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Outbreaks of Democracy

Nowadays, everyone's a democrat. Everyone believes that authority rests on the consent of the governed. Even dictators hold elections, and claim they represent the will of the people. Democracy boasts a moral superiority as well as a unique performance. As the safest, most decent and most effective method of government, it has at last triumphed over its enemies, and now claims to be the only legitimate and viable political form.

This has been a remarkable rehabilitation. For most of its history, democracy was seen as a degenerate mode of politics, much feared for its reliance on a populace seen as foolish and volatile. Yet since the adoption of representation in the Eighteenth Century, and the provision of an institutional place for democracy at the level of the state, we have laid to rest those dangerous images of noisy and volatile mobs, constant mass assemblies and endless inefficient talk. With the people being ruled by proxy, and periodically consenting to elite rule in elections, we have found a way to combine legitimacy with decency and viability. Now, modern representative form provides enough participatory input to be legitimate, yet not so much as to damage its viability. As such, it's easy to see why the democratic club is one that everyone wants to join.

Certainly, those who have most recently joined this club, be they Africans, Latin Americans or Eastern Europeans, have made significant improvements on their previous regimes. Yet they also sense a growing disappointment. This is due not only to the increasingly apparent social costs of a free (and unstable) market, but also to the realisation that the transition from mass action against authoritarianism to the settled structures of elections and parties involves a significant reduction in political activity. In rising against their masters, such people participated in noisy debate and spontaneous action. Now, they have become mere spectators in an elitist game.

There are rumblings, also, within the established democracies. Here we struggle with the inescapable fact that participation is a sham. Falling voter turnout, widespread cynicism and a loss of respect for our representatives is our lot. Elected by a small percentage of the vote, and even this won by the distortion of information, our political and economic elites once again sever any connection they ever had with the people in order to pursue their self-regarding ways. Though our politicians claim our consent, whole sections of the populace have become superfluous. Not only is their participation no longer required, but they are also denied work, resources, public services and opportunities.

So it is that the 'end of history' turns out to be characterised by extraordinary suffering, a global elite bonanza which completely evades democratic control, and a frightening degree of political and economic instability. We face our future unaided by radical theory, and the triumph of liberal democracy has been accompanied by a general crisis of utopian energies. It seems we must resign ourselves to our collective addictions: there will be no revolution, no let-up to our cruelty, no stopping our self-destruction. No longer can we imagine a different kind of politics. Recently, the Zapatistas appealed to us in the following way: "Why is it so quiet here?" they asked. "Is this the democracy you wanted?"¹



In fact the demise of radicalism is far from complete. At the margins of both theory and practice, there is significant exploration of a different and altogether older kind of democracy. Here, as it was for the ancients, for Rousseau, and for Marx, democracy is not so much a set of procedures and institutions, as it is a way of life, an ethical ideal, an answer to the question: "how should we live?"² So we can observe groups, associations, and social movements across the world valuing a quite different quality of participation in their decision-making, one which asserts distinct identities, recovers excluded cultures, and suggests new relationships with our environment.³

Often, these activities are deeply suspicious of existing hierarchies and democratic institutions, and are therefore careful to by-pass traditional political channels. Indeed, one of the characteristics of these initiatives is a certain anti-institutionalism. We see this same rejection of institutional politics in right-wing militias and in a range of groups using new technologies to co-ordinate their actions.⁴ Even in the voluntary sector, public administration and business management, we notice recurrent themes of decentralisation, active participation and the flattening of hierarchies.⁵

Available for our consideration, then, is a range of populist, anti-institutional and participatory political activity, some of which is democratic, some of which is not. Our capacity to distinguish between the two is much aided by recent theoretical developments. From across the social sciences, an extraordinary rush of attempts are currently underway to deepen democracy. Communitarians, Habermasians, feminists and postmodernists all draw our attention to the nature of consent required if an authority is to claim legitimacy.⁶ According to these accounts, meaningful participation is not just a question of occasionally placing a cross in a box beside a person's name. Rather, what becomes of central importance is the process of forming and informing that act of choice, the openness of debate which precedes the act of consent, and the quality of information actually available to political participants.

Discernible here is a distinct vision of democracy, one which rests upon face-to-face deliberation, one which stresses that deliberations be fair. 'Fairness' indicates the absence of coercion, the right for all to participate and to have their views taken seriously.⁷ Fair deliberation here emerges as the defining characteristic of democracy. It is only this that can confer legitimacy. Of those anti-institutional initiatives outlined above, it is those which aspire to fair deliberation that offer a glimpse of a different kind of democratic politics.

Yet the moment we seek examples, perhaps from the politics of identity, from self-help community groups, or from the DiY culture, so we confront recurrent criticisms. Such criticisms suggest that the recovery of more ethical forms of democracy evince parochialism, idealism and political irrelevance. More specifically, they have been strongly admonished for abandoning attention to material questions,⁸ for their lack of concrete institutional reforms⁹ and for their unrealistic, and possibly dangerous, over-estimation of citizen capacities. It is perhaps for these reasons that fair and anti-institutional democratic initiatives have attracted so little serious scrutiny. Either ridiculed as pubescent (by statist political science), dismissed as irrelevant to real questions of power (liberalism,¹⁰ Marxism¹¹), or lost in a cacophony of textual analysis (postmodernism, post-structuralism), they are not seen as having contributed to our understanding of crucial organisational and strategic questions.

