Cultures of Democracy and Citizen Efficacy

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The twentieth century saw a great advance of democracy: not at all even, of course; it was always a question of two steps forward, one step back. But the long-term trend is unmistakable. I believe that this trend will continue in the twenty-first century. This is not because I am a simple-minded optimist (although some of my friends accuse me of this) or because I believe in the inevitability of progress. It is rather because democracy is becoming the only regime that can claim legitimacy over the long term. Human history is full of earlier, hierarchical regimes that were stable because they reposed on some belief in an ordered cosmos, where a ruler might draw his mandate from heaven; on the divine right of some dynasty; or on the natural superiority of some class or tribe. But the progress of what we call *modernity*, in its different forms, undermines all these traditional ideas and eventually makes them incredible. In the end, the only basis for stable legitimacy we can fall back on turns out to be that we should obey our rulers because in doing so we are really obeying ourselves.

This is not to say that democracies are stable. They may fail to deliver the goods and become discredited, they may fail to hold together in face of tensions between classes or ethic groups, and they may fall apart in a host of ways. But in our day, the regimes that displace them, often through coups, turn out to have even less legitimacy once the first flush of the novelty wears off. And they lack this because they have no good grounds to hold our allegiance over time. They have to claim superefficacy as their excuse for overturning democratic institutions, and this claim cannot fail to look unconvincing over the long term. In other words, democracies may not be stable, but other regimes are even less so; and they end up having to sustain themselves by more and more naked force, like Saddam Hussein in Iraq. That is why putschist generals in our day usually begin by

assuring people that they will revert to elected government once they've "cleared up the mess" (like Musharaf in Pakistan).

But this greater geographical scope of democracy makes it harder to understand. Or, rather, it makes us aware how little we have understood it. What are the conditions that make for stable democracies? Why does democracy take root here and not there? (For instance, why in India and not in Pakistan, when both achieved independence at the same time from the same Raj.) In the postwar period, books such as Lipset's *Political Man* tried to answer these questions.[1] Some of their intuitions were good, but others now seem wide of the mark.[2]

It may well be that the attempt to answer totally general questions — such as, what are the conditions of democracy? — is misguided. General questions assume that there is some recognizable political culture of democracy and a set of economic and social conditions that enable this. In fact, it would seem more sensible to start from another basic assumption: that there are culture*s* of democracy, in the plural. Just as we have (many of us) stopped talking about *modernity* and speak now of *multiple modernities*, so we will have to recognize different democratic forms.

If nothing else has, the existence of the Indian Republic ought to drive this point home. This is the world's biggest democracy. But more than that, in some respects it is showing signs of health where some older democratic regimes show signs of decline. In the North Atlantic world, we are all concerned by the downward trend in voter participation in elections. This is most noticeable in the United States, but it is happening across the North Atlantic world. This is indeed one of the paradoxes of democratic life today — that as this form spreads over most of the globe, it is showing signs of running out of breath in its original heartland.

The paradox becomes less acute if we recognize that we are not necessarily dealing with the same form in different regions. In India, for instance, the opposite seems to be the case: the level of participation in elections is going up, and the sense of satisfaction and citizen efficacy seems to be growing. And — what is really surprising for people in the North — participation and sense of efficacy is higher among lower-income and lower-caste people than among those who are richer and more powerful.[3] This is a reversal of the pattern in the North

1. Seymour Lipset, *Political Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

2. For instance, the notion that democratic development correlates with economic development. But it turns out that some relatively low-income countries (e.g., India, Sri Lanka) live in functioning democracies while many better-off areas do not.

3. See Yogendra Yadav, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: Trends of Bahujan Participation in Electoral Politics in the 1990s," in *Transforming India*, ed. Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava, and Balveer Arora (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 120–45.

Atlantic world and close to inconceivable there. In fact, Indian democracy, in its dynamic mode of operation, is very different from what we see in these northern societies.

