, journalists must depart from traditional reporting norms and take up a more

[41] Among the more famous champions of this critique is Harold Bloom, who attacked the rise of what he termed the "school of resentment" in contemporary literary criticism. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

consciously oppositional stance. Their reporting must be "true to the facts, in a way that will stand up to history's judgment."[42]

My point in canvassing these arguments has been to trace one common meaning of "politicization," not to take a position on the actual controversies. The important thing to notice is that those who deploy this conception of the political *mean it as an objection*. There is something wrong with politicizing civil society, the media, or universities. That these spheres have been politicized is typically evidence of corruption.

(2) Politicization/the political as a spirit of contestation and energetic citizenship.

If the first understanding is deployed as a critique, the second offers politicization as an ideal. Many—more in intellectual circles than in the broader culture—worry that neoliberalism has sapped the people of political spirit. What we need is an invigorated culture of active struggle. The problem is not an excess of politicization, but its disappearance. Or, more charitably, they worry that the performative politicization we see is disconnected from real contestation. We need more, better political mobilization.

Modern peoples have been pacified, according to this argument, they have resigned themselves to liberal capitalism, and they have abandoned the imagination and spirit to fight for a better society. There is an echo here of Tocqueville's fear of tutelary despotism and the disappearance of independence and political liberty.[43] More recently Hannah Arendt has been taken

[42] Jim Rutenburg, "Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism," *New York Times*, August 7, 2016.

[43] Sheldon Wolin famously understands democracy as essentially formless and "fugitive," a momentary expression of common struggle, discovery, and self-actualization. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy." Wolin clearly draws in part on Tocqueville's resistance to tutelary authority in developing this distinctive vision of politics.

up as a champion of this vision of an active, democratic life.[44] Bonnie Honig, for example, invokes Arendt to demand a culture that is willing to be disruptive, assertive, and agonistic. We need an energized *demos* that can commit to constant contestation.[45]

Iris Marion Young similarly identifies the political with an ethic of constant scrutiny and critique of the assumptions unthinkingly upheld by a complacent, conservative culture. The political covers "all aspects of institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decisionmaking."[46] In line with the familiar feminist formula—the personal is political—Young takes the political to demand contestation of even apparently minor practices, insofar as they contribute to invidious marginalization. More grandly, it means challenging the conservatism of welfare-state capitalism, which reifies a non-participatory, hierarchical managerial economy.[47] Importantly for Young, re-politicization cannot operate merely through institutional forms. She worries that a "dialectic of recontainment" promises to swiftly depoliticize whatever has been recently politicized. She consequently demands a permanent spirit of "insurgency," prepared to immediately challenge the drift back toward bureaucratism.[48]

Developing a similar and influential argument, Chantal Mouffe radicalizes Carl Schmitt to critique a liberalism in which "conflicts, antagonisms, relations of power disappear and the field of politics is reduced to a rational process of negotiation among private interests under the constraints

---

[44] Arendt's most important treatment of this subject is her slippery account of "action" developed in *The Human Condition*, 175–247.

[45] Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[46] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 34.

[47] In this regard she echoes Wolin's radical critique of the welfare state Wolin, "I. Democracy and the Welfare State."

[48] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 87–91.

of morality."[49] The proper response to the Rawlsian "fact of reasonable pluralism" is not managed harmony, but active struggle. Mouffe is more keen to emphasize mass politics than is Young, and her understanding of the political is more populist and less insurgent. What they share is a vision of the political covers the whole of social life and centers on conflict.

There is something curiously value-neutral and even formal at the heart of these critiques of depoliticization. They run the risk of treating a spirit of agonism itself as a virtue, untethered from substantive principles. Apathy *per se* is the target. While apathy may be dangerous insofar as it renders a people unduly tolerant of unjust and oppressive social arrangements, the proper response is not to make a fetish of conflict itself. The shadow of Schmitt alone gives reason to think that valorizing struggle conceptualizes politics as the existential conflict between friend and enemy. While Honig, Young, and Mouffe defend substantive, emancipatory moral ends, they share a suspicion of the traditional language of morality—a vocabulary they associate with depoliticization. The affirmation of the political as struggle tends toward a contentless appreciation of the need to resist a common enemy. Leo Strauss' original critique of Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* remains highly instructive on this subject:

> Let us now make thoroughly clear what the affirmation of the political in disregard of the moral, the primacy of the political over the moral, would signify. Being political means being oriented to the 'dire emergency,' Therefore the affirmation of the political as such is the affirmation of fighting as such, wholly irrespective of *what* is being fought *for*. In other words: he who affirms the political as such comports himself *neutrally* toward all groupings into friends and enemies. … he who affirms the political as such respects all who want to fight; he is just as *tolerant* as the liberals—but with the opposite intention: whereas the liberal respects and tolerates all 'honest' convictions so long as they merely acknowledge the legal order, *peace*, as sacrosanct,

[49] Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), 113.

> he who affirms the political as such respects and tolerates all '*serious*' convictions, that is, all decisions oriented to the real possibility of *war*.[50]

Karl Löwith made a similar point in his rebuke of both Schmitt and Heidegger.[51] The embrace of agonism purports to reject rationalistic standards of morality and justice, yet in so doing the political *qua* struggle comes to constitute a rather dingy and neutral moral ideal.

(3) Politicization/the political as governing for the sake of partisan gain.

Having treated two understandings of politicization that primarily apply to civil society and culture, we can turn to two accounts that deal more directly with the state. The third concept of politicization and the political relates to the first insofar as it deals with the intrusion of politics beyond its proper domain. Politicization of this kind emerges when government power is deployed for the sake of helping a particular party, faction, or candidate win power. Politicization here points to a kind of institutional sphere violation or corruption, backed by political and not merely social power.

When we speak, for example, of the politicization of the judiciary, we mean that the courts have been coopted by a party or leader at the expense of their mandate of legal impartiality. The most strident expressions of such politicization occur when an institution selectively enforces the law with the aim of helping a political leader or party. If a Department of Justice, for example, were to target citizens for prosecution to delegitimize their political cause, we would call it politicized and corrupt.

---

[50] Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt," in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 105.

[51] "This nihilistic ground of the kind of decision that is not bound by anything beyond itself becomes completely clear in the concept of the political … Schmitt's decision in favor of the political is not a decision in favor of a definite and authoritative subject area, as in religious, metaphysical, moral, or spiritual decisions generally; rather, it is nothing other than a *decision in favor of decisiveness*." Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 146. Löwith recalls a similar joke offered by a student in Heidegger's lectures: "I am resolved; I just don't know upon what." *Ibid.*, 162-3.

The weaponization of the judiciary is the most obviously objectionable form of politicization in this sense. At the other extreme, however, politicization of this kind constitutes a normal feature of electoral politics. When politicians grandstand, they can be accused of "playing politics." What is meant there is that their arguments have less to do with the merits of the issue, and more to do with boosting their chances of electoral victory. This is a curious objection. One of the premises of constitutional liberal politics is that private ambition can be made to coincide with public advantage. It is a hope of democratic politics that candidates and parties might be brought to power on account of their records of governance. Thus, governing with an eye toward winning re-election might constitute a form of "politicization," but it remains a normal feature of any democratic system that places its confidence in the basic mechanism of electoral accountability.[52] Indeed, if elections cannot be relied on as a means of making good, if fallible, collective decisions, democracy as a form of government will be subject to far deeper worries.

Governing with an eye toward private gain can be uncontroversially corrupt in some cases (weaponizing the judicial system) and perfectly pedestrian in others (electoral grandstanding). Less clear is politicization at the level of judicial and bureaucratic interpretation. It is likely if not inevitable that the statutory interpretations relied on by courts or administrative agencies will favor (even systematically) a particular faction. That fact alone is not decisive evidence of politicization. But the specter of something resembling partisan corruption is raised when a pattern of decisionmaking appears to favor a given candidate or party in an unprincipled manner. We begin to

[52] Skeptical treatments of democracy have long insisted that this hope in the convergence of private ambition and the public good is theoretically and historically unfounded. As Frank Knight puts it, "it goes without saying that competence to persuade is only accidentally and improbably associated with competence to counsel and to lead." "The Ethics of Competition" in Frank Knight, *The Ethics of Competition* (New Brunswick: Routledge, 1997), 305. Plato's Socrates puts the point canonically in the *Gorgias*: "evidently oratory produces the persuasion that comes from being convinced, and not the persuasion that comes from teaching, concerning what's just and unjust." Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald Zeyl, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 454e.

invoke the language of politicization when we suspect that technical approaches to textual interpretation matter less in shaping a judge's reasoning than do considerations of raw, partisan consequentialism. Patterns of bias—the systematic application of disparate standards in like cases—give us reason to think that complexity affords judges the opportunity to find whatever reasoning they need to justify a pre-determined decision. This is the objection beneath commonplace accusations that the American Supreme Court has become political. Something similar might be said of bureaucratic agencies. If regulatory decisions or monetary policy were set for the sake of helping a party win an election, that would be a straightforwardly objectionable form of politicization.

This charge of politicization only makes sense insofar as courts and bureaucratic institutions are supposed to be non-political. When they become political, they abandon their legal and constitutional duty of independence, and they become organs of partisan contestation.

(4) Politicization/the political as the institutionalized imposition of controversial value judgments in an ostensibly neutral domain.

The third concept identifies politicization with the explicit aim of helping a politician/party win or retain power. There is some continuity with the fourth concept, in which the political-making conduct is not electoral consequentialism, but a kind of values imposition. A non-political institution operates according to technical criteria rather than unbounded considerations of how to organize society. Even if they aren't acting with electoral outcomes in mind, a court or agency is said to be politicized when it is animated by value or policy judgments beyond its proper remit.

Insofar as substantive value judgments track partisan commitments, it is tempting to collapse this view of politicization into that sketched above, but there are important differences. Advancing a moral ideal is different from helping a particular party or leader win power. More importantly, politicization of this kind often deals with value-laden, ideological reasoning, rather than conscious

partisanship. The judge or bureaucrat might honestly think they are applying a substantively neutral, technical standard. Such officials might know that their work, even if done in an impeccably impartial fashion, will promote some interests at the expense of others. What matters is that these distributional effects are not the basis for the decision.

The Federal Reserve, for example, is tasked with a dual mandate of price stability and full employment. This mandate—set by law—constrains the basis on which central bankers make decisions, and it rules out broad ranging judgments concerning the nature of a flourishing society. A controversial question today concerns whether central bank policy can be set with an eye toward further considerations—combatting climate change, for example. Skeptics of expanding the Fed's power in this manner warn that it would constitute an objectionable form of politicization, a violation of its mandate. As Jerome Powell, Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, put it recently: "Decisions about policies to directly address climate change should be made by the elected branches of government and thus reflect the public's will as expressed through elections." While acknowledging a weak sense in which climate-related risks might properly influence bank supervision, he concludes that "without explicit congressional legislation, it would be inappropriate for us to use our monetary policy or supervisory tools to promote a greener economy or to achieve other climate-based goals. We are not, and will not be, a 'climate policymaker.'"[53]

It is tempting to think that whatever their professions, judges and bureaucrats do, in fact, consciously depend on controversial value judgments beyond their legitimate remit. They make their decisions with an eye toward reaching a morally desirable outcome, and they appeal to ostensibly neutral reasoning (or properly bounded normative reasoning) *ex post* as a matter of public

[53] Jerome Powell, panel on "Central Bank Independence and the Mandate—Evolving Views," Symposium on Central Bank Independence, Sveriges Riksbank, Stokholm Sweden. January 10, 2023. Accessed at: https://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/powell20230110a.htm

justification. What's more, even if judges and bureaucrats do not act consciously on the basis of such considerations, it is certainly the case that the ostensibly neutral, technical criteria they deploy embed contested value judgments. Pushed to its most extreme form, this line of reasoning suggests that it is simply impossible to develop genuinely neutral technical principles. Any rule or practice adopted even in sincere impartiality will invariably systematically favor some values at the expense of others, and therefore some groups at the expense of others.