In response, those seeking to defend this different vision of democracy have argued that its effectiveness cannot be adequately assessed by instrumental means. Historically,



moments of fair and anti-institutional democratic action have often had important effects which are indirect: they place issues on the public agenda, they educate and empower citizens.¹² We cannot, for example, dismiss the 1848 Revolutions simply because they failed to capture state power. By announcing the future centrality of popular opinion in politics, the events of that year were of lasting importance.¹³

Further counter-arguments have been suggested by those theorists seeking to deepen democracy. They have offered a range of practical institutional reforms which would allow fair deliberation to be effectively fed into the decision-making processes of the state, so preserving the organisational benefits of a central representational structure.¹⁴ By giving deliberative democracy a 'place', they hope to combine its increased legitimacy with political viability.

Yet these latter suggestions, while going some way toward addressing the issue of political irrelevance, remain strangely transfixed upon the state. Almost none address the problems encountered by participants in real deliberative situations. Democratic theorists have always plied their trade as designers of entire political orders. They have always sought to show how states could be both legitimate and effective. The theorist, gazing out over the entire institutional landscape, diagnoses ills, and designs institutional treatments. From this elevated perspective, trying to deepen democracy becomes a problem of design, of finding forms which will allow for fair deliberation to be fed into the decision-making apparatus of the state, of suggesting institutional structures to house participation. To be effective, to be politically relevant, deliberative input must be channeled, limited, managed. Otherwise it cannot run states.¹⁵

Yet most of us do not practice state craft. We do not, in fact, face the problem of reforming an entire political order. Instead, we live everyday lives, in our families and communities. We work, we belong to civic associations and, when sufficiently motivated to overcome our pessimism, we engage in political activism. From the perspective of a participant in everyday collective decision-making, democracy presents a quite different set of problems. Here, now, democracy means fairness and effectiveness in the decision-making process of an actual group.

For all their talk of deliberation, if you ask a democratic theorist questions like: How can our decisions be fair and effective? How can we have more democracy, say, in our place of work? you will be greeted by a loud silence. This is because they are busy elsewhere. Anxious to be seen as politically relevant, they want to show democratic states how to run. Participants would be more impressed if we could learn, first, how to walk.

What, then, can we say about democracy as it appears from the perspective of actual participants? We might start with Wolin's suggestion that "democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government," more along the lines of, "a mode of being."¹⁶ In so doing, we begin to see that democracy is not so much about "where the political is located but how it is experienced."¹⁷ Wolin describes democracy as something that happens to people, something immediate, something characterised not by a form for participation, nor by an institutional design, but precisely by a loss of form, and by a breach of design.¹⁸ It is thus "defined by its opposition to existing arrangements rather than by them."¹⁹

We are here invited to contemplate democracy as an immediate and transgressive moment which occasionally erupts²⁰ in our everyday lives. According to this view, democracy is not an institutional form but, instead, something that can occur among



particular people in particular situations. In an outbreak of democracy, there is a sudden recovery of politics, an awakening, a process of political renewal. There is a moment when we rise above the power saturated ways in which we normally interact, and something quite different takes place between us.

An outbreak of democracy, whether it be on a small or large scale, begins with a sudden challenge to power. It can occur with extraordinary rapidity, and almost always catches us by surprise. This is because we do not watch everyday life. Feminists have long pointed out that 'political' activity far beneath the level of the state remains largely invisible to mainstream political science. It was precisely this perceptual failure that accounted for the widespread dismissal of feminist CR groups and their insight that 'the personal is political'. Trained, perhaps, by generations of sovereigns and clerics, we now concentrate our attention exclusively on political and cultural elites, and so cannot see the seething activity which at last expresses itself in an outbreak of democracy. Our surprise²¹ is then matched by our horror, as it gradually dawns upon us that such disorganised political forms might, in fact, be very effective indeed.

Certainly, democracy as a way of life, has always been highly opportunistic. It mushrooms into the political spaces vacated upon the loss of order, and is aided by crisis, systemic breakdown, and incompetent leadership. Examples of democratic outbreaks, some on a massive scale, are common in the history of religious struggles, agricultural uprisings, labour movements and secessionist rebellions. Against our expectations, they are often very effective in the way they co-ordinate action. Marx had his own preferred examples, especially the June Days of 1848. "It is well known," he states, "how the workers, with unexampled bravery and ingenuity, without leaders, without a common plan, without means, and, for the most part lacking weapons, held in check for five days the army, the Mobile Guard, the Paris National Guard and the National Guard which streamed in from the provinces."²²