Does this mean that a comparative study of democracies is a waste of time? Not at all, but it does mean that the objectives we seek in the comparison must change. Instead of looking for general laws, such as the American development theory of the postwar period, we should turn back to an older tradition that finds its source in Montesquieu.[4] Comparison here does not aim at general truths but rather is the search for enlightening contrasts, where the particular features of each system stand out in their differences. Of course, contrasts require likenesses as their essential background; therefore the point is not to catalog the similarities but to grasp what is particular to each.

What can we say in general about democracies? Because of their differences, this will have to be something merely formal, with the content being filled in differently in each particular context. But this need not be a fatal objective, because at least it may tell us something about the dimensions of comparison.

One such dimension I would like to introduce is what I call *social imaginary*. What I am trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence — how they fit together with others and how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.[5]

I want to speak of social imaginary here rather than social theory because there are important differences between the two: (1) social imaginary is about the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, which is often not expressed in theoretical terms but is, instead, carried in images, stories, legends, and so on; (2) social imaginary is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society, while theory is often the possession of a small minority; and (3) social imaginary is the common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy, while theory can circulate only among elites.

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our

4. Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, vol. 11 of *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 585 – 98.
5. I have discussed these issues at greater length in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

social life. It also incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. This understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice. Take, for example, our practice of choosing governments through general elections. For each one of us, part of the background understanding that makes sense of our act of voting is our awareness of the whole action involving all citizens, choosing each individually but from among the same alternatives and compounding these microchoices into one binding, collective decision. Essential to our understanding of what is involved in this kind of macrodecision is our ability to identify what would constitute a foul: certain kinds of influence, buying votes, threats, and the like. This kind of macrodecision has to, in other words, meet certain norms if it is to be what it is meant to be. If a minority could force all others to conform to its orders, there would cease to be a democratic decision, for instance.

The transition to democracy involves our being able to sustain together elections and the other practices and institutions of democracy, such as national elections, an operative and reasonably open public sphere, political parties and other movements engaged in peaceful mobilization, and the acceptance of a legal framework as ultimate arbiter (e.g., on who has won the election, on which laws are validly adopted). This can be seen as a change in our repertory, but it also should be understood as a transformation of our social imaginary in which we take on the kinds of understandings which can sustain these new practices. But the transition is from other such practices and imaginaries. Some of these can be crucial stepping stones in the transition—that is, with some modifications, they can be integrated into the practices of democracy. But others will be very hard to fit into a democratic dispensation and will have to be abandoned or radically modified. In some cases, again, the new regime will involve building from scratch institutions that have no relation to what went before.

Thus, transitions to democracy will be very different from each other because the people concerned are moving from very different predemocratic repertories and imaginaries and are often moving to rather different variants of democratic imaginary. And these two phases are naturally linked.

But this means that we should not think of transitions as different routes to the same (at least hoped-for) end point, a stable democracy of a normal kind. In fact, democracies are path dependent; the founding transitions they undergo mark their future.

For instance, we can compare the two great late-eighteenth-century revolutions in the West that helped to usher in democracy there: the American and the French.

We note that the Americans already had within their repertory elected representative institutions, which were seen as legitimate expressions of popular will. This smoothed the path toward the first fully modern regime based on popular sovereignty, which found expression in the 1787 Constitution, which was attributed to "We, the People." By contrast, the parallel kind of institution in France was weak, had been in abeyance for one hundred fifty years, and still was strongly marked by ancien régime features such as separate chambers for each order. Moreover, there was a vigorous tradition of popular revolt, which in one way could be built on but in another was hard to combine with democratic politics.

The American transition, if one takes into account the whole half-century from 1775 to 1825, emphasized the equality of independent agents.[6] In the French case, a crucial weight came to be laid on the enacting of a common purpose, which often found a congenial intellectual formulation in the Rousseauian idea of a *general will*. We can see these different emphases arising in the respective transitions that began in the late eighteenth century. But they also continue to mark the political cultures of these two great democracies.[7] Pierre Rosanvallon's recent book gives an interesting illustration of this continuity in the French case.[8]

At the same time, in the American case, we can see the continuing influence of the political culture that evolved in the first thirty years of the new republic, which dignified individual self-reliance and initiative with the (in that context) powerfully loaded title of "independence." This has perhaps, among other things, contributed to the relative lack of importance of trade unions in the U.S. polity—one of its striking points of contrast with France in the twentieth century.