There is a contrast here between the third and fourth conceptions of politicization. The third idealizes a genuinely non-political bureaucracy and judiciary—a bureaucracy and judiciary that do not act with the aim of favoring a given politician or party. I see no arguments to favor politicization of that kind. But the fourth—at least in its strongest form—suggests that there is *no such thing as a non-political institution*. Every decision will be value-laden and therefore political. Any action undertaken by the Federal Reserve will have distributional consequences, which can only be evaluated in terms of a panoply of value judgments. Central bankers might reply that they are simply carrying out their statutory dual mandate—the maintenance of price stability and full employment. But that mandate is underdetermined insofar as price stability and employment trade off against one another.

Something similar can be said of the Supreme Court. While legal ideology suggests that sound jurisprudence is the application of neutral interpretive principles, it is obvious that these principles and their choice of deployment are value laden. This is most evident in controversial cases concerning the set of moral rights guaranteed by the constitution. Judicial nominees testify that their decisions will in no way be influenced by their substantive moral commitments.[54] They are umpires,

[54] Antonin Scalia protested on these grounds to the Court's decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "Texts and traditions are facts to study, not convictions to demonstrate about. But if in reality our process of constitutional adjudication consists primarily of making *value judgments*…then a free and intelligent people's attitude towards us can be expected to be (*ought* to be) quite different. The people know that their value judgments are quite as good as those taught in any law

calling balls and strikes. Nobody, of course, believes them. It isn't just sociologically implausible that one's personal views on the morality of, for example, abortion have nothing to do with one's legal approach to the issue; it would be almost sociopathic if it were true. Indeed, judges seem to be unique in boasting that their work has nothing whatsoever to do with their most deeply held moral commitments. Where else would civilized society look kindly on a job applicant who proudly proclaims that he so completely checks his conscience at the door? More to the point, even if a particular interpretive philosophy were consistently applied by a judge who believes it to be the technically correct mode of interpretation, the reason that philosophy was adopted in the first place is almost certainly related to the fact that it reflects moral judgments the jurist holds dear, has been socialized to accept, and served as the basis of their appointment.

At a level of generality, none of this seems controversial. Indeed, arguments about the inescapability of value impositions are true to the point of triviality. Those who proclaim *everything is always political*, helpfully rule out naïve idealizations of technical neutrality. But it is not obvious what, if anything, follows from the fact that the Federal Reserve and Supreme Court are always engaged implicitly in the work of value judgments. It does not follow, for example, that central bankers or judges are or should be unbounded in their reliance on such judgments. They need not become applied ethicists and philosopher kings. On the contrary, their work is appropriately constrained by role-ethical considerations and norms which preclude the brute imposition of first-order moral reasoning. These offices cannot help but make decisions that rely on ethical considerations and

---

school--maybe better. If, indeed, the "liberties" protected by the Constitution are, as the Court says, undefined and unbounded, then the people *should* demonstrate, to protest that we do not implement *their* values instead of *ours*. Not only that, but confirmation hearings for new Justices *should* deteriorate into question and answer sessions in which Senators go through a list of their constituents' most favored and most disfavored alleged constitutional rights, and seek the nominee's commitment to support or oppose them. Value judgments, after all, should be voted on, not dictated; and if our Constitution has somehow accidently committed them to the Supreme Court, at least we can have a sort of plebiscite each time a new nominee to that body is put forward." *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey,* (1992) (Scalia dissenting), 1000-1.

produce distributional consequences liable to moral evaluation. To repeat, this seems trivially true, and so the understanding of politicization/the political to simply mean value-ladenness seems so obvious as to verge on the useless.

3. Judges, Bureaucrats, and Politicians

The four uses of "politicization" outlined above each have their appropriate place. None, however, points to the heart of the anxiety about depoliticization, especially in its connection to liberalism. It is easy to see why abusing public institutions for partisan gain is objectionable. So too is it straightforward to understand why the intrusion of moralized, partisan loyalties in ordinary social life is obnoxious and unhealthy. On the other hand, the fourth conception of politicization carries a tone of suspicion and unmasking, but yields no clear implications. Accusing all professional role ethics of harboring implicit value-judgments does not get us very far in assessing those role ethics.

The most promising use of politicization is the second formulation—the political as an ethic of civic agonism. As my earlier chapters have shown, a concern with a mechanistic, spiritless, and passive society has always marked anxieties about the liberal state and market economy. Perhaps Arendtian politicization might be a continuation of Tocquevillian demands for an independent, self-reliant citizenry that refuses to forfeit its liberty. But as I suggested, these champions of politicization break from Tocqueville in coming to treat agonism itself as an autonomous virtue. More fundamental still, Tocqueville's hope is that democratic participation will teach moderation and sobriety, virtues very different from those insisted on by Mouffe et al.

That is why the fifth understanding of the political—an expression of authoritative rule by an act of will—is more instructive. It draws our attention to the basic categories of politics—command and obedience—the categories liberal theory and practice are least comfortable with. The depoliticization that follows is a twentieth-century articulation of what Marx, Tocqueville, and

Carlyle saw as the core problem with the new liberal order: The abolition of rule and the rise of anarchy. By anarchy, these thinkers did not mean the dissolution of the state. What they saw was the transition from conscious, personal modes of political rule and mastery to impersonal, mechanistic modes of social organization. That development—crystallized in our deference to the market, bureaucratism, and judiciary—is the most theoretically rich form of depoliticization.

I want to sharpen this account of depoliticization by developing an ideal-typical contrast between the ruler and technocrat, by which category I will include both judges and bureaucrats. Judges, central bankers, public health officials and the like have grown enormously powerful in recent years and decades, but that does not make them rulers.[55] These technocrats remain non-political because their decisions are not legitimized, self-understood, or publicly presented as expressions of rule and obedience. Political rule is not the same thing as power. For political rule and authority in my sense to exist, it must be recognized as such.

It may be helpful to consider Max Weber's contrast between "leadership" and "officialdom." The essential difference between these two vocations consists in the fact that whereas the official (the judge or the bureaucrat) is simply *doing their job*, the political leader assumes "personal power" and accepts "full *personal responsibility for one's cause* which is the consequence of such power."[56] To do a job is to carry out a task given from without. When we abide by the decisions and rules of the official, we do so out of respect for the authority behind that task, an authority which is not the official himself. To be a bearer of personal responsibility, on the other hand, is to be a generative

[55] I elide differences between judges and bureaucrats to make a negative, clarificatory point. I'm trying to make sense of why despite the enormous power wielded by the Supreme Court and Federal Reserve, those institutions remain non-political.

[56] Weber, "Parliament and Government in Germany" (1917) in *WPW* 161.

source of obligation. This contrast might be made more clear by considering three features of this ideal-typical juxtaposition.

The first is the matter of *vocational self-understanding*. Judges and bureaucrats are technocrats insofar as their office is tethered to technical competence. The nature of that competence varies—for judges, it entails knowledge of law and precedent; for central bankers, macroeconomics and monetary policy; for public health administrators, virology and immunology; and so forth. Unifying these offices is the sense that expertise, measured by the standards of academic disciplines, grounds their right to occupy their positions. This is true as both a matter of public legitimation and professional self-understanding. When a technocrat is nominated or hired, their CV and academic achievements ought to serve as the basis for their selection. The technocrat moreover believes that their office derives from technical skill and expertise.

This contrasts with politicians, whose practical authority does not derive from epistemic competence. The properly political leader, Weber writes, "is not required to demonstrate any kind of *qualification based on training*. This fact indicates that the meaning and purpose of his position differs from that of other officials."[57] Politicians represent the people, not academic scholarship or technical "best practices." Hobbes summarizes this contrast in his rebuke of the Common Law. There he recapitulates Edward Coke's view that judges' collective "artificial reason" discovers requirements of law that curtail even the authority of the king. For Hobbes, this drift from the judiciary's epistemic powers to the practical authority of law manifests a complete non sequitur:

> Lawyer: This legal reason is *summa ratio*; and therefore if all the reason that is dispersed into so many several heads, were united into one, yet could he not make such a law as the law of England is; because by so many successions of ages it hath been fined and refined by an infinite number of grave and learned men. …

[57] Weber, "Parliament and Government in Germany" in *WPW* 160.

> Philosopher: I understand well enough, that the knowledge of the law is gotten by much study, as all other sciences are, which when they are studied and obtained, is still done by natural, and not by artificial reason. I grant you, that the knowledge of the law is an art; but not that any art of one man, or of many, how wise soever they be, or the work of one or more artificers, how perfect soever it be, is law. It is not wisdom but authority that makes a law.[58]

This raises a second contrast between the technocratic and political vocations. When the technocrat makes decisions, they rely on a constrained body of reasoning. A judicial decision must be based on, for example, legal precedent and set canons of construction.[59] The FDA's decision to approve a new drug must be based on experimental trials that meet academic standards. When the FOMC sets interest rates, it relies on macro-economic forecasts and research. I do not mean to suggest that technocratic authorities do in fact rely on such limited reasoning. But at least in theory—and as a matter of professional ideology—appealing beyond their narrow, technical fields is a violation of the technocratic office. If the Federal Reserve were to set interest rates to facilitate a morally desirable redistribution of wealth from creditors to debtors, we would consider that an illicit interference with the political process. So too if the FDA made drug-approval decisions with an eye to supporting a certain industry it takes to be important for national welfare. Such policy judgments may be

---

[58] Thomas Hobbes, *A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws in England.* (J. Bohn, 1840), 4–5. Some pages later Hobbes' philosopher argues: "Statutes are not philosophy, as is the common-law, and other disputable arts, but are commands or prohibitions, which ought to be obeyed, because assented to by submission made to the Conqueror here in England, and to whosoever had the sovereign power in other commonwealths; so that the positive laws of all places are statutes." *Dialogue*, 24. The contrast between command (law) and counsel (philosophy/arts) is crucial for Hobbes. As he explains in *De Cive*, counsel is "an *instruction or precept* in which the reason for following it is drawn *from the matter itself*." A command, on the other hand, "is an *instruction* in which the reason for following it is drawn from *the will of the instructor*." *On the Citizen*, 153. For a discussion, see Stephen L. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 12–15. This distinction is interestingly different in *Leviathan*. At least in emphasis, Hobbes is there more keen to emphasize the different motivations underlying counsel and command. Commands are aimed at the self-interest of the commander, counsels at least purport to be aimed at the self-interest of the counseled. Counsels fail to practically obligate, Hobbes argues, because the harm of refusing to follow the counsel falls squarely on the counseled. *Leviathan*, 176–77.

[59] For Rawls, constitutional judges are exemplary in relying on public reason rather than substantive moral considerations. *Political Liberalism*, 235–37. In his recent work, Blake Emerson has suggested that in fact the administrative state is the more fitting locus of Rawlsian reasoning and legal implementation. "Liberty and Democracy Through the Administrative State: A Critique of the Roberts Court's Political Theory," *UC Law Journal* 73, no. 2 (February 1, 2022): 371.

appropriate, but they require more than technical reasoning to be justified, and so they lie beyond the remit of those in power in virtue of specific expertise.

Where technocrats reason as specialists, politicians reason as generalists. When they make decisions, they do not simply channel the scholarly recommendations of a particular discipline. They may permissibly consider electoral consequences, the wishes and demands of their constituents, an interpretation of the nation's traditions, party platform commitments, and personal understandings of justice. It is possible, perhaps likely, that this distinction has broken down in recent years. Technocrats may be increasingly emboldened to draw on considerations beyond their area of competence. At the same time, politicians have become increasingly technocratic. Michael Oakeshott argued in 1947 that the triumph of a rationalistic spirit in politics produced ever greater deference to the technical knowledge of scientists and distorted politicians' understanding of their own work.[60] The technocratic approach refigures politics into problem solving, and when solving a problem who better to consult than the expert? But the political vocation demands not merely the application of technical fixes to technical problems but a broader scope of judgment. The Oakeshottian critique only makes sense if we recognize the distinction between technocracy and politics that has broken down in practice.