Garton-Ash stresses just this kind of unexpected effectiveness in his description of the formation of Solidarity,²³ and there are also accounts of the development of democracy on the American frontier which stress its ability to co-ordinate action in the absence of law.²⁴ Others have identified such outbreaks in Russia during 1917, Paris in 1968, in the American resistance to the war in Vietnam, and in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit. Goodwyn details just this combination of fair deliberation and effectiveness in his discussion of the National Farmer's Alliance, Shay's Rebellion, and the Flint Sit-Down strikes of the 1930's.²⁵ Further glimpses are afforded in the evident capacity of Danes in the face of Nazi power to collectively, and overnight, place a yellow star on an entire nation's coats,²⁶ in striking miner's wives ability to agitate for, and support, their embattled communities²⁷ and in the mass mobilisation of citizens which brought down the puppet regimes of Eastern Europe. There have also been great refusals, like the boycott of the Nike Corporation by black youth prompted by Public Enemy's exposure of racist hiring practices, the resistance to Shell's dumping of the Brent Spa and the city of Liverpool's boycott of the *Sun* newspaper following its reporting of the Hillsborough disaster.

What we see in these examples is, first of all, an alternative form of collective action. It is precisely this form which co-ordinates most things in our everyday lives. Here, beneath the veneer of institutions, activities occur in horizontal, flattened networks of communication, lacking centralised guidance yet somehow with the capacity to effectively co-ordinate. It is precisely this alternative form of action co-ordination, termed "rhizomatic..."



like crab-grass" by Deleuze and Guattari,²⁸ that so terrifies those holding elite power. Having claimed that only an institutional politics can be effective, they now confront a way of organising that they do not understand.

But how does this kind of disorganised democracy actually function? What happens upon an outbreak of democracy? To answer these questions, we must move away from the study of participation as it takes place within institutionalised political science, and instead borrow from empirical work undertaken in social psychology, communication studies, community activism and radical democratic practice.

When the veneer of social order begins to tear, people gather together. Whether in those spaces so carefully hidden from the eye of power: the wood, the street, the public house, the coffee shop, or in places formerly cleansed by surveillance and legalized force, such as the town square or the theatre, people group together and they talk.²⁹ The temperature of this new interaction is hot, there is energy and noise and there is debate. The same thing occurs when existing power-saturated and hierarchical groups in civil society suddenly find their structures subjected to suspicious interrogation and open discussion.

Accounts of such moments repeatedly note that speech becomes animated, that people are keen to be heard, they listen to others with interest and there is a heightened concern to elicit all views. Another early indication is that people become highly suspicious of all forms of existing authority. The women's movement in particular found that one of the effects of this suspicion was that women identified new ways in which they were oppressed. In effect, during open discussion, people become politicized. As republican theory has always claimed, participants are able to broaden their tight focus on individual interests, first to include the point of view of others³⁰ and then to those interests the group has in common. As the forum continues to meet, friendship, vitality and rapid learning all draw people in.³¹ Now, to use Rousseau's phrase, they "fly to the assemblies."³² In an outbreak of democracy, the cost of participation is completely swamped by the benefits.³³

Social psychologists have found that what seems to drive these processes, to give them their extraordinary energy, is that in an outbreak of democracy, conflict works.³⁴ It somehow generates cohesion, it causes people to re-evaluate their preferences and needs,³⁵ it brings about consensus. There are disagreements, and these are acted out - often in highly dramatic ways. Livy's history of early Rome has many good examples of such political drama, and it was precisely this energizing conflict to which Machiavelli attributed the vitality of that republic.³⁶

A further characteristic of such an outbreak is that participants seek ways to deliberate which are seen to be right, as democratic. This means they regularly evaluate their decision-making process to check that it was as fair as circumstances allow. In judging the quality of their own democracy, they must necessarily make appeal to a common understanding of fairness, be it a universal ideal or a social construction. Whatever its epistemological status, the ideal of fairness is interpreted differently in different cultures, and participants bring their own ethical and aesthetic understandings to bear on such judgments.³⁷ Accounts of democratic outbreaks illustrate this great variety of style, while at the same time reflecting a common democratic core. In most cultures, argumentation is not something stilted and rational, but includes the use of rhetorical devices such as irony, ridicule and ad hominem. In the sometimes playful mass debates of democratic Athens, for example, to abuse a speaker's ancestry was seen as a valid part of



criticising their views. Yet Athenians certainly watched their democracy with care, subjecting their decisions to constant reassessment and complaint.³⁸

Upon an outbreak of democracy, leadership is no longer based on social roles, but becomes more fluid: its functions divided and shared. Where it does accrue to particular individuals, it is because the group benefits from that individual's abilities. Whether the benefits of leadership outweigh its dangers is a constant topic of discussion for the group. On those rare yet inevitable occasions where ostracism is necessary, it tends to be practised against those more powerful members of the group who are widely seen to be actively working against the collective interest.³⁹

As the forum continues to meet, networks of alliance and disagreement emerge, group boundaries harden, and adversarial postures are adopted towards the institutions of power.⁴⁰ The group develops in-jokes, stereotypical images of opponents and symbolic representations of its cohesion. Nevertheless, a characteristic of fairness is openness of membership, and informal and un-bureaucratic procedures to include new arrivals.