Indeed, one of the crucial differences between the United States and many European societies lies in the fact that the spreading of the new political imaginary downward and outward took place on the Old Continent partly through the crystallization of a class imaginary of subordinate groups, particularly workers. This meant more than the sense of a common interest among, for example, mechanics, present from the first days of the republic. The class imaginary of the British Labour movement or of the French or German trade unions went beyond the sense that certain kinds of independent individuals shared an interest; it came closer to the sense of a common identity shared within a local community (e.g., in mining villages in the UK), or the *volonté générale* of those who share a certain community of fate, such as exploited workers. In some cases, it belongs to a politi-

6. See Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

7. I have discussed this in greater detail in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, chaps. 8 and 9.

8. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

cal culture shaped by the Rousseauian "redaction" of the modern moral order, which was alien to the American trajectory.

So, we can think of the social imaginary of a people at a given time as a kind of repertory, including the ensemble of practices which they can make sense of. To transform society according to a new principle of legitimacy, we have to have a repertory that includes ways of meeting this principle. This requirement can be broken down into two facets: (1) the actors have to have a sense of themselves as forming a collective agent, capable of acting together; and (2) the ensemble of actors has to know what to do, has to have agreed practices in its repertory that put the new order into effect.

There have been certain modern revolutionary situations where facet 1 has been almost entirely missing. Take the Russian case, for instance: the collapse of Czarist rule in 1917 was supposed to open the way to a new republican legitimacy, which the provisional government supposed would be defined in the constituent assembly they called for the following year. But if we follow the analysis of Orlando Figes, the mass of the peasant population could not conceive of the Russian people, as a whole, as a sovereign agent.[9] What they did perfectly well understand, and what they sought, was the freedom for the mir to act on its own, to divide the land that the nobles (in their view) had usurped, and to no longer suffer repression at the hands of the central government. Their social imaginary included a local collective agency, the people of the village or mir. They knew that this agency had to deal with a national government that could do them a lot of harm and, occasionally, even some good. But they had no conception of a national people that could take over sovereign power from the despotic government. Their repertory did not include collective actions of this type at the national level; what they could understand was large-scale insurrections, like the Pugachovschina, whose goal was not to take over and replace central power but to force it to be less malignant and invasive.

This has had fatal effects on Russian democracy. We could imagine another possible history in which this local self-government might have been transformed and then connected through federative institutions to the developing national state with its representative assemblies. But the Bolsheviks, following in the footsteps of the Jacobins, preferred to bypass and then altogether suppress this local form of collective agency, as well as any other form of nonstate initiative; the consequences of these actions we now see in the slow, difficult, and insecure transition to Russian democracy.

9. Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy* (London: Penguin, 1997), 98–101, 518–19.

Modern democracies have had as much difficulty with facet 1 as they have with facet 2. The sense of forming a collective agency has sometimes been very hard to generate. In a way, we can think of the modern invention of the nation as the result of the belief that we belong together because we form a nation. But when the sense of nationality develops, it often turns out to be disruptive of existing state boundaries. Or else it fails to develop any robust form, and this leaves the state weak and vulnerable to breakdown, as in a number of African countries.

But what if facet 1 is assured but facet 2 undergoes change in an established democracy; if, that is, the institutions of democratic rule remain unchanged but the underlying imaginary evolves?

Something like this is perhaps happening in Western democracies. It seems to underlie the paradox I mentioned earlier, the loss of force and legitimacy of democracy in its erstwhile heartlands at the very moment when the form seems to be spreading triumphantly over the world. I will return to this later, but first I want to deal with an issue that arises out of the preceding discussion.

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How can it be that a democracy is thus colored by its history? Surely *democracy* is defined by a simple normative principle — that the people must rule? But saying this is not so simple as saying that the monarch rules. How does the people get its act together to rule? This has to be articulated and the articulation accepted and understood as having this meaning, which means that democracy has to be imagined; in fact, it is imagined in different ways.