One final way to see the contrast is by considering the divergent aesthetics of technocratic and political power. If Weberian charisma is the hallmark of one ideal-typical ruler, bureaucratic rationality is the hallmark of the technocrat. The cliché of the "faceless" bureaucrat comes to mind here. That facelessness, put in other terms, is embraced by technocrats and officials. Neil Gorsuch,

---

[60] "Rationalism in Politics" in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, New and expanded edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991). Weber made much the same point in his description of the emerging spirit of officialdom among Germany's political leaders. ""Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order: Towards a Political Critique of Officialdom and the Party System" in *WPW*, 130-271.

upon his nomination to the Supreme Court, emphasized the importance of the judge's robes: "It serves, too, as a reminder of the modest station we judges are meant to occupy in a democracy … Ours is a judiciary of honest black polyester."[61] The personality of the judge disappears under the robes, just as the priest's personality is hidden by his vestments when he acts sacramentally *in persona Christi*. The ego vanishes within the office.[62] The judge's task is to apply the law soberly and quietly. When they do address the public, it is in the form of Senate hearings or televised CSPAN lectures. This does not mean that judges and technocrats fail to become public figures—one need only think of Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg or of Anthony Fauci's more recent celebrity. But Fauci too embodied a distinctively technocratic aesthetic appeal. The qualities that endeared him to part of the nation were precisely the qualities that precluded the possibility of winning elected office: cerebral if adorable awkwardness.

Politicians, on the other hand, rely on aesthetic symbols of authority to reinforce their place in American government. They address crowds and meet voters. They signal a simultaneous distinction from the mass and a devotion to it. Their speeches invoke ideals of national history, purpose, and destiny. The political is marked by pomp and ceremony, where the technocratic is, by design, drab and professional.

It is tempting, given the extraordinary accretion of power within technocratic and judicial institutions, to suppose that we live under an epistocracy or kritarchy—the rule of the expert or the

---

[61] Neil Gorsuch, Opening Statement, Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Hon. Neil M. Gorsuch to be an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, March 20, 2017, p. 66. Accessed at: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg28638/pdf/CHRG-115shrg28638.pdf.

[62] Weber offers a possibility of charisma being transferred to the office, with the Catholic sacramental priesthood as the standard example. Herein lies Weber's distinction between a church and a sect. A church attaches charisma to an office, where a sect relies on charismatic individuals. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1164–65. Insofar as a "charismatic office" is possible, however, Weber suggests elsewhere that it will succumb to the logic of bureaucratization, as in the case of the early-modern consolidation of power within the Roman curia. "Parliament and Government in Germany," in *WPW* 146.

judge. Central bankers and judges have become unaccountable philosopher kings. But that is not right. Technocracy is not the rule of the technician but the rule of *techne* or science itself, with the experts serving only as its representatives or conduits. This is different from traditional aristocracy and from the Platonic rule of the wise.[63] Philosopher kings are proper rulers—they are aesthetically marked out from the rest of society, they present and see themselves as practical authorities, not specialists, and they govern on the basis of general reflection, not technical knowledge. Technocracy, to return to our theme, is unpolitical—the rule by nobody, the rule by abstracted forms of rationality, mediated by academic representatives.

I have offered three considerations to ideal-typically distinguish the politician from the technocrat: A vocational self-understanding, technical versus general bases of decisionmaking, and aesthetic public presentation. In practice these distinctions are not as clean as they are in theory. It is characteristic of our time to blur the distinction—technocrats act like politicians, and politicians act like technocrats. We see and hear this often: judges "legislate from the bench," public health officials rely on moral and sociological judgments beyond their remit, and politicians think of themselves as mere problem solvers. The line is even more explicitly blurred in the case of elected judges, district attorneys, and sheriffs. Campaigning for election to a non-political post makes it much harder to distinguish political rule from technocratic or judicial officialdom.

This blurring is a worrying development. We find ourselves today in a terribly confused situation. In speech we legitimize our politics with the language of democratic authorization, yet we

[63] The Platonic demand for the rule by the wise destabilizes traditional aristocratic government, which does not identify superior wisdom as the claim to rule. This is, after all, one of the themes of the Platonic corpus. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, Phoenix ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 124ff. The Athenian Stranger in Plato's *Laws* identifies seven titles to rule, distinguishing the claim of the high-born from the claim of the wise. The wise, the Stranger notes, has the most important claim, yet it also appears to be politically the weakest. Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3.689ff.

allow our institutions, in deed, to drift toward Comtean technical sovereignty.[64] Even as judges and bureaucrats take over many of the powers proper to political authority, we refuse to recognize them as rulers. We do that because we continue to believe that political rule cannot be justified on the grounds of technical competence alone. We see ourselves as democrats, and we ignore the drift toward depoliticization. Once again, this dissonant situation is connected to a liberal polity's refusal to abide "arbitrariness." We demand a rational politics, and so we prefer formal, procedural, technical adjudication over explicit political rule, marked by the specter of arbitrary will.

4. Publius and Contemporary Liberal Constitutionalism

The liberal aversion to arbitrary rule lends itself to a program of depoliticization, the removal of certain domains of life from conscious political control. It is important not to overstate this connection, however, for the liberal tradition has evolved substantially on this subject. We can see that development by comparing the constitutionalism theorized by the *Federalist Papers* and the model most familiar in contemporary liberal political philosophy. We find in earlier liberalism a much stronger attachment to political rule and authority than is tolerated by much contemporary liberal theory.

The American constitution sought to complicate simple democratic control with a system of overlapping jurisdictions. Popular will was decisive but only after it was filtered through constitutional institutions that aimed to produce sobriety and consensus. The hope was that these overlapping jurisdictions would resist majority tyranny and preserve basic liberties. In an 1834 speech, Daniel Webster offered an eloquent statement of this constitutional vision:

[64] There is nothing intrinsically incoherent about being politically ruled by judges or technocrats. That was the case in biblical kritarchy and in Comte's ideal positivist regime. What is important in those cases is that everyone (the judges, industrialists, and people) understand the technocrats to be the rulers. They command as rulers and are obeyed as rulers.

> The first object of a free people is the preservation of their liberty; and liberty is only to be preserved by maintaining constitutional restraints and just divisions of political power. Nothing is more deceptive or more dangerous than the pretence of a desire to simplify government. The simplest governments are despotisms; the next simplest limited monarchies; but all republics, all governments of law, must impose numerous limitations and qualifications of authority, and give many positive and many qualified rights. In other words, they must be subject to rule and regulation. This is the very essence of free political institutions.[65]

At a certain level of generality, Webster articulates a principle of constitutional liberalism that seems very much aligned with the theoretical priorities of contemporary political philosophers. Yet abstract agreement masks a fundamental political divergence. For Webster and the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, public freedom is to be preserved through a scheme of complex, overlapping political institutions. Contemporary liberal theory does not take this approach. To protect core moral priorities, it is suspicious of counter-majoritarian institutions and insistent that a sweeping bevy of moral rights be enforced by the judiciary and other essentially non-political bodies. Publius' constitutionalism is thus markedly more political than, for example, Rawlsian constitutionalism. The former deploys complex, counter-majoritarian institutions to channel political will. The latter favors a simple majoritarian legislature bounded by a sweeping set of constitutional limits. Publius sets a high bar for democratic change generally, Rawls rules it out completely in certain domains.

The American constitution cannot be separated from the priority of natural rights as sketched in the Declaration of Independence's preamble. But the constitution, as understood by Publius, does not preserve these rights by immunizing them from the political branches of government. Fundamental liberties are preserved by combining an extended republic with a powerful central government, a scheme of representation and the separation of powers, and a reliance on popular virtue. Majoritarian democrats object to the scheme of representation and the

---

[65] Daniel Webster, "The Presidential Protest," speech given to the Senate on May 7, 1834. Daniel Webster, *The Works of Daniel Webster*, vol. 4 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 122.

separation of powers for obstructing mass, collective agency. Indeed, Federalist 63 defines American republicanism as "*the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity*" from political power.[66] But while rejecting simple majoritarianism, the constitution remains political insofar as all power ultimately lies with the people and their representatives: "the whole power of the proposed government is to be in the hands of the representatives of the people. This is the essential, and, after all, the only efficacious security for the rights and privileges of the people, which is attainable in civil society."[67]

The constitution does not take a single substantive issue off the political agenda, tempering popular will by passing it through the various branches rather than juridically limiting it. In that sense the constitution honors "that fundamental maxim of republican government, which requires that the sense of the majority should prevail."[68] The "sense of the majority" is a vague standard, but one that acknowledges the core claim of popular sovereignty. Federalist 39 likewise describes republicanism as "a government which derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people; and is administered by persons holding their offices during pleasure, for a limited period, or during good behavior."[69] Here too there are ambiguities as to what precisely republican government entails, and Publius emphasizes the theoretical limitations of any idealized constitution—the political process must render the meaning of the constitution clear.[70]

---

[66] Publius, *Federalist Papers* 63.329.

[67] Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 28.138.

[68] Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 22.106

[69] Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 39.194.

[70] The constitution lacks "that artificial structure and regular symmetry, which an abstract view of the subject might lead an ingenious theorist to bestow on a constitution planned in his closet, or in his imagination." The precise nature of the appropriate boundaries between the various departments of government will remain vague "until their meaning be liquidated and ascertained by a series of particular discussions and adjudications." Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 37.183-4.

What is certain, however, is that Publius offers a political and institutional account of republicanism. That differs dramatically from the contemporary republicanism of Philip Pettit, for example, which aims at preserving a moral status of non-domination. Particular government forms may be better or worse at limiting personal dependence, but Pettit's republicanism does not essentially concern the right of the people to govern itself. The republicanism of the *Federalist Papers*, by contrast, is committed to a form of government (not a moral ideal) by which the people determine their own collective fate.

The danger to which liberal constitutionalism responds is the threat of arbitrary government and tyranny. For Publius, individual rights must be secured by the people and their representatives, not the judiciary. Bodies like the Supreme Court, on Publius' view, cannot be relied on to protect fundamental liberties.[71] If republican, political self-government cannot preserve liberty, nothing can: if "there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government … nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another."[72] The pessimism that leads contemporary liberals to seek solace in a politically insulated judiciary or administrative state echoes the antifederalists' "supposition of universal venality in human nature." Such cynicism is

[71] The clearest evidence that the *Federalist Papers* do not countenance anything like Supreme Court enforced protections of individual liberties is simply the fact that no paper raises the possibility of such a measure. Indeed, the discussion that comes closest to the subject consists in a forceful argument against giving any independent body the responsibility of interpreting and enforcing the constitution. Citing an example of such a body tried in one of the states, Publius concludes: "this censorial body, therefore, proves at the same time, by its reaches, the existence of the disease; and by its example, the inefficacy of the remedy." Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 50.266. This should be no surprise, for Publius defends a constitution without the Bill of Rights. Federalist 84 proposes that the liberty of the press, for example, shall be protected by public opinion, and makes no recourse to the courts. Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 84.446.

[72] Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 55.291.

incompatible with the premise of republican government, which "implies that there is a portion of virtue and honour among mankind, which may be a reasonable foundation of confidence."[73]

Publius' constitutionalism counsels and channels democratic will but does not block it. As a celebrated passage from Federalist 63 puts it, "the cool and deliberate sense of the community ought, in all governments, and actually will, in all free governments, ultimately prevail over the views of its rulers." The purpose of constitutional design is to check the momentary stimulation of "some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage" or the "artful misrepresentations of interested men."[74] If these political means of restoring moderation and sobriety in the people do not succeed, no other measures can.

Contemporary liberal political philosophy takes itself to be more democratic than Publius, yet it often presumes a far more dismal view of the capacities of the citizenry. Most liberal theorists today are critical of the Senate and Electoral College, arguing that such institutions block popular will and serve minoritarian interests. At the same time, the same liberal theorists often favor a robust role for the Supreme Court and relatively insulated administrative state as the guarantor of fundamental liberties. It is curious that the Senate seems democratically illegitimate but expansive judicial review and an independent bureaucracy is not. Where Publius offered a political system to check the excesses of democratic politics, contemporary democratic theorists prefer to constitutionalize rights. This practical implication is made clear by the structure of contemporary liberal theorizing.

---

[73] Publius, *Federalist Papers*, 76.395. Cecelia Kenyon famously called the anti-federalists "men of little faith." Contemporary liberal political philosophers are the same—men of little democratic faith. *Men of Little Faith: The Anti-Federalists on the Nature of Representative Government* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955).

[74] Publius, *Federalist Papers* 63.326-7.