Generally, activity remains frenetic; people make extraordinary sacrifices and act in uncharacteristic ways.⁴¹ A great deal of emotion continues to be expressed, both positive and negative: people can't sleep, they fall in love, and what they are able to achieve surprises both others and themselves. In recovering their collective power, participants report an extraordinary sense of euphoria and a heightened confidence in their own ability.⁴² Drawing now on many different points of view, the group's deliberations often result in highly creative decisions. When implementing such decisions, people act with responsibility and commitment. This is another important way in which rhizomatic democratic action is particularly effective. In more hierarchic forms, implementation of decisions (made by others) always entails a collective loss of energy, due both to foot dragging and to the necessary costs of enforcement.⁴³

Such moments of fairness enjoy some successes: power is challenged, its ways revealed.⁴⁴ If outbreaks become extended and networked together, new rights can be won, and sometimes even governments fall. But usually there is failure.

The demise has multiple causes, both external and internal. Externally, one of the most significant difficulties faced by any genuinely democratic network is the unbridled hostility of the state and other institutions of power. Usually, outbreaks can be safely ignored, ridiculed, denied resources and allowed to peter out. Should they manage to survive and network together so as to present even a symbolic threat to existing structures of power and property distribution, other strategies, such as informants, pay-offs and dirty tricks will be used. Finally, if even these prove inadequate, states (both authoritarian and democratic) will resort to direct and violent repression in order to restrict the growth of democracy.⁴⁵

Further difficulties arise when an outbreak expands and finds it must develop new administrative structures. As the scale of their activities increase, contacts with the institutions of power become more frequent and the network finds it needs delegates, proxies and spokespersons.⁴⁶ Subsequently, the selection and control of representatives comes to occupy more and more of their time and energy, necessitating new levels of institutional structure. This process often follows upon a group being offered much needed resources, or perhaps the attention of the media or powerful decision-makers. Such resources invariably come with strings attached, and the nature of these strings can pose



significant organisational difficulties for the group. Asked now for written constitutions, due processes of accountability and proof of representativeness, networks suddenly find they must evince structures which fulfil conditions for the reception of resources. This can entail groups having to learn new languages for the expression of their activities and adopting particular self-descriptions which more directly address the conceptual categories of the resource provider. This is an important institutional moment in the life of a democratic outbreak, and it can strongly affect the texture of interactions taking place within it. At such points, discussion is, to use Habermas's phrase, gradually "colonized" by instrumental forms.⁴⁷

Here, then, we witness the generation of specialised teams, sub-groups of representatives and support and briefing structures for those now increasingly active outside the original group. The danger with this secondary layer of structure is that it tends to move decisions away from direct discussion and interrogation. Representatives find ways of acting that seem to offer efficiency gains, they develop expertise in getting things done. Yet if this learning is concentrated in sub-groups and individuals, if it remains uninspected by the original group, if it begins to sediment into distinct intra-group cultures, then it becomes damaging to the discursive ability of the group as a whole. We witness just this in various Green parties,⁴⁸ within the women's movement and when self-help groups apply for charitable funding. The colonisation of the democratic outbreak, and the institutional structures it brings into being, ineluctably erode its face-to face quality.⁴⁹ Now, what was once done by talking is taken over by individuals with particular abilities, displaced by bureaucratic procedure, rendered static by hierarchic institutional solutions.

At last, if it has not fizzled out or been repressed, the outbreak is co-opted and fully institutionalised.⁵⁰ Participants now find themselves mere spectators of a process that was once their own. So domesticated, discussion returns to its more common power-saturated and "normalised"⁵¹ form. If the outbreak was widespread and prolonged, its slogans will be adopted hypocritically, aped by politicians and used to advertise clothing to teenagers. Now declared a "Triumph of Democracy,"⁵² the revolutionary moment is finally contained in a constitutional form. Here, participants in a successful outbreak find themselves subject to that most seductive of ends: death by liberal democracy.

Internal causes of failure are easy to identify. Stress and exhaustion, fear of repression, frustration, resignation, repeated narcissistic injuries and withdrawal are among them.⁵³ Often, these take the form of group divisions that increasingly constrain discussion or the emergence of a faction or leader whose methods undermine fair communication. Old power differentials reappear, so that once again men dominate the discussion, experts automatically take on tasks which become invisible to the group, and the more confident members, now doing all the talking, complain about the level of participation of the less active. Riven by conflict that is now destructive,⁵⁴ the noise at last begins to abate. As the cost of participation rises, people no longer attend with the same frequency. When democracy ends, apathy returns, as does the exclusive concern with self-interests and the prevalence of 'free-riding.'⁵⁵ Instead of agreeing to disagree, as they might have done during the democratic outbreak, conflict goes underground, and consensus becomes, once more, a sham.⁵⁶

Now the recriminations begin. People start to pathologise those who hold views different from their own, and to see that difference as sabotage.⁵⁷ Ostracism becomes a weapon to be used against less powerful members of the group, it becomes increasingly



divisive, and as the ideology of the network hardens further still, a kind of micro-Thermidor occurs, one characterised by "group think" and the enforcement of conformity.⁵⁸ Now, in a parody of self-rule, participants take on the task of oppressing themselves. With the eclipse of fairness, leaders and sub-groups police deliberations, thus resurrecting the negative side of direct 'democracy', in which individual freedom is effectively denied.⁵⁹ Such an occurrence is then greeted with gleeful shouts of "I told you so!" by those threatened by the outbreak.