Democratic societies, in the plural, exist, and each have their own imaginary — that is, their own way of understanding themselves as a democracy and the range of practices that correspond to this understanding.[10] Yet reality is in fact even more varied and confused than this picture suggests, because societies are often divided between different interpretations of their common understanding (for instance, what does *independence* really mean?); and this understanding also evolves through time.

But this intuition that democracy lives in different cultures, evolving through history, tends to be resisted for a host of reasons. One reason is, no doubt, the ambitions of a modern science of politics, which is always looking for general

10. See Pierre Rosanvallon, *Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique*, leçon inaugurale au Collège de France (Paris: Seuil, 2003): "Le peuple n'existe qu'à travers des représentations approximatives et successives de lui-même." [The people only exists through successive and approximate representations of itself] (16).

laws. But there is something else, something in the very ideology of modern democracy that encourages this resistance.

We have borrowed the word from the Greeks, but in fact *democracy* means something rather different for us. *Democracy*, we are told by dictionaries, means *rule of the people*; and *people* translates as *demos*. But not quite. The modern term in most European languages has a double sense. It can mean the whole membership of a nation, either ethnically defined or politically defined — in the latter case, defined by membership in a certain political body. So, *people*, in that sense, means the whole body of the citizens. But its second meaning covers only a part of this membership, although generally the most numerous part. Here the word is used synonymously with common people, ordinary people, or in older French, *le menu peuple*. It contrasts to elites, aristocracy, the rich, the powerful, or some such designation of the hegemonic class or classes.

In the Greek case, *demos* had this latter sense, and *democracy* meant a regime in which this class had its share of power or even preponderant power. Absent from their world was the modern ideal that is captured in the concept of popular sovereignty. The modern idea of a *sovereign* is that of a supreme instance, whose will is decisive for society and not limited by or contingent on anyone else's decision. So the term was easily applied to absolute monarchs. The nature of the overturn sought in the French Revolution was thus naturally defined by some in terms of a simple switch in sovereign, from king to people (or nation). What is meant here, of course, is *people* in the all-inclusive sense. True, we may have to fight for democracy against certain aristocrats, but the idea is that their very existence as a separate class is illegitimate. They must either disappear (emigrate, be executed) or else become simple citizens.

This idea of a will of the people in this sense was foreign to the Greeks. There may be decisions in which the demos has a big say, even the decisive one, but this is not the same as the will of the people in the modern sense.

But this is connected to an important modern ideal, that of transparency. An action carried out by a single will can in principle be quite clear about what is aimed at and how it is achieved. This is certainly true in certain cases of individual action. One of the dreams of modern democracy is that of a similar clarity and lucidity on the level of the whole society, ruled by the whole people. A tremendous distrust surrounds the process of decisions where certain parts of it are not open and transparent to the public. I am not saying that this is not natural, in the sense that there may be dangers for the public of one kind or another in this opacity, but the insistence on total transparency is often put forward as an absolute ideal.

How does this bear on our argument about plural cultures of democracy? It is an easy step from this ideal of transparent popular sovereignty to the conclusion that only one form can properly realize this. Therefore, different democratic structures must be in some way rankable as more or less adequate, unless of course they are all equally inadequate. Hence the extraordinary but widespread belief in powerful and successful democracies (the United States, France), a belief that they have the unique key to a free self-governing society.

This ideal has become part of the modern understanding of emancipation and freedom. But I think it is based on an illusion.[11] Democracy always is, and must be, imagined in one historically specific way or another. This emerges ironically in the fact that the ideal of transparency is refracted in quite different models.