For Rawls, "the first task in the theory of justice is to define the initial situation so that the principles that result express the correct conception of justice from a philosophical point of view."[75] He famously rejects consequentialism and builds a theory of justice that respects the individual's right to live according to their own conception of the good. The resulting right-based theory of justice produces a strong account of what the state is forbidden to do. Rawlsian justice provides a vision of a good society that consists in banning the attempt to impose any substantive moral conception of the good. The priority of justice means that no government—not even democratic government—is permitted to violate the principles of public reason that philosophers upon reflection have discovered.[76]

Rawls, to be clear, insists that democracy is the only adequate expression of his first principle of justice. The equal liberties guaranteed to all citizens include equal political rights: "all citizens are to have an equal right to take part in, and to determine the outcome of, the constitutional process that establishes the laws with which they are to comply."[77] But this right of roughly equal political power is just one of the many rights guaranteed by a just, liberal society.[78] Majoritarian political power can never acceptably curtail those other equally important liberties. We must limit the extent of democratic power up to the point where the loss of political liberty "balances the security of liberty gained by the greater use of [non-majoritarian] constitutional devices."[79]

---

[75] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 392.

[76] It must be acknowledged that Rawls substantially weakens this argument in *Political Liberalism*.

[77] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 194.

[78] Recall here Marx's objection to liberal, democratic societies that set political liberties *in service of* civil liberties: "the political emancipators go so far as to reduce citizenship, and the *political community*, to a mere *means* for maintaining these so-called rights of man … the *citoyen* is declared to be the servant of egoistic *homme*." "OtJQ" *MECW* 3.164.

[79] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 202.

It is for this reason that Rawls is accused of limiting the scope of democratic politics. Bonnie Honig, for example, argues that Rawls' theory of justice is so demanding and expansive as to reserve mere "remainders" of politics to the democratic process.[80] The hypothetical Rawlsian procedure—the imagined bargaining behind a veil of ignorance—rules out actual procedures of democratic decision-making. Wolin makes a similar objection. Rawls' constitutional state excludes the possibility of real, democratic action, which means, in Wolin's terms, "subordinating participatory possibilities in favor of administered benefits."[81]

All this is even more true of Ronald Dworkin, who distinguishes majoritarian conceptions of democracy—according to which decisions demanded by a majority of the people become law—from constitutional conceptions—according to which democracy exists to secure a bevy of fundamental rights, of which political power is but one:

> Democracy means government subject to conditions—we might call these the "democratic" conditions—of equal status for all citizens. When majoritarian institutions provide and respect the democratic conditions, then the verdicts of these institutions should be accepted by everyone for that reason. But when they do not, or when their provision or respect is defective, *there can be no objection, in the name of democracy,* to other procedures that protect and respect them equally.[82]

Why, the argument runs, do we favor democracy in the first place? Surely the answer has to do with bedrock commitments to individual equality. Yet that commitment to equality grounds a dizzying array of rights and interests that are just as fundamental as political equality. Since both political and

---

[80] Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 126–61.

[81] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought - Expanded Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 531.

[82] Dworkin, *Freedom's Law*, 17. Emphasis added.

social equality are downstream of the master egalitarian principle, it makes little sense to assert the priority of majoritarian democracy.

Publius offers a political mode of resisting tyranny, while most contemporary theorists are inclined to favor non-political checks from without. For Publius, we must complicate popular will through representation, a separation of powers, and an extended republic. The counter-majoritarianism of these institutions delay, temper, and elevate popular will. Ultimately, however, the constitution does not obstruct the will of the people, for no government can do so and remain republican. For contemporary democratic theorists, non-majoritarian institutions are inimical to equality and therefore suspect. We must have a simple majoritarian system of government. The way to resist the corresponding dangers of arbitrary government or tyranny is to juridically restrict the scope of popular government with non-political (judicial and administrative) constraints. Where Publius favors a complex republican institutional form with no extra-political limits, contemporary theorists favor strong extra-political constraints around a simple majoritarian state.

In this hostility to procedural majoritarianism, we find a new statement of the oldest argument against democracy. How can the people be trusted to govern in a just, stable, responsible manner? Won't democracy devolve into ochlocracy or theatocracy, violate justice, and undermine the stability of the regime? In its most honest form, this argument constitutes a critique of democracy. What is so peculiar about much contemporary democratic theory is that it accepts the substance of the critique without accepting its form.[83] They proscribe a huge range of actions for a democratic state, but they insist that these proscriptions are not limits on democracy but expressions of its deepest character. In truth, these democratic critics of majoritarianism do not differ all that

[83] This is another example of the Tocquevillian tensions described earlier in this dissertation. Even those most hostile to various expressions of egalitarianism—in this case a hostility to popular government—feel compelled, in a democratic society, to express that hostility with the language of equality.

much from the more openly democracy-skeptical arguments of John Stuart Mill[84] or Pope Leo XIII.[85] Contemporary theorists simply replace traditional principles of negative liberty or natural law with a demanding account of social equality.

Conclusion

Max Weber offers the following account of *Herrschaft*, variously translated as mastery, rulership, legitimate domination, or authority:

> *Domination* will thus mean the situation in which the manifested will (*command*) of the *ruler* or rulers is meant to influence the conduct of one or more others (*the ruled*) and actually does influence it in such a way that their conduct to a socially relevant degree occurs as if the ruled had mad ethe content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its own sake. Looked upon from the other end, this situation will be called *obedience*.[86]

Weber's most influential argument is that the modern age is characterized by a new mode of domination. We are no longer ruled by men but by systems. Modern citizens have come to live under what he famously terms the "iron cage" (more literally rendered the "shell as hard as steel"[87])

---

[84] Mill's wariness of procedural democracy is most evident in his anxieties about majority tyranny in *On Liberty* and his defense of plural voting in *Considerations on Representative Government*. A fine formulation of his position can be found in an early writing on universal suffrage: "What, then, has a liberal statesman to offer to the working classes? The greatest thing of all; and a thing which must precede Universal Suffrage--if Universal Suffrage is ever to come without a civil war. He must redress the practical grievances of the working classes. ... The motto of a Radical politician should be, Government by means of the middle for the working classes." Mill, "Reorganization of the Reform Party" (1839) *CWM* 6.483.

[85] For Pope Leo XIII, the most important question is whether a state governs in line with a Catholic view of human flourishing and welfare: "it is not of itself wrong to prefer a democratic form of government, if only the Catholic doctrine be maintained as to the origin and exercise of power. Of the various form of government, the Church does not reject any that are fitted to procure the welfare of the subject." Pope Leo XIII, *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888) in Peter A. Kwasniewski, ed., *A Reader in Catholic Social Teaching: From Syllabus Errorum to Deus Caritas Est* (Tacoma: Cluny Media, 2017), 70.

[86] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1978, 946.

[87] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 121.

or the "carapace of bureaucratic regimentation."[88] The crucial fact about this new mastery is impersonality. It lacks the personal, human command characteristic of political rule. For Weber, this impersonality connects capitalism and bureaucracy, both of which "may be felt to be much more oppressive than an authority in which duties of obedience are set out clearly and expressly."[89]

This chapter has offered a parallel and complementary analysis to Weber's. I have attempted to show that contemporary laments concerning the rise of "depoliticization" are most intelligible and theoretically fruitful when understood as critiques of leaderless government. In that sense we find a new articulation of the slaves-without-masters anxiety. A liberal aversion to arbitrary rule produces an affinity with depoliticization, a tendency to construct rational systems that serve as substitutes for capricious human will. Publius famously predicted that the Supreme Court would never threaten the political branches of government precisely because it possesses merely judgment, not force nor will.[90] He neglected the power of the promise of non-voluntary judgment in the minds of a democratic people. Today judges and bureaucrats wield extraordinary power, but they have not become political rulers. In virtue of their public image, mode of reasoning, and self-understanding, they do not constitute practical sources of political authority. Rather, they represent bodies of expertise. Indeed, insofar as their task is to protect individual autonomy, social equality, and the like, judges in particular might be characterized as *anti-rulers*. They do not rule, but ensure that no one in society rules anyone else.

I have suggested, however, that liberalism has a more overtly political tradition it can draw on. Though its insistence on counter-majoritarianism and its skepticism of raw popular will are now

---

[88] Weber, "Parliament and Government," *WPW* 268.

[89] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1978, 946.

[90] Publius, *Federalist Papers* 78.

seen as relics of a more undemocratic past, the American constitution as theorized by Publius offers a more political approach to reconciling self-government and individual liberty. The fragmented constitutional scheme Publius defends, whatever its demerits, cannot be accused of depoliticization. The technocratic and judicial rule by nobody may have roots in a deeper liberal tradition, but it has only recently emerged as the preferred theoretical approach of liberal philosophers.

Conclusion

In his final State of the Union address, Theodore Roosevelt rejected a classically American fear of political centralization. Leaderless, fragmented power, he argued, is a greater threat to democracy than is unified, presidential authority:

> The danger to American democracy lies not in the least in the concentration of administrative power in responsible and accountable hands. It lies in having the power insufficiently concentrated, so that no one can be held responsible to the people for its use. Concentrated power is palpable, visible, responsible, easily reached, quickly held to account. Power scattered through many administrators, many legislators, is impalpable, is unseen, is irresponsible, cannot be reached, cannot be held to account. Democracy is in peril wherever the administration of political power is scattered among a variety of men who work in secret, whose very names are unknown to the common people. It is not in peril from any man who derives authority from the people, who exercises it in sight of the people, and who is from time to time compelled to give an account of its exercise to the people.[1]

This line of argument was standard among the major progressive thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Roosevelt's critique of Congress—for which he would be censured—echoes the argument developed more systematically by his progressive rival, Woodrow Wilson. Like Roosevelt, Wilson identified the central problem of his day not to be an excess of government, but the invisible and diffuse power that flourished in the absence of a responsible, centralized state. In his 1912 campaign speeches published as *The New Freedom*, he argued that America was not plagued by the tyranny of the state and an oligarchy of the rich. It suffered instead under "the wrongs of a system." The power of corporations was not the power of rapacious capitalists, but a depersonalized form of social discipline and control.[2]

---

[1] Theodore Roosevelt, "Eight Annual Message," in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. 17 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 586.

[2] Wilson, *The New Freedom*, 10–11.

Only an exertion of state power could check the new force of amorphous economic power. Yet as Wilson argued throughout his career, the American state was incapable of placing the industrial economy under control because the American state was itself leaderless. Though his views developed over the course of his life, Wilson consistently argued that the separation of powers produced by the American constitution and its more doctrinaire interpreters made responsible leadership impossible. As he summarized in a lecture on "leaderless government," this is a "government without definite order, showing confused interplay of forces, in which no man stands at the helm to steer, whose course is beaten out by the shifting winds of personal influence and popular opinion."[3]

The hallmark of leaderless government for Wilson is the disconnect between elections and governance. Congressional and presidential candidates do not run on united party platforms around which public opinion can be organized. Rather, each candidate articulates a bespoke set of commitments to satisfy the interests of particular constituencies or local party bosses and their corporate or union allies. The Congress is run by dozens of committees, each pursuing a legislative agenda under the direction of its chairman. There is no common governing program, and consequently committees produce legislation at odds with one another. The president has no power to direct the work of legislation, and he has no discretionary power to administer the laws in accordance with an electoral mandate.[4]

The fragmentation of electoral selection and government administration makes accountability impossible. Without a unified program directed by clear leaders, voters are unable to

---

[3] Woodrow Wilson, "Leaderless Government," *The Virginia Law Register* 3, no. 5 (1897): 349.

[4] Wilson's related complaint concerns the amateurish character of the bureaucracy. Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1887): 197–222.

make meaningful decisions at the ballot box. Come election day, how "is the schoolmaster, the nation, to know which boy needs the whipping?"[5] We know that we suffer from a crisis of leaderless government when we cannot straightforwardly identify the people to blame or credit for national policy.

Herbert Croly, the most systematic of the progressive writers, identified this condition of fragmented, leaderless, anarchic politics with an American fixation with the rule of law.[6] An exaggerated and dogmatic faith in the rule of law meant that government was not directed by the people's representatives, but arose chaotically and passively from a "government by litigation."[7] Something similar would be true of an independent bureaucratic apparatus. While Croly, Wilson, and Roosevelt favored the emergence of a strong administrative state, they insisted it be subject to direct presidential control. An independent, fragmented bureaucratic apparatus would reproduce and magnify the crisis of leaderless government.[8] The common demand was for a rise of presidential

---

[5] Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1885), 282.

[6] "The human will in its collective aspect was made subservient to the mechanism of a legal system." Herbert David Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 39.