Whatever the combination of causes, democratic outbreaks seem to have a discernible life cycle: they burn brightly, then either fizzle, are repressed, become profoundly unfair, or are co-opted and institutionalised. They can last for moments, or for months, but eventually, they come to an end.⁶⁰

What use, then, are such extraordinary and ephemeral moments? We have noted their capacity to educate citizens, to renew ordinary politics, and to effect change. In assessing their value, we should also recognise that the many problems democratic outbreaks must overcome, if they are to extend their activities and remain democratic, are not necessarily without solutions. All the various pressures identified above, be they internal or external, have been solved by particular democratic outbreaks in the past. What we can say, however, is that no single outbreak has managed to solve them all in order to build a genuine anti-institutional democratic movement which is sustained over time.

Yet the fact that this has so far not occurred in our political history does not preclude its future possibility. If groups succeeded in mobilising, networking and co-ordinating their activities on a large scale, perhaps adopting some second layer structures which are carefully controlled, sustaining their democratic character across periods of lesser energy, taking on everyday organisational functions, it is still conceivable that an accumulation of democratic outbreaks could constitute a different kind of politics.

Assessing the value of such ephemeral events therefore presents us with significant difficulties, not least among them being the question of whether the past can be used to predict the future. To assert that democratic outbreaks will always only be ephemeral would require a law-like explanation (and thus, prediction) for their necessary failure, something that is entirely beyond our present knowledge of such events. Not only do we lack such an explanation, we also lack the capacity to evaluate the effects of such outbreaks. Where these might include indirect effects, such as pressures on elites to make concessions and lasting images of struggle, we are never sure precisely what is to be valued, nor over how long. Indeed, for how long must an ephemeral activity be sustained before we designate it as important? Five years? Ten? Surely, it needs to be at least seventy-five years, for otherwise, each of our individual lives becomes unimportant. Yet we cannot insist that an event must last for more than a hundred years for it to be important, for otherwise, liberal democracy itself appears to be of little value. The charge of ephemerality, and the easy dismissal of fair and anti-institutional democratic initiatives it seems to allow, is a numbers game we do not know how to play. Certainly, democratic outbreaks are ephemeral. But that does not mean they always will be, or that they thereby lack importance.

There is one deficiency of democratic outbreaks, however, that cannot be denied: they are unable to provide a stable supply of deliberative input for a state. Simply, democracy from the participant's perspective may not be the kind of thing that can be accommodated in an institutional design. To see why this is so, we must recall that the



basic building block of democratic legitimacy is fair face-to-face deliberation. What makes an outbreak of democracy legitimate, and, importantly, what keeps it so is the ceaseless energy with which its members are suspicious of unfairness. Only by talking, arguing, celebrating, can participants be sufficiently vigilant to extend the duration of their democratic moment. Subject to significant pressures on their time and resources, participants often face the need to compromise their fairness in order to make gains in effectiveness. They need to agree to methods of quick decision-making which may not involve the whole group, to temporary hierarchies, to reliance on an particular person's skills, and generally, to a number of practices which are, in fact, unfair.

What we are considering with such trade-offs is the addition of a second layer of organisational structure, a minimal increase in formalized procedure. Participants in democratic outbreaks face an unending array of difficult collective judgments which will determine whether they remain democratic or not. Somehow, they must recognise the need for a gain in effectiveness, agree to a reduction in their own participation and remain vigilant that the resulting trade-off does not become permanent. While fairness is difficult enough in itself, it becomes even more so when we try to manage and control this second layer. As the empirical evidence shows, even minimal reliance on proxies and bureaucratic procedures can be hard to reverse. Often, they result in permanent damage to the deliberative capacities of the group.

Those who participate in outbreaks of democracy thus confront legitimacy as ephemeral and entropic, as requiring constant reassertion. Good judgment is, therefore, characterised by an ongoing suspicion, not only of all forms of authority, but also of those subtle textural shifts that occur in groups as they interact with existing institutions of power.⁶¹ Groups show poor judgment when they succumb to the temptations of institutional solutions and lazily allow their processes to lapse back into illegitimacy. Discursive assessment, rapid, and suspicious, is required before the group can legitimately adopt some institutional relief such as the selection of a delegate, the adoption of a procedure, or some other hierarchical arrangement which secures an easing of the discursive load.⁶² Vigilance is a virtue democrats must have in abundance; they must be non-believers, active in their ambivalence, wide awake. In this way, they can constantly scrutinise the effects of their trade-offs upon the deliberative capacities of the group, and so legitimately adopt and control a second layer of organisational structure.