Two of these models emerge from the previous discussion. There is one way that is indigenous to the American case. The American Revolution started with an objection to the confiscation of their right to decide, the right to vote taxes. But what rapidly becomes crucial is what we could call general equality. Gordon Wood shows, as I argued above, how in the first generation after the Constitution, the notion of *independence* took on the meaning that all levels and stations in society could be what they wanted: owners, entrepreneurs, and also political candidates. *Democracy*, as Tocqueville understands the word, has an important stress on this kind of social equality; America is not a society of "orders." This naturally occurs to Tocqueville coming from a France not yet totally departed from the ancien régime; but it also makes sense in Jacksonian America. A weak state is necessary in order to allow everyone an equal chance. Jackson targets the Hamiltonian central bank, which was seen as an instrument of economic development.

So, democracy is a framework in which individuals can be and act without unnecessary restrictions and without undue privilege to some over others and in conditions where they can make themselves heard.

A quite different imagination exists in France; here the notion of *volonté générale* is central from the revolution onward. This includes at least three components: this will is in principle unanimous; it is the will for what really ought to be agreed, namely, the common good; and it is the rational common policy. Democracy exists where people come together—almost sacramentally—to par-

11. I have drawn here on the work of Marcel Gauchet. "C'est ainsi que l'idéal religieux de la conjonction de la communauté humaine avec sa suprême vérité et son pouvoir ordonnateur fait retour à l'intérieur du projet d'émancipation finale et d'autonomie intégral." [Thus the religious ideal of the coming together of the human community with its supreme truth and ordering power returns within the (modern) project of final emancipation and integral economy.] See Gauchet, *La condition historique* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 252.

ticipate in the general will. The republic is always trying to achieve this: against those who do not accept the regime, or against certain elements who want to stand outside this will, perhaps for egoistic reasons.

In one sense, this perfect democracy is a standing framework in which people go about their business, in freedom, fairness, and equality. In another, it happens when the people come together and continually exercise their common will. French *laïcité* is based on this. It is not a matter of refusing to privilege anyone's religion (equality) but rather of everyone participating in a sense of the general will, which is purely *laïque* — that is, depending purely on secular reason. You can be religious on the side, provided you do this.

So we have quite different models. The English one is different again. Democracy inherits the ideal of collective provision, partly from the predemocratic regimes and partly from the earlier democratic movements, like trade unions, which started in many cases as friendly societies. So Labour tries to establish something like the mores of the Labour movement as the hegemonic political form in England.

Once again, it is from these different refractions of what is supposed to be the same ideal that we can understand deep-lying differences of political culture. Here some light is shed on the relative absence of welfare state provision in America, which in this respect is the odd society out in the North Atlantic world.

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Now to return to the issue I raised previously, that there is a malaise in contemporary Western democracies, a sense of decline and loss of democratic life. This emerges in one way in rising numbers of people who tell pollsters that they do not trust politicians, have less faith in the political system than in the past, or feel that their voice has no weight in political decision making. This disaffection seems also to be reflected in the declining rate of participation in elections. Several decades ago, the United States was the odd country out among Western democracies, with its terribly low rate of electoral participation even in presidential elections, heading down then toward 50 percent. But now many of the others are showing declines in the same direction, even if they have not yet gotten that far.

Now when one surveys certain features of these contemporary democracies, it is easy to make the case that these disillusioned citizens are right to sense their powerlessness. The growth of monopoly power at all levels means greater impact for lobbies whose cases do not need to be made in public. But worse, this monopoly, or oligopoly, power affects the media as well — newspapers and, especially, television networks. Think of the clout of a Murdoch in the United States and

the United Kingdom. If anyone has followed Fox TV in the period since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, they will have seen a paradigm example of propaganda, dumbing down the news to keep the audience in a condition of angry and mindless super-patriotism, directed against any voices of dissent.

But there is more here than irresponsible personal power. There is also something about the way the media of mass communication work in a society that is largely driven by consumption, which means, in this field, driven by ratings. In the competition for big audiences, news and public affairs discussion get pulled toward the new hybrid phenomenon for which the word *infotainment* has been coined. Public affairs have to be packaged so that they have some of the same draw as entertainment. And this introduces its own kind of distortion: simplification of the issues into simple polarizations, encapsulating complex positions into sound bites, and the like.