[7] Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 253. *The Promise of American Life* deals at some length with the problems attending the emerging American "government by lawyers." At one point Croly remarks, "The existing political order has been created by lawyers; and the naturally believe somewhat obsequiously in a system for which they are responsible, and from which they benefit. This government by law, of which they boast, is not only a government by lawyers, but is a government in the interest of litigation" Herbert David Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 167.

[8] It is worth noting how different the progressives' vision of administrative reform was from that of the post-New Deal legal settlement or the proposals of contemporary democratic critics of bureaucratization. The central demand of the progressive program is for consolidated, accountable, executive control over the administration. In response to the experience of fascism, American liberal thinkers began to retreat from that vision, preferring instead a model of institutionalized insulation with localized forms of participation that would ultimately be concretized through the Administrative Procedures Act. Rosenblum, "The Antifascist Roots of Presidential Administration." When contemporary democratic theorists speak of democratizing the administrative state, they often favor similar forms of bottom-up, quasi-consultative democratic bodies *within* bureaucratic agencies. Such measures would, on the original progressive view, only contribute to the anarchic, disjointed, leaderless nature of democratic governance. Cordelli, *The Privatized State*, chap. 3; Blake Emerson, *The Public's Law: Origins and Architecture of Progressive Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 4; K. Sabeel Rahman, *Democracy against Domination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 5.

power, the sole means by which the people could overcome their condition of economic, political, legalistic anarchy:

> Progressive democracy needs executive leadership, because it accomplishes so effectively one very important object of democratic political organization. Better than any other exclusively parliamentary system, any legalistic system or any system of pure democracy, it organizes and vitalizes the rule of the majority. As a consequence of bestowing the leadership of the state upon one man who represents the dominant phase of public opinion, it develops and consolidates majority rule as it has never yet been developed and consolidated in the history of democracy.[9]

The progressive critique of leaderless government and its demand for centralized, energetic presidentialism represents another chapter in the tradition this dissertation has attempted to reconstruct.[10] In their hostility to the rule by judiciary, the fragmentation of legislative committee-government, the structural power of the corporate, capitalist economy, and the specter of an autonomous bureaucracy, these thinkers produced a variation of a now-familiar theme. Liberal constitutionalism and the rule of law produce anarchy and depoliticization. Citizens are unable to take control of their society, which is dominated by impersonal forces. A new mastery is needed to overcome the drift of Gilded Age political economy.

That language of mastery and drift is deployed by Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann—in his early years another major progressive thinker—and points to a deeper ambiguity. Is the problem faced by liberal societies caused by mistaken institutional choices? Or is there a psychic and spiritual

---

[9] Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 304.

[10] In this regard the progressives are remarkably similar their contemporary, Max Weber, who insists that only "leadership democracy" can resist the routinization of capitalism and bureaucracy. Modern parliamentarism has become a "leaderless democracy," Weber writes, "characterized by the effort to minimize the rule of man by man." Max Weber, *Economy and Society: A New Translation*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 408. A new plebiscitary mode of party leadership is needed, Weber argues, to establish leadership democracy: the "only choice lies between a leadership democracy with a 'machine' and a democracy without a leader, which means rule by the 'professional politician' who has no vocation, the type of man who lacks precisely those inner, charismatic qualities which make a leader." "Politics as a Vocation," *WPW* 351.

crisis that inclines liberal societies to resist political rule and embrace rational impersonality? If the problem is as simple as reforming institutions to empower the presidency vis-à-vis the legislature or the courts, the difficulty is not especially theoretically interesting. But as this study has shown, the most serious anxieties concerning this slaves-without-masters tendency cannot be so easily resolved. An impersonal political regime is positively attractive to many citizens, who find in the rule of systems a rational refuge from the specter of arbitrary will. To paraphrase Tocqueville, it only seemed like the people demanded political liberty. In truth, they merely hated the person of the master.

The most compelling of the progressives recognized the spiritual nature of the problem. Lippmann's 1914 *Drift and Mastery* follows a familiar pattern. The problem of early nineteenth-century America is not state tyranny or plutocracy, but anarchy, a leaderless condition that resists political control. This condition derives, Lippmann argues, from the experience of disorientation that arose with the abolition of feudal forms of personal authority: "We have lost authority. We are 'emancipated' from an ordered world. We drift."[11] Lippmann has political proposals in mind—an empowered presidency that can make use of a new, professional bureaucracy to wield rational but democratic control over society.[12] But the power of Lippmann's book lies in its discussion of the

[11] Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery; An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1917), 111.

[12] As Roosevelt put it in a glowing 1914 review of Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery* and Croly's *Progressive Democracy*, the progressive program calls for a dramatic expansion of collective political power. Roosevelt draws particular attention to Croly's rebuke of the "saturation of our Government with legalism" and Lippmann's account of the need of establishing "mastery of the movement; which can come in a democracy only if the people, or at least the leaders of the people, have the courage to face the facts and the wisdom and vision to think rationally about them." Theodore Roosevelt, "Two Noteworthy Books on Democracy," *Outlook (1893-1924)* 108, no. 12 (November 18, 1914): 649–50.

spiritual difficulty of navigating a world dedicated to dynamism and freedom and allergic to order and authority.[13]

A similar equivocation marks Croly's political thought. At times, he advances a political-institutional critique and proposes political-institutional remedies. He uses too uses the language of "drift" to describe a constitutional regime that lacks decisive executive leadership. Like many other progressives, Croly favors Hamiltonian executive power over a Jeffersonian entrenchment of anti-statist individualism. Jefferson, Croly writes gave the nation a "fatal policy of drift," whereas Hamilton demanded "energetic and intelligent assertion of the national good."[14] Like Lippmann, however, Croly is not satisfied with a merely political and institutional solution to the nation's difficulties. Both of his major books—*The Promise of American Life* and *Progressive Democracy*—are marked by a decidedly religious tone. One chapter of *Progressive Democracy*—"The Law and the Faith"—takes up the spiritual orientation democracy must adopt.[15] The final words of *Promise* offer striking vision of the moral transformation needed for democracy to succeed:

> The principle of democracy *is* virtue, and when we consider the condition of contemporary democracies, the [Montesquieuian] saying may seem to be more ominous than flattering. But if a few hundred years from now it seems less ominous, the threat will be removed in only one way. The common citizen can become something of a saint and something of a hero, not by growing to heroic proportions in his own person, but by the sincere and enthusiastic imitation of heroes and saints, and whether or not he will ever come to such imitation will depend upon the ability of his exceptional fellow-countrymen to offer him acceptable examples of heroism and saintliness.[16]

---

[13] Lippmann would later abandon his earlier faith in democratic, scientific mastery. He came to mock the pseudo-theological "illusion of control," the hope for an assertion of political mastery over modern life. Lippmann, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society,* 29.

[14] Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 55, cf. 88, 386–87.

[15] Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, chap. 8.

[16] Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 558.

These are not rhetorical flourishes. Croly's political thinking is suffused with a vision of organic holism and an ethic of fraternal, spiritual conversion. He inherited this democratic quasi-faith from his father, a committed American follower of Auguste Comte. Indeed, Croly was baptized in a Comtean Church of Humanity in New York.[17] Democratizing the Comtean program—which centered on the rule of the industrialists—the Crolies retained Comte's sense that political and economic reform required spiritual transformation and legitimation. Atheism and disenchantment render impossible meaningful social transformation.

Croly's insistence on spiritual renewal grew alongside his increasing disillusionment with the possibilities of politics. Following the post-Wilson defeat of the progressive movement, Croly began work on a new book, never published, titled *The Breach in Civilization*.[18] The argument of that book returns us to the historical imagination this dissertation has attempted to study. Croly looked back to medieval Catholicism for providing a spiritual unity that was abandoned by the Reformation and the liberalism that followed:

> If the progressive peoples wish to control the powerful special interests of government and property, they will have to resurrect the mediaeval vision of a single Catholic community, the incarnation of a valid Christian science, whose authority is sufficient to prevail over the authority of state, of corporation, of class, of syndicate, or of individual conviction and conscience. Unless they return devoutly to this conception, their civilization will remain divided against itself and will drift helplessly to its own destruction.[19]

---

[17] On Croly's father's Comteanism, see David Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), chap. 1.

[18] Only some 150 pages of the galley proofs of the book remain in the Houghton Library collection. Herbert Croly, *A Breach in Civilization*, [1920] Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Croly develops some of these religious reflections in another uncompleted manuscript, *Religion in Life* [19--] Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[19] Croly, *The Breach in Civilization*, 15.

As did so many others, Croly returned to an ideal of unity and holism inspired by the medieval integration of political, religious, and economic life. Without spiritual revival, Croly warned of falling back "upon the existing moral anarchy" and thereby playing "into the hands of the enemies of liberalism."[20] Liberalism fails, Croly explains, when it consists in "religion without authority" and "science without humanism." Only the "remarriage of science with religion" can overcome the anarchy of the present.[21] In June of 1920, Croly published an excerpt from a chapter of the book in *The New Republic* under the title "Regeneration." The chapter opens by restating the crisis of Western civilization that has gradually unfolded since the Reformation: "ever since the passing of Catholicism men have searched for a new body of authoritative knowledge which would bind humanity together and save it from falling a victim to its prepossessions, aberrations and distempers."[22] The two great epistemic projects of the modern age—a subjectivist, introspective psychologism borne of Protestant individualism and an objectivist, scientific sociology associated with Marx and Comte—have failed to recapture the synthetic holism found in medieval Catholicism. The political crisis of liberalism, Croly explains, derives from the inadequacy of the modern vision of human nature, and regeneration will ultimately require a restoration of an authoritative system of belief.

Croly never published the book, due in part perhaps to the critical comments of his friend, Felix Frankfurter.[23] His attempt to marshal the medieval imagination in service of progressive regeneration—once a familiar maneuver, as we have seen—was at best eccentric in early twentieth-

---

[20] Croly, *The Breach in Civilization*, 54.

[21] Croly, *The Breach in Civilization*, 150.

[22] Herbert David Croly, "Regeneration," *The New Republic* 23, no. 288 (June 9, 1920): 40. In the manuscript version, these lines can be found in Croly, *The Breach in Civilization*, 125.

[23] Edward A. Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), chap. 8.

century America. What it revealed, however, was Croly's recognition that political and economic reform alone could not overcome the experience of "drift" that marked American society. In this regard, Croly—the optimistic, progressive liberal—comes to sound much more like his great contemporary, Henry Adams, the pessimistic, nostalgic conservative. Adams too is torn between the possibilities of a new, progressive technological civilization, and a fear that modern America has been cut off from its Christian civilizational roots. The challenge, as Adams evocatively puts it, is the choice between "The Dynamo and the Virgin."[24] Adams would respond to the challenge by turning to the study of the Middle Ages, and his *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* remains one of the few great American monuments to medieval nostalgia. Unlike Adams, Croly was unwilling to return to the embrace of the "old churches."[25] Instead, like many in his circle, he turned to a new mysticism, becoming a regular participant in George Gurdjieff's Manhattan spiritual salons.[26] Both trajectories point to what Max Weber identified as the core difficulty of the modern world: disenchantment. The impersonality and anarchy Croly once thought might be overcome through democratizing institutional reforms proved to be fundamentally spiritual and religious in origin. It could only be met with a correspondingly religious alternative. This did not mean that Croly rejected politics. His articles of the 1920s reflect a growing political radicalism, a demand for a more economically assertive and class-conscious form of liberalism.[27] But he consistently demanded a unity of moral-

---

[24] Henry Brooks Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (New York: Modern Library, 1996), chap. 25.

[25] Weber uses that phrase in the final words of his influential lecture, "Science as a Vocation:" "If someone cannot endure this fate of the age like a man, he must be told that he should rather return to the merciful, wide open arms of the old churches—silently, purely, simply, without the usual publicity of a renegade … he must inevitably somehow, one way or another, make the 'sacrifice of the intellect.'" Weber, "Science as a Profession and Vocation," in *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings*, trans. Hans Henrik Bruun (New York: Routledge, 2012), 352–53.

[26] Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic*, chap. 9.

[27] For one particularly sharp statement, see Herbert David Croly, "The Eclipse of Progressivism," *The New Republic* 24, no. 308 (October 27, 1920): 210–16.

spiritual and political-economic reform to rescue progressive democracy from both class domination and class warfare.