One recurrent difficulty with this second layer pertains to our understanding of how and why representatives become separated from those they represent.⁶³ This phenomenon has been inspected by democratic theory, though usually in order to show that any serious engagement with existing structures of power necessitates the adoption of hierarchical and perhaps oligarchic methods. So we find Michels analysing the Social Democratic Party in Germany and concluding that their efforts to organise inevitably generates oligarchy.⁶⁴ The explanation for democratic degeneration is here given in terms of a spatial metaphor: it is the *distance* between the representatives and the people that results in the former's transformation into 'oligarchs'.⁶⁵

Distance, however, is more descriptive of this process than it is explanatory. What we really require is a deeper understanding of the subtle ways in which institutions, even democratic ones, gradually distort the experience of democracy. Group representatives, in their efforts to do business with elites, somehow ineluctably internalise a different set of norms and values, finally becoming socialized into a more institutionalised view of



participation: one which seeks to manage it effectively in order to serve the needs of the elite. The danger here, then, is that the representatives of the people become co-opted into a quite different project from the one that originally generated their mandate.

A further obstruction to the evaluation of democratic breakouts arises from the contradictory nature of the criticisms so often leveled at apparently disorganised political forms. The history of such outbreaks would seem to indicate that the simple charge of ineffectiveness is misplaced, and is likely to be more ideological than substantive. It cannot be the failure of democratic outbreaks to co-ordinate action that accounts for the refusal by political science to take anti-institutional initiatives seriously, nor does it explain the lack of sustained study of how we might stimulate and nurture such activities, develop ways for groups to network together and thereby to overcome the problem of partiality which always besets local actors.⁶⁶ Rather, at the heart of this disinterest is the fear that rhizomatic action is too effective, dangerously so, and thus prone to violent disorder. As such, it must be controlled. Otherwise, and here is the rub, it cannot provide the safety and stability required by elites to maintain their power, in other words, the state. Any radical politics that cannot run a state is thereby seen as deficient.⁶⁷ To say that democratic outbreaks are unimportant because they are dangerous, ineffective, and ephemeral, is therefore, to evaluate them in a purely instrumental way; purely instrumental, that is, for the maintenance of existing state power.

And of course, outbreaks of democracy cannot run states. Indeed, running a state is not, after all, a suitable task for the spontaneous and ephemeral, nor for the joyful, the committed or the autonomous.⁶⁸ It's not the sort of thing one would do if wide awake, if suspicious of illegitimacy, if wanting to be involved in processes of actual democratic judgment. It is clearly true that an outbreak of democracy can co-ordinate collective action. It can effectively provide for both material and social needs. It can defeat centralised structures of power in the field, it can take over a whole area, culture, way of life, so fast it takes the breath away. But it cannot run states.

This is because we cannot, as the designing theorists would suggest, simply stack democratic layers on top of one another, and then, in a great leap of faith, switch to a representative structure at the level of the state. Above the second layer, the texture of deliberation is inexorably changed. Here, face-to-face interaction is replaced by a corrupting politics of proxy, by bureaucratisation and ossification of procedure, by institutionalised mechanisms geared solely to effectiveness. Above the second layer, and sometimes even within it, fairness is not only lost, it is also forgotten.

How, then, could there ever be such a thing as a democratic state? In the liberal democracies, we live with significant trade-offs of participation for effectiveness. But, again, it is not the presence of unfair practices that signals illegitimacy. It is the lack of deliberative agreement to such trade-offs. Where no serious effort is made by the state, or even by a major political party, to seek meaningful deliberative input into the making of collective decisions, then such trade-offs must be seen as illegitimate. And of course, even if a state did seek such input, it could only do so by attempting to provide institutional forms which, as we have seen, are not conducive to fairness as it is experienced by participants. We must conclude, therefore, that newly democratic states have joined a club of non-democrats. It is for this reason that they are disappointed; it is for this reason that they find themselves in (our) brave new world of political silence and carefully managed participation.



This, though, is not to remove all possibility for a deepening of democracy. Historically, participatory rights are not given by suddenly generous elites. They are taken by emerging oppressed groups. Only as groups learn to operate their own procedure with fairness and effectiveness, only as they find ways to network with other such groups while retaining their democratic core, can they begin to challenge the existing structures of power.

Yet it is precisely when we begin to consider the possibility of such a challenge that we reveal the extraordinary lack of knowledge we have accumulated over our history regarding what it actually means to rule ourselves. We know so little about how to behave fairly in groups, how we might nurture and network democratic break-outs and thus begin a genuinely democratic movement. When suitably humbled by this lack of knowledge, the question of how we might deepen democracy escapes from the hands of the designing theorist and becomes one that participants can only ask themselves. Do we want to be autonomous citizens? Do we want to have fun, to make noise, to act on our growing mistrust? Or do we want merely to watch as those forces which work against democracy increasingly colonize our lives and perhaps even destroy us completely?