The family of lamentations this dissertation has attempted to reconstruct has always been torn between these two poles—the political and the spiritual. Liberal, capitalist societies seem to have done away with conscious political authority, deferring to the formal equality of the market economy, the winds of public opinion, and the technocratic representatives of reason. Political remedies can be proposed to take back control of social life. But those remedies only treat symptoms of the deeper malaise. Liberal citizens are properly afraid of arbitrary power, but that healthy vigilance easily becomes an undue aversion to politics itself. A sensible hostility to the tyrannical rule of man can beget learned helplessness and collective impotence.

This remains a difficulty that confronts liberal theory and practice. The rule of law is a crucial civilizational achievement. The self-discipline and restraint shown by recourse to depoliticization is a mark of sobriety. But taken too far, sobriety becomes sclerosis. It is easy to see why so many rebel against a regime of inertial but anarchic social power. Citizens naturally demand to be given at least the occasional power to control their collective fate through their political leaders. What may seem like mature self-control comes to be experienced as juvenile helplessness. At the same time, it is easy to see why citizens so unpracticed in self-government, so untutored by responsible authorities, and so spiritually underdeveloped will react to the impersonality of their liberal societies in crude and destructive ways.

I do not propose a way out of this difficulty. In reconstructing the most powerful exponents of the slaves-without-masters critique, I have attempted merely to draw attention to a vulnerability within the liberal order. I have tried to suggest that many of our preferred diagnoses for the failings of contemporary politics fail to recognize the depth of our problems. If thinkers as varied as Marx,

Carlyle, and Tocqueville saw this crisis emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, and if their fears continue to speak to readers today, it seems obvious enough that institutional or economic reforms will not address what is really at stake. More worrying still, many of the attempts I know of to resist political helplessness and assert a new mastery over social life seem worse than the disease.

This study does not intend to bolster the demand for radical re-politicization of society or an explosive expression of populist power. My primary aim has been to canvass a danger in liberalism's affinity with depoliticization. I do wish to conclude with one positive suggestion, however. We need not commit to a total triumph of political will to recognize that our current regime has moved too far in the direction of inertial, mechanical, impersonal systems. We need not jettison the wisdom of traditional constitutional constraints—those defended by the *Federalist Papers*, for example—to recognize that too much of life has come to be juridically and culturally removed from the reach of political control. Indeed, this ever-expanding demand for depoliticization represents a serious departure from Publius' far more political conception of republicanism.

In one of his most decisively neo-feudal works, *An Outline of Sanity*, G.K. Chesterton develops his program of distributivism, taking inspiration from an idealized vision of medieval, widespread rural ownership. Like many neo-feudalists before him, Chesterton recognizes the threat posed by modern technology and mechanized agrarian production to the viability of that way of life. An efficient, large-scale estate provides increasing returns to scale with which independent farmers cannot compete. The modern machine seems to necessitate the abolition of small-scale ownership and the consolidation of large, productive estates. To these technological determinists, Chesterton writes:

> Before we begin any talk of the practical problem of machinery, it is necessary to leave off thinking like machines. It is necessary to begin at the beginning and consider the end. Now we do not necessarily wish to destroy every sort of

> machinery. But we do desire to destroy a certain sort of mentality. And that is precisely the sort of mentality that begins by telling us that nobody can destroy machinery. Those who begin by saying that we cannot abolish the machine, that we must use the machine, are themselves refusing to use the mind.[28]

Taken literally, Chesterton is surely right that technological innovations need not be taken uncritically. It is the prerogative and duty of a civilized society to evaluate innovations, determine whether they threaten social welfare, and regulate or even proscribe them as appropriate. It would be irresponsible to dogmatically assert that the arrival of a potentially destructive technology is simply inevitable. Chesterton's deeper point, however, is that the machine per se is not the problem. The real challenge is the machine-mentality that cannot countenance intervention to begin with. There is a connection between machine-like institutions—which lock-in policy decisions or insulate spheres of life from public control—and a machine-like psychology—by which the state and its citizens come to believe that there is no alternative to the continuing operation of the system.

There are, to repeat, powerful reasons to partially insulate domains of life from political control. There are also powerful pathologies that flow from an excess of depoliticization and a resulting regime of learned helplessness. There is a temptation in contemporary political theory to arrive at an ideal point of balance—an equilibrium between the extremes of will and reason, political control and depoliticized insulation. Without purporting to propose a satisfactory point of balance, my suggestion is simply that too much of social, economic, and political life has been given over to impersonal systems and mechanisms. Market efficiency and bureaucratic independence are increasingly understood not as tools deployed by statesmen, but as the normative, natural state of things: there is no alternative. An undue aversion to human rule—even when that rule is checked by constitutional measures—leads us to adopt the machine-mentality Chesterton feared. It may be wise

---

[28] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* in G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 5 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 145.

to depoliticize, but it is dangerous to forget that depoliticization is a choice that can be revisited and revised in the future.

Only by periodically breaking some of the machines and reasserting conscious will can we begin to be freed from the spell of impersonal systems and reminded of the possibilities of political authority. To modify the opening words of the *Federalist Papers*, the question is whether our nation is destined to remain trapped within an inertial logic of drift and dependence or may prove capable of establishing good government from reflection and choice.

Works Cited

Acton, John. *Lectures on the French Revolution*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1910.

Adams, Henry Brooks. *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*. New York: Modern Library, 1996.

———. "The Session." *The North American Review* 111, no. 228 (1870): 29–62.

Adolphe-Jérôme, Blanqui. *History of Political Economy in Europe*. Putnam, 1880.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012.

Althusser, Louis. *For Marx*. Edited by Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 1979.

———. *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx: Politics and History*. Verso. London: Verso Books, 1982.

Anderson, Elizabeth. "Adam Smith on Equality." In *Adam Smith: His Life, Thought, and Legacy*, edited by Ryan Patrick Hanley, 157–72. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

———. "Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value." In *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*, 213–27. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

———. *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

———. "What Is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287–337.

Anderson, Perry. *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. London: Verso, 2013.

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

———. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970.

———. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

———. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Armenteros, Carolina. *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794-1854*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

Armenteros, Carolina, and Richard Lebrun, eds. *Joseph de Maistre and His European Readers: From Friedrich von Gentz to Isaiah Berlin*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Aston, T. H., and C. H. E. Philpin, eds. *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Avineri, Shlomo. *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

———. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Avramenko, Richard. "The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy." *Political Theory* 45, no. 4 (2017): 495–523.

Avramenko, Richard, and Brianne Wolf. "Disciplining the Rich: Tocqueville on Philanthropy and Privilege." *The Review of Politics* 83, no. 3 (2021): 351–74.

Beiser, Frederick C. *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Bickerton, Chris J. *European Integration: From Nation-States to Member States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Bisset, Robert. *The Life of Edmund Burke, Volume II*. G. Cawthorn, 1800.

Bisson, Thomas N. *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Bloch, Marc. *Feudal Society*. Translated by L. A. Manyon. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
Boesche, Roger. *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.
Bongie, Laurence L. *David Hume, Prophet of the Counter-Revolution*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
Bork, Robert. "Neutral Principles and Some First Amendment Problems." *Indiana Law Journal* 47, no. 1 (1971): 1–35.
Bourke, Richard. *Empire & Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
———. *Hegel's World Revolutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.
Brendon, Piers. "Newman, Keble and Froude's Remains." *The English Historical Review* 87, no. 345 (1972): 697–716.
Breyer, Stephen. *Breaking the Vicious Circle: Toward Effective Risk Regulation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
Brown, Elizabeth A. R. "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe." *The American Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (1974): 1063–88.
Brownson, Orestes Augustus. *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson*. Edited by Patrick W. Carey. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000.
———. *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson: Religion and Society*. Edited by Henry F. Brownson. T. Nourse, 1883.
Buchanan, James, and Gordon Tullock. *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004.
Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Edited by Francis Canavan. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999.
———. *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace*. Edited by Iain Hampsher-Monk. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
———. *Select Works of Edmund Burke: Miscellaneous Writings*. Edited by Francis Canavan. Vol. 4. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999.
Calhoun, Craig. "Beyond Left and Right: A Cobbett for Our Times." In *William Cobbett, Romanticism, and the Enlightenment*, edited by James Grande and John Stevenson, 157–71. London: Routledge, 2015.
Cammack, Daniela. "Kratos and Other Forms of Power in the Two Constitutions of the Athenians." *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 39, no. 3 (September 7, 2022): 466–97.
Carlyle, Thomas. *Essays on Politics and Society*. Edited by Chris Vanden Bossche, T. Frye Lowell, and John M. Ulrich. Vol. 6. 6 vols. Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022.
———. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*. Edited by M. K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin, and Mark Engel. Vol. 1. 6 vols. Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
———. *Past and Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909.
———. *Past and Present*. Edited by Chris Vanden Bossche, Joel J. Brattin, and D. J. Trela. Vol. 4. 6 vols. Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
———. *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books*. Edited by Rodger L. Tarr and Mark Engel. Vol. 2. 6 vols. Norman and Charlotte Strouse Edition of the Writings of Thomas Carlyle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
———. *The French Revolution: A History*. Edited by David R. Sorensen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

———. *The Works of Thomas Carlyle: Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Vol. 20. 30 vols. London: Chapman and Hall, 1896.
Carlyle, Thomas, and Jane Welsh Carlyle. *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. Edited by Ian Campbell and David R. Sorensen. 50 vols. Durham: Duke University Press, 1970.
Carnall, Geoffrey. *Robert Southey and His Age : The Development of a Conservative Mind*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.
Cassirer, Ernst. *The Myth of the State*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946.
Chandler, Alice. *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970.
Chesterton, G. K. *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*. Vol. 4. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987.
———. *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*. Vol. 5. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987.
———. *The Victorian Age in Literature*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1913.
Chitty, Andrew. "The Basis of the State in the Marx of 1842." In *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, edited by Douglas Moggach, 220–41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Chrysis, Alexandros. *"True Democracy" as a Prelude to Communism: The Marx of Democracy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
Claeys, Gregory. "Non-Marxian Socialism 1815–1914." In *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, edited by Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys, 521–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
Clive, John Leonard. *Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian*. New York: Knopf, 1973.
Cobbett, William. *A History of the Protestant "Reformation," in England and Ireland: Showing How That Event Has Impoverished and Degraded the Main Body of the People in Those Countries*. J. Duffy, 1869.
———. *Rural Rides: In the Counties of Surrey ... [Etc.] in the Years 1821, 1822, 1823, 1825, 1826, 1829, 1830 and 1832, with Economical and Political Observations Relative to Matters Applicable To, and Illustrated By, the State of Those Counties Respectively*. A. Cobbett, 1853.
Cohen, G. A. *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're so Rich?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
———. "Marx's Dialectic of Labor." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1974): 235–61.
———. *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
Cohen, Jean L. *Class and Civil Society: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982.
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge's Writings: On Politics and Society*. Edited by John Morrow. Coleridge's Writings. London, England: MacMillan Press Limited, 1990.
Collier, Andrew. "Marx and Conservatism." In *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Chitty and Martin McIvor, 94–104. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
Collins, Gregory M. *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's Political Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
Colton, Calvin. *The Junius Tracts*. Greeley & McElrath, 1844.
Comte, Auguste. *A General View of Positivism*. London: Trübner and co., 1865.
———. *Early Political Writings*. Edited by H. S. Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
Constant, Benjamin. *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
Cordelli, Chiara. *The Privatized State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.
Craiutu, Aurelian, and Jeremy Jennings. "The Third Democracy: Tocqueville's Views of America after 1840." *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 3 (August 2004): 391–404.
Croly, Herbert David. *Progressive Democracy*. New York: Macmillan, 1914.
———. "Regeneration." *The New Republic* 23, no. 288 (June 9, 1920): 40–47.

———. "Religion in Life," n.d. MS Am 1291. Houghton Library, Harvard University.
———. "The Breach in Civilization," 1920. MS AC9 C8798 920b. Houghton Library, Harvard University.
———. "The Eclipse of Progressivism." *The New Republic* 24, no. 308 (October 27, 1920): 210–16.
———. *The Promise of American Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
Darwall, Stephen L. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Penguin, 2003.
Digby, Kenelm Henry. *The Broad Stone of Honour: Goefridus*. Vol. 1. B. Quaritch, 1877.
———. *The Broad Stone of Honour: Morus*. Vol. 3. E. Lumley, 1848.
———. *The Broad Stone of Honour: Tancredus*. Vol. 2. Edward Lumley, 1846.
Dijn, Annelien de. *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
Disraeli, Benjamin. *Selected Speeches of the Late Right Honourable the Earl of Beaconsfield*. Edited by T.E. Kebbel. London: Longmans, Green, and co, 1882.
———. *Vindication of the English Constitution in a Letter to a Noble and Learned Lord*. Saunders and Otley, 1835.
Drescher, Seymour. *Tocqueville and England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964.
Drolet, Michael. *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
Du Marsais, Cesar Chesneau. "Philosopher." In *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative*, translated by Dena Goodman. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2002.
Duong, Kevin. "The Demands of Glory: Tocqueville and Terror in Algeria." *The Review of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 31–55.
Dworkin, Ronald. *Freedom's Law: The Moral Reading of the American Constitution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
Edwards, Owen Dudley. "Carlyle Versus Macaulay?—A Study in History." *Carlyle Studies Annual*, no. 27 (2011): 177–206.
Eliot, T. S. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949.
Emerson, Blake. "Liberty and Democracy Through the Administrative State: A Critique of the Roberts Court's Political Theory." *UC Law Journal* 73, no. 2 (February 1, 2022): 371.
———. *The Public's Law: Origins and Architecture of Progressive Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
Englert, Gianna. "'The Idea of Rights': Tocqueville on The Social Question." *The Review of Politics* 79, no. 4 (2017): 649–74.
———. "Tocqueville's Politics of Grandeur." *Political Theory* 50, no. 3 (2022): 477–503.
Epstein, Klaus. *The Genesis of German Conservatism*. 1764. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.
Feuerbach, Ludwig. "Principles of the Philosophy of the Future." In *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, translated by Zawar Hanfi, 175–246. London: Verso, 2012.
Fitzhugh, George. *Cannibals All!: Or, Slaves without Masters*. Edited by C. Vann Woodward. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
Fleischacker, Samuel. *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations A Philosophical Companion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
Forbes, Duncan. "Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce, and Liberty." In *Essays on Adam Smith*, edited by Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson, 179–201. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Translated by Graham Burchell. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
———. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

Froude, James Anthony. *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
Froude, Richard Hurrell. *Remains of the Late Reverend Richard Hurrell Froude*. J. G. and F. Rivington, 1838.
Furst, Lilian R. *European Romanticism: Self-Definition*. Routledge, 1980.
Ganshof, François Louis. *Feudalism*. Translated by Philip Grierson. London: Longmans, Green, 1952.
Ghosh, P. R. "Macaulay and the Heritage of the Enlightenment." *The English Historical Review* 112, no. 446 (1997): 358–95.
Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Volume I*. Edited by David Womersley. London: Penguin Press, 1994.
Goldberg, Jeffrey. "The Obama Doctrine." *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.
Gouldner, Alvin Ward. *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980.
Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
Grande, James. *William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England: Radicalism and the Fourth Estate, 1792-1835*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
Green, Jonathan Allen. "Friedrich Gentz's Translation of Burke's Reflections." *The Historical Journal* 57, no. 03 (September 2014): 639–59.
Guizot, François, and William Hazlitt. *The History of Civilization, from the Fall of the Roman Empire to the French Revolution*. London: G. Bell & sons, 1901.
Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.
Halikias, Dimitrios. "Adam Smith on the Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Commercial Society." *History of Political Thought* 41, no. 4 (2020): 622–47.
———. "Adam Smith's Four Invisible Hands and the Problem of Political System." *History of Political Thought* 44, no. 2 (May 31, 2023): 338–68.
———. "The Young Marx on Feudalism as the Democracy of Unfreedom." *The Historical Journal* 67, no. 2 (March 2024): 281–304.
Haller, Karl Ludwig von. *Restauration Der Staats-Wissenschaft Oder, Theorie Des Natürlich-Geselligen Zustands Der Chimäre Des Künstlich-Bürgerlichen Entgegengesetz*. Second Edition. Vol. 4. 6 vols. Winterthur, 1822.
Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
———. *The Palliative Society: Pain Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021.
Harrington, James. *"The Commonwealth of Oceana" and "A System of Politics."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
Hayek, Friedrich. "Individualism: True And False." In *Studies on the Abuse and Decline of Reason*, edited by Bruce Caldwell, 46–74. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
———. *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice*. University of Chicago Press, 1976.
———. *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 3: The Political Order of a Free People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
———. *Studies on the Abuse and Decline of Reason: Text and Documents*. Edited by Bruce Caldwell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
———. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.
———. *The Road to Serfdom*. Edited by Bruce Caldwell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Allen W. Wood. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
———. *Hegel: The Letters*. Translated by Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
———. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Edited by J. N. Findlay. Translated by Arnold V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
———. *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by John Sibree. New York: Dover, 1956.
Henderson, Christine Dunn. "Beyond the 'Formidable Circle': Race and the Limits of Democratic Inclusion in Tocqueville's Democracy in America." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2022): 94–115.
———. "Revisiting Tocqueville's American Woman." *Political Theory* 51, no. 5 (October 1, 2023): 767–89.
Herf, Jeffrey. *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
Hilton, Rodney. *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*. London: NLB, 1976.
Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. New York: Knopf, 1984.
Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
———. *On the Citizen*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
———. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury: A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws in England. Behemoth: The History of the Causes of the Civil Wars of England. The Whole Art of Rhetoric. The Art of Rhetoric, Plainly Set Forth with Pertinent Examples for the More Easy Understanding of the Same. The Art of Sophistry*. J. Bohn, 1840.
Hofstadter, Richard. *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948.
Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 1996.
Honig, Bonnie. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
Hume, David. *Essays: Moral; Political; and Literary*. Edited by Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987.
———. *The History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*. Edited by William Todd. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983.
Hunt, Richard N. *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818-1850*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974.
Ikuta, Jennie C., and Trevor Latimer. "Aristocracy in America: Tocqueville on White Supremacy." *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 2 (2021): 547–59.
Iyengar, Shanto, and Sean J. Westwood. "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707.
Janara, Laura. "Brothers and Others: Tocqueville and Beaumont, U.S. Genealogy, Democracy, and Racism." *Political Theory* 32, no. 6 (December 2004): 773–800.
———. "Commercial Capitalism and the Democratic Psyche: The Threat to Tocquevillean Citizenship." *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 2 (2001): 317–50.
Jaume, Lucien. *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
Jefferson, Thomas, and James Morton Smith. *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776-1826*. New York: Norton, 1995.
Jones, Emily. *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830-1914: An Intellectual History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
Jordan, Alexander. "'Noble Just Industrialism' Saint-Simonism in the Political Thought of Thomas Carlyle." PhD Diss, European University Institute, 2015.

———. "Thomas Carlyle and Political Economy: The 'Dismal Science' in Context." *The English Historical Review* 132, no. 555 (2017): 286–317.
Judt, Tony. *The Memory Chalet*. New York: Penguin Press, 2010.
Jünger, Ernst. *On Pain*. Translated by David C. Durst. New York: Telos Press, 2008.
———. *The Worker: Dominion and Form*. Translated by Laurence Paul Hemming and Bogdan Costea. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017.
Kahan, Alan S. *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
Kapossy, Béla. "Words and Things: Languages of Reform in Wilhelm Traugott Krug and Karl Ludwig von Haller." In *Languages of Reform in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Susan Richter, Thomas Maissen, and Manuela Albertone. New York: Routledge, 2020.
Katz, Claudio J. "Karl Marx on the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism." *Theory and Society* 22, no. 3 (1993): 363–89.
Kelley, Donald R. "The Metaphysics of Law: An Essay on the Very Young Marx." *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (1978): 350–67.
Kellner, Leon. *Die englische Literatur im Zeitalter der Königin Viktoria*. B. Tauchnitz, 1909.
Kenyon, Cecelia. *Men of Little Faith: The Anti-Federalists on the Nature of Representative Government*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955.
Kierkegaard, Søren. *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age A Literary Review*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
Knight, Frank. *The Ethics of Competition*. New Brunswick: Routledge, 1997.
Koganzon, Rita. *Liberal States, Authoritarian Families: Childhood and Education in Early Modern Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
Kolakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*. Translated by Paul Stephen Falla. New York: Norton & Company, 2005.
Kolodny, Niko. "Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2014): 195–229.
———. "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014): 287–336.
———. *The Pecking Order: Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023.
Korsch, Karl. *Marxism and Philosophy*. Translated by Fred Halliday. London: Verso, 2012.
Kotkin, Joel. *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class*. New York: Encounter Books, 2020.
Kovesi, Julius. "Moses Hess, Marx and Money." In *Values and Evaluations: Essays on Ethics and Ideology*, edited by Alan Tapper, 127–207. New York: Peter Lang, 1998.
Kwasniewski, Peter A., ed. *A Reader in Catholic Social Teaching: From Syllabus Errorum to Deus Caritas Est*. Tacoma: Cluny Media, 2017.
Lane, Melissa. *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.
Lasch, Christopher. *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*. New York: Norton, 1991.
Lawrence, D. H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Edited by Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
Leipold, Bruno. "Marx's Social Republic: Radical Republicanism and the Political Institutions of Socialism." In *Radical Republicanism*, edited by Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and White. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
Leopold, David. *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Levin, Michael. "Marxism and Romanticism: Marx's Debt to German Conservatism." *Political Studies* 22, no. 4 (December 1, 1974): 400–413.
Levy, David. *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
Levy, Jacob T. *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
Lincoln, Abraham. *Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*. Edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher. New York: Library of America, 1989.
Lippincott, Benjamin Evans. *Victorian Critics of Democracy: Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Stephen, Maine, Lecky,*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938.
Lippmann, Walter. *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society,*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937.
———. *Drift and Mastery; An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*. New York: H. Holt and Company, 1917.
Liu, Glory M. *Adam Smith's America: How a Scottish Philosopher Became an Icon of American Capitalism*. Princeton: University Press, 2022.
Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Edited by Peter Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
Lord Byron. *The Complete Poetical Works, Vol. 5: Don Juan*. Edited by Jerome J McGann. Vol. 5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
Lovett, Frank. *A Republic of Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
Löwith, Karl. *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
Löwy, Michael. "The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization." *Theory and Society* 16, no. 6 (1987): 891–904.
Lukács, György. *History and Class Consciousness; Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971.
———. *Tactics and Ethics: 1919-1929*. London: Verso, 2014.
———. *The Historical Novel*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
Macaulay, Thomas Babbington. "Southey's Colloquies on Society." In *Critical and Historical Essays, Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, 5th ed., 1:217–69. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848.
MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
Mackrell, J. Q. C. *The Attack on "Feudalism" in Eighteenth-Century France*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1973.
MacLean, Nancy. *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*. New York: Penguin, 2017.
Maistre, Joseph Marie de. *Considerations on France*. Edited by Richard Lebrun. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
———. *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*. Little and Brown, 1847.
Manent, Pierre. *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*. Translated by Ralph C. Hancock. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020.
———. *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.
Manin, Bernard. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Manners, John. *England's Trust: And Other Poems*. J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1841.
———. *The Monastic and Manufacturing Systems: By Anglo-Catholicus*. Painter, 1843.
Mansfield, Harvey C. "Hobbes and the Science of Indirect Government." *The American Political Science Review* 65, no. 1 (1971): 97–110.

———. "The Forms and Formalities of Liberty." *The Public Interest* 70 (1983): 121–31.
Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.
Markovits, Daniel. *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. New York: Penguin Press, 2019.
Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.
———. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 3*. Translated by David Fernbach. New York: Penguin, 1993.
Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*. 50 vols. New York: International Publishers, 1975.
———. *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe 2*. 114 vols. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1975.
———. *Marx-Engels Werke*. 39 vols. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1957.
Mcarthur, Neil. "Laws Not Men: Hume's Distinction between Barbarous and Civilized Government." In *David Hume*, edited by Richard Whatmore and Knud Haakonssen. Routledge, 2013.
McCollum, Jonathan. "The Nazi Appropriation of Thomas Carlyle: Or How Frederick Wound Up in the Bunker." In *Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle's Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Paul E. Kerry and Marylu Hill. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010.
McQueen, Alison, and Burke A. Hendrix. "Tocqueville in Jacksonian Context: American Expansionism and Discourses of American Indian Nomadism in Democracy in America." *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 3 (September 2017): 663–77.
Meinecke, Friedrich. *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.
Mill, John Stuart. *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Edited by John M. Robson. 33 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963.
Monahan, Sean. "The American Workingmen's Parties, Universal Suffrage, and Marx's Democratic Communism." *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 2 (June 2021): 379–402.
Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Translated by Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat. *My Thoughts*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012.
More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Edited by George M. Logan. Translated by Robert Merrihew Adams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Morley, John. *Critical Miscellanies*. Macmillan, 1888.
Morrow, John. "Romanticism and Political Thought in the Early Nineteenth Century." In *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, edited by Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys, 39–76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
Mouffe, Chantal. *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso, 1993.
Müller, Adam. *Die Elemente Der Staatskunst*. Berlin: J.D. Sander, 1809.
Nelson, Eric. "'Barons' Wars, under Other Names': Feudalism, Royalism and the American Founding." *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 2 (2017): 198–214.
———. *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
———. *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.
———. *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019.