Deepening democracy could, quite suddenly, and quite alarmingly, become something more than an unlikely possibility. Any significant outbreak can be relied upon to generate, quickly, a great number of very angry and very active citizens, and would certainly, eventually, challenge for greater democratic control of the market. At such a point, participants would find themselves trying to discursively evaluate what must surely be one of the greatest 'non-decisions' and the least deliberated trade-offs for effectiveness in human experience. An outbreak on such a scale would be tantamount to revolution, and as history shows, no violence is ever spared to protect the market from the demands of justice.

"Once you have citizens," Rousseau said, "you have all you need." At present, we have few citizens. Liberal democracy studiously fails to produce them. For the most part there is apathy, cynicism, extraordinary hardship and also, possibly, impending infrastructural breakdown. Yet, where a political structure relies for its stability on systematic depoliticisation and on the exhaustion of utopian energies, it is always vulnerable. There is much dry wood. There are many outbreaks of democracy. Just because our elites cannot see them does not mean they do not occur. After all, the democratic project of basing authority on the fair and considered agreement of those affected has always been one that has threatened to grow out of control.

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Notes:

¹Zapatistas, *Communiqué*, 4th. February, 1994.

²R. Shusterman, "Putnam and Cavell on the Ethics of Democracy," *Political Theory*, 25, 1997: 193-214.

³See, for examples, B. Epstein, "Radical Democracy and Cultural Politics: What about Class? What about Political Power?," in *Radical Democracy*, D. Trend (ed.), London: Routledge, 1996: 127-139; *Differences*, Special Issue, Vol. 6, 1994; and ongoing editions of *SchNEWS*.



- ⁴M. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997: ch. 2.
- ⁵D. Burns et al, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, London: Macmillan, 1994; M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996: 167.
- ⁶J.S. Fishkin, *The Dialogue of Justice*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992; J. Elster, "The Market and the Forum," in *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, J. Elster, J. Hylland (eds.), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986: 103-132; C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso, 1993.
- ⁷J. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992: 89; J. Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in *The Good Polity*, A. Hamlin, P. Pettit (eds.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991: 17-34.
- ⁸N. Geras, "Ex-Marxism Without Substance: Being a Reply to Leclau and Mouffe," *New Left Review*, 169, 1988: 34-62.
- ⁹W. Kymlicka, W. Nelson, "Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory," *Ethics*, 104, 1994: 352-381, here at 369, n. 21.
- ¹⁰Perhaps the classic rejection is presented in R. Dahl, E. Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, Stanford University Press, 1974, where it receives an axiomatic proof.
- ¹¹Since Lenin's "'Left-Wing' Communism - An Infantile Disorder," in V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Moscow: Progress, Vol. 3, 1977: 291-369.
- ¹²S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations*, 1/1, 1994: 11-25, here at 17.
- ¹³E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*, New York: Meridian, 1979: 21.
- ¹⁴B.R. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; P. Hirst, *Associative Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- ¹⁵This is Habermas's position, one which severely hampers attempts to conceive of a radical politics arising from his work.
- ¹⁶S. Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy," in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, J.P. Euben et al (eds.), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994: 29-58, here at 54.
- ¹⁷Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 18.
- ¹⁸See also, H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- ¹⁹Wolin, "Norm and Form," 41.
- ²⁰H. Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968.
- ²¹F. Guattari, T. Negri, *Communists Like Us*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1990: 31; J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990: 86, 224.
- ²²K. Marx, "The Class Struggles in France: 1848-1850," in *The Marx-Engles Reader*, R.C. Tucker (ed.), London: Norton, 1978: 586-593, here at 589.
- ²³T. Garton-Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, London: Granta, 1991.
- ²⁴R.H. Weibe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995: 15, 60, 257.
- ²⁵L. Goodwyn, "Organizing Democracy," *Democracy*, 1/1, 1981: 41-60.
- ²⁶J.C. Isaac, "Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 88/1, 1994: 156-168.
- ²⁷B. Cambell, *Goliath: Britain's Dangerous Places*, London: Methuen, 1993: 319.
- ²⁸G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- ²⁹See, in particular, Scott, *Domination*, 64, 118, 121-122, 124; S. Moscovici, W. Doise, *Conflict and Consensus: A General Theory of Collective Decisions*, London: Sage, 1994: 48, 60, 64, n. 1; Garton-Ash, *The Polish Revolution*, 51; A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991: 49, 121, 142.
- ³⁰What Arendt calls "enlarged thinking." See S. Benhabib, "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought," *Political Theory*, 16/1, 1988: 29-51.
- ³¹Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, 129. That learning is a side-effect of participation is well documented, and has even served to provide justifications for democracy, J. Knight, J. Johnson, "Aggregation and Deliberation: On the Possibility of Democratic Legitimacy," *Political Theory*, 22/2, 1994: 227-296, 295 n. 62. On the 'therapeutic' effects of user participation in mental health service provision, see V. Lindow, "A Chance for a Change," *Nursing Times*, 89/12, 1993: 33-34.
- ³²J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968: 140.