Nicole, Pierre. *Moral Essays Contain'd in Several Treatises on Many Important Duties. Written in French, by Messieurs Du Port Royal. Faithfully Rendred Into English, by a Person of Quality. Second Volume*. Samuel Manship at the Ship in Cornhil, near the Royal Exchange, 1696.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

———. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Nippel, Wilfried. *Ancient and Modern Democracy: Two Concepts of Liberty?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Oakeshott, Michael. *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. New and Expanded edition. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991.

Ober, Josiah. *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1989.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2023.

Paine, Thomas. *Political Writings*. Edited by Bruce Kuklick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Pankhurst, Richard. *The Saint Simonians, Mill and Carlyle; a Preface to Modern Thought*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1957.

Pettit, Philip. "Freedom in the Market." *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 5, no. 2 (2006): 131–49.

———. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Pickering, Mary. *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*. Vol. 1. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Pitts, Jennifer. *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Plato. *Complete Works*. Edited by John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997.

———. *The Laws of Plato*. Translated by Thomas Pangle. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

———. *The Republic*. Edited by G. R. F. Ferrari. Translated by Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Pocock, J. G. A. "Burke and the Ancient Constitution—a Problem in the History of Ideas." *The Historical Journal* 3, no. 2 (1960): 125–43.

———. *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century: A Reissue with a Retrospect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Pope Gelasius I. *Pope Gelasius I, The Letters of Gelasius I*. Translated by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014.

Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton: University Press, 2013.

Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. Translated by John Beverley Robinson. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969.

———. *System of Economical Contradictions: Or, The Philosophy of Misery*. Boston: Tucker, 1888.

Publius. *The Federalist Papers*. Edited by James McClellan and George Wescott Carey. Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, 2001.

Pugin, Augustus Welby Northmore. *Contrasts: Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day, Shewing the Present Decay of Taste*. C. Dolman, 1841.

Pye, Tom. "The Scottish Enlightenment and the Remaking of Modern History." *The Historical Journal* 66, no. 4 (September 2023): 746–72.
Rahman, K. Sabeel. *Democracy against Domination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
Rasmussen, Dennis. "Adam Smith on What Is Wrong with Economic Inequality." *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 2 (May 2016): 342–52.
Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Revised Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
———. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
———. *The Law of Peoples: With, the Idea of Public Reason Revisited*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
Read, Leonard E. "I, Pencil." *The Freeman* 8, no. 12 (1958): 32–37.
Reynolds, Susan. *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
Richter, Melvin. "Tocqueville and French Nineteenth-Century Conceptualizations of the Two Bonapartes and Their Empires." In *Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*, edited by Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter, 83–102. Washington DC: German Historical Institute, 2004.
Ritter, Joachim. *Hegel and the French Revolution: Essays on the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982.
Roberts, William Clare. *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
———. "Marx's Social Republic: Political Not Metaphysical." *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 2019, 27, no. 2 (2019): 41–58.
Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*. Vol. 17. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.
———. "Two Noteworthy Books on Democracy." *Outlook (1893-1924)* 108, no. 12 (November 18, 1914): 648.
Rose, Jonathan. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
Rosenberg, John D. *Carlyle and the Burden of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.
Rosenblum, Noah. "The Antifascist Roots of Presidential Administration." *Columbia Law Review* 122, no. 1 (2022): 1–86.
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau Volume 11*. Edited by Christopher Kelly. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005.
Rubel, Maximilien. "Notes on Marx's Conception of Democracy." *New Politics* 1, no. 2 (1962): 78–90.
Runciman, David. *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Ruskin, John. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Wiley & Halsted, 1857.
Rutenburg, Jim. "Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism." *New York Times*, August 7, 2016.
Sabl, Andrew. "When Bad Things Happen from Good People (and Vice-Versa): Hume's Political Ethics of Revolution." *Polity* 35, no. 1 (2002): 73–92.
Sagar, Paul. "On the Liberty of the English: Adam Smith's Reply to Montesquieu and Hume." *Political Theory* 50, no. 3 (2022): 381–404.
Sandel, Michael. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.
Sandoval, Tonatiuh. "Auguste Comte's Reading of Maistre's Du Pape: Two Theories of Spiritual Authority." In *Joseph de Maistre and His European Readers*, edited by Carolina Armenteros and Richard Lebrun, 75–94. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Schaar, John H. "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond." In *Equality*. Routledge, 1967.
Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*. Translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.
———. "The Nature and Value of Universal History: An Inaugural Lecture [1789]." *History and Theory* 11, no. 3 (1972): 321–34.
Schlegel, Friedrich von. *A Course of Lectures on Modern History: To Which Are Added, Historical Essays on the Beginning of Our History, and on Caesar and Alexander*. H. G. Bohn, 1849.
———. *Lectures on the History of Literature: Ancient and Modern*. Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson and Son, 1818.
———. *The Philosophy of Life, and, Philosophy of Language: In a Course of Lectures*. Translated by A. J. W. Morrison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
———. *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
Schouten, Gina. *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labor*. Oxford: University Press, 2019.
Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
Scott, James C. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
Scott, Walter. *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott Volume II*. Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1894.
———. *Ivanhoe*. Edited by Graham Tulloch. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
Selinger, William. "The Monarchical Origins of Modern Liberty: The Norman Conquest and the English Constitution Revisited, 1771–1861." *History of European Ideas*, Forthcoming.
Selinger, William, and Greg Conti. "Reappraising Walter Bagehot's Liberalism: Discussion, Public Opinion, and the Meaning of Parliamentary Government." *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 2 (2015): 264–91.
Semmel, Bernard. *Jamaican Blood and Victorian Conscience: The Governor Eyre Controversy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963.
Shanin, Teodor, ed. *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983.
Shawn, Wallace. *My Dinner with André: A Screenplay*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1981.
Shoikhedbrod, Igor. "Marx and the Democratic Struggle Over The Constitution in 1848–9." *History of Political Thought* 43, no. 2 (May 23, 2022): 357–81.
Sismondi, Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde. *New Principles of Political Economy: Of Wealth in Its Relation to Population*. Translated by Richard Hyse. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991.
———. *Political Economy, and the Philosophy of Government: A Series of Essays Selected from the Works of M. de Sismondi*. London: J. Chapman, 1847.
Skinner, Quentin. "Hobbes on Representation." *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 155–84.
———. *Liberty Before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Skocpol, Theda. *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.
Slobodian, Quinn. *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.
Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981.
———. *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982.

———. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982.
Smith, Rogers M. "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America." *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 549–66.
Sorensen, David R. "'The Great Pioneer of National Socialist Philosophy'?: Carlyle and Twentieth-Century Totalitarianism." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 45, no. 1 (2012): 43–66.
Southey, Robert. *Sir Thomas More: Or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*. Edited by Tom Duggett and Tim Fulford. New York: Routledge, 2018.
Sperber, Jonathan. *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*. New York: Liveright Pub. Corp., 2013.
Stedman Jones, Gareth. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.
Stepelevich, Lawrence S., ed. *The Young Hegelians, an Anthology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
Stephen, Leslie. *The English Utilitarians Volume II*. London: Duckworth and Company, 1900.
Stettner, Edward A. *Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993.
Storey, Benjamin, and Jenna Silber Storey. *Why We Are Restless: The Modern Quest for Contentment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.
Strauss, Leo. "German Nihilism." *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353–78.
———. *The City and Man*. Phoenix ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
Swedberg, Richard. *Tocqueville's Political Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
Thomas, Paul. *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
Thompson, E. P. *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955.
Tillery, Alvin B. "Tocqueville as Critical Race Theorist: Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and the Limits of Jacksonian Democracy." *Political Research Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (December 2009): 639–52.
Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
———. *Democracy in America*. Edited by Eduardo Nolla. Translated by James T. Schleifer. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012.
———. *Journeys to England and Ireland*. Translated by George Lawrence and K.P. Mayer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.
———. *Memoir on Pauperism*. Translated by Seymour Drescher. London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1997.
———. *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings: Poverty, Public Welfare, and Inequality*. Translated by Christine Dunn Henderson. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021.
———. *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
———. *Tocqueville on America after 1840: Letters and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
Trevor-Roper, Hugh. *History and the Enlightenment*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
Tuan, Mao-Lan. *Simonde de Sismondi as an Economist,*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1927.
Tuck, Richard. "Against (Many Kinds of) Representation." In *Sceptical Perspectives on the Changing Constitution of the United Kingdom*, edited by Yuan Yi Zhu and Richard Johnson, 363–80. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2023.
Urbinati, Nadia. "Sismonde de Sismondi's Aristocratic Republicanism." *European Journal of Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (2013): 153–74.
Vanden Bossche, Chris. *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991.

Varoufakis, Yanis. *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*. London: The Bodley Head, 2023.
Villa, Dana. "Tocqueville and Civil Society." In *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, edited by Cheryl B. Welch, 216–44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Walzer, Michael. "Liberalism and the Art of Separation." *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (1984): 315–30.
———. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: A New Translation*. Translated by Keith Tribe. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019.
———. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
———. *General Economic History*. Glencoe: Free Press, 1950.
———. *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings*. Translated by Hans Henrik Bruun. New York: Routledge, 2012.
———. *Political Writings*. Edited by Peter Lassman. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
———. *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*. Translated by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. New York: Penguin Books, 2002.
Webster, Daniel. *The Works of Daniel Webster*. Vol. 4. Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851.
Weikart, Richard. "Marx, Engels, and the Abolition of the Family." *History of European Ideas* 18, no. 5 (1994): 657–72.
Welch, Cheryl B. *De Tocqueville*. Oxford: University Press, 2001.
Whitman, Walt. *Complete Prose Works*. Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1891.
Whittington, Keith E. "'Interpose Your Friendly Hand': Political Supports for the Exercise of Judicial Review by the United States Supreme Court." *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 4 (November 2005): 583–96.
Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1958.
———. *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. Verso Books, 2015.
Wilson, Woodrow. *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*. Houghton, Mifflin, 1885.
———. "Leaderless Government." *The Virginia Law Register* 3, no. 5 (1897): 337–54.
———. *The New Freedom*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1913.
———. "The Study of Administration." *Political Science Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1887): 197–222.
Winch, Donald. "The Burke-Smith Problem and Late Eighteenth-Century Political and Economic Thought." *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 1 (1985): 231–47.
———. *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
Winthrop, Delba. "Tocqueville's American Woman and 'The True Conception of Democratic Progress.'" *Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (May 1986): 239–61.
Wolin, Sheldon. "Democracy and the Welfare State: The Political and Theoretical Connections between Staatsräson and Wohlfahrtsstaatsräson." *Political Theory* 15, no. 4 (November 1987): 467–500.
———. "Fugitive Democracy." *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 11–25.
———. *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought - Expanded Edition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
———. *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. London: J. Johnson, 1790.
Wood, Allen W. "The Marxian Critique of Justice." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 244–82.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London: Verso, 2002.
———. "The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism." *New Left Review* I, no. 127 (1981): 66–95.
Wootton, David. "David Hume: 'The Historian.'" In *Cambridge Companion to David Hume*, edited by David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
Yack, Bernard. *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.
Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
———. *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
Young, Michael Dunlop. *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965.
Ypi, Lea. "Democratic Dictatorship: Political Legitimacy in Marxist Perspective." *European Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2020): 277–91.
Zakaras, Alex. *The Roots of American Individualism: Political Myth in the Age of Jackson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.