- ³³J.J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, New York: Basic Books, 1980: 9.
- ³⁴A.O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970: 206-211.
- ³⁵C.R. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 20/1, 1991: 3-34.
- ³⁶N. Machiavelli, "The Discourses," in *The Portable Machiavelli*, P. Bondanella, M. Musa (eds.), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979: 167-418.
- ³⁷J. Habermas, "Struggles for Recognition in Constitutional States," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1/2, 1993: 128-155, here at 139, 144.
- ³⁸J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 148, cites Isocrates observation that Athenians tended to "sit around in the shops complaining about the existing political order."
- ³⁹Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, 123; Ober, *Mass and Elite*, 74; Garton-Ash, *The Polish Revolution*, 54.
- ⁴⁰A. Pizzorno, "An Introduction to the Theory of Political Participation," *Social Science Information*, 9/5, 1970: 29-61, here at 44ff.; Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, 123. Such in-group/out-group distinctions, or, as C. Schmitt describes them in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985, "us and them" mentalities, can constitute important components of group identities as well as exclusionary practices.
- ⁴¹See Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, 118; J. P. Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, London: NLB, 1976; Book II, ch. 1; Scott, *Domination*, 209, 222.
- ⁴²R. Flacks, "Reviving Democratic Activism: Thoughts About Strategy in a Dark Time," in *Radical Democracy*, Trend (ed.), 102-116 suggests that political activist's accounts of their successes contradict theoretical denials of their effectiveness, here at 102.
- ⁴³Scott, *Domination*, 188; S. Bowles, H. Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism*, New York: Basic Books, 1987: 200.
- ⁴⁴A. Melucci, "Social Movements and the Democratization of Everyday Life," in *Civil Society and the State*, J. Keane (ed.), London: Verso, 1988: 245-260.
- ⁴⁵Goodwyn, "Organizing Democracy," 47.
- ⁴⁶Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, 134.
- ⁴⁷J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, MA: Beacon Press, 1987: 355ff.
- ⁴⁸See the discussion of such parties in H. Wainwright, *Arguments for a New Left*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994: ch. 7.
- ⁴⁹Wolin, "Norm and Form," 36.
- ⁵⁰A process described by L.J. Ray in *Rethinking Critical Theory*, 74 as one of "repressive modernization." He also draws attention to attempts by the state to "displace public issues into socially isolated sub-cultures," 66-68.
- ⁵¹Moscovici and Doise, *Conflict and Consensus*, 62.
- ⁵²See Wolin's citations of the western press as they greeted such developments in Poland and Thailand, "Norm and Form," 30.
- ⁵³M. Walzer, "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen," in M. Walzer, *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1970; H. Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self*, New York: International Universities Press, 1971: 128-134; Moscovici and Doise, *Conflict and Consensus*, 42, 61; J.J. Mansbridge, "Time, Emotion, and Inequality: Three Problems of Participatory Groups," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 9/2-3, 1973: 351-368.
- ⁵⁴Knight and Johnson, "Aggregation and Deliberation," 286.
- ⁵⁵M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.,
- ⁵⁶Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, 130-133.
- ⁵⁷Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, 145.
- ⁵⁸Moscovici and Doise, *Conflict and Consensus*, 144.
- ⁵⁹Zuckerman highlights this tendency in "The Social Context of Democracy in Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 25/4, 1968: 523-544.
- ⁶⁰This, for Wolin, is what gives it its 'fugitive' character. See also, Wolin, "Norm and Form," 55; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 416.
- ⁶¹Ober cites the ancient Athenian view that a good judgment preserves the capacity to make good judgments, *Mass and Elite*, 161.
- ⁶²The history of constitutionalism, particularly the seminal discussions by Burke and Madison, has often highlighted the energy savings afforded by codified political procedures.
- ⁶³P.-J. Proudhon, "Parliamentary Isolation," in *The Anarchist Reader*, G. Woodcock (ed.), Fontana: Glasgow, 1977: 110-11; Guattari and Negri, *Communists Like Us*, 104.
- ⁶⁴R. Michels, *Political Parties*, Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1958.
- ⁶⁵Wolin inspects this distance in "Norm and Form," 43.



⁶⁶Radicalism needs more than the usual discussion of "coalition politics" if it is to benefit from and maintain the legitimacy of such networks. Accounts of international meetings of local protesters in *SchNEWS* 156, 26th. Feb., 1998, and 200, 5th. Feb. 1999, would suggest that this is an area in which practice is currently forging ahead of theory.

⁶⁷For an analysis of this assertion and its role in the history of socialism, see M. Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880-1938*, London: Verso, 1990: 226-250.

⁶⁸Guattari and Negri, *Communists Like Us*, 143; A. Pannekoek, *Worker's Councils*, Melbourne, 1950: 52.