The effect of both kinds of distortion—through interested power and from the dynamic of infotainment—is to make it next to impossible to raise certain issues, to bring forward the crucial nuance, or to appeal for a broader mobilization around a third, more nuanced position within the media that have a very large audience and an equally large impact. Again, since the beginning of the Iraq war, we have seen in the United States an organ like the *New York Times* deconstruct time and again the untruths and evasions of the administration, but these rebuttals have very little impact beyond its elite readership.

Now even (those whom elites consider) very unsophisticated people often have nuanced positions on things. In-depth polls have shown time and again that most Americans share neither the hard-line pro-choice nor the hard-line pro-life position on abortion. As soon as you ask them to react to the details of people's stories and situations, this becomes evident. But this great majority of the nuanced have absolutely no impact on the way the issue is framed in the media, by lobby organizations, and in the slogans of politicians.[12] No wonder they feel disenfranchised.

But we need to look further and deeper than these unfortunate trends. Democracy has always been at least potentially an elite-run affair. Top people, socially and economically, have always had disproportionate power. How has this sense of disfranchisement been avoided in the past?

One widespread theory was classically stated by Tocqueville. Ordinary people acquire democratic efficacy, and therefore the sense of this efficacy, through a proliferation of voluntary associations. These are close enough to the base to be

12. James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture Wars* (New York: Free Press, 1994), part 3.

potentially under its control, and they have enough collective clout in the larger society to compel power-wielders to listen to them. In the absence of such intermediary bodies, each individual would stand alone against state power and those who control it, utterly powerless to deflect its course and control its impact on their lives. This was the nightmare which Tocqueville feared for his own society, formed as it was by a revolution that immeasurably increased state power without fostering a political culture of association. America seemed to have escaped this fate, at least for a time, and that is what drew him to it.[13]

But if we want to draw a general lesson about democratic agency and efficacy from Tocqueville, we will perhaps have to widen our lens. In the United States, it seems appropriate to speak of voluntary associations in general, but if we ask our question from above in the context of other Western democracies — that is, how was some degree of effective agency achieved — a big part of the answer lies in the nature of the class politics. I am thinking, for instance, of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and a number of other European societies. Through trade unions and working-class parties there arose in these societies fairly effective countervailing power to the classes, milieus, and interests that were normally in control. A certain number of concrete objectives were won by these class organizations and political parties and a corresponding sense of political efficacy was gained.

This was true in spite of the fact, which Roberto Michels so persuasively laid out, that these organizations tended themselves to be run by elites and were relatively impervious at the top to input from the base.[14] Whence this sense of efficacy then? One can probably understand it in these terms: workers made gains on issues that were obviously important to them (legislation on hours and working conditions, welfare state measures, and the like) through the clout wielded by these organizations or parties. Just as a private in a victorious army may share in the sense of triumph even though the general never asked his opinion, so can a worker, peasant, or small craftsman in a condition of relative class war have a sense of efficacy from the collective gains of the movement.

It might seem that class struggle is good for democracy. I do indeed think that something like this is correct, but of course not in unqualified fashion. There are certain conditions. This opinion goes against the whole weight of the tradition of theory about republics and civic humanism, with the single exception of Machia-

13. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 2000).
14. Roberto Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1998).

velli. This majority view is not wrong. Class war is indeed one of the great threats to republican institutions; it can often lead to a brutal suspension of the laws, the rules of the republican game, in favor of a class dictatorship from one side or the other.

Where the tradition is right is that it is indeed crucial that the whole body of citizens identify profoundly with the society and its free institutions, the sentiment which was called in the old days *patriotism* (which meant a love for our laws, not just an identification with our ethnic group). This sentiment is usually deeper and stronger than a sense of democratic efficacy, but it cannot survive forever in the absence of such efficacy. But for nonelites who have a clear perception of the ways in which their interests are not being served, this efficacy can only take the form of collective action that can secure redress. Class mobilization for redress is what I am calling rather loosely "class struggle" (and clearly *class* here has a looser sense than in Marxist theory).

Where this is so, then the real formula of republican longevity and stability is complex. It involves both a powerful patriotic identification and a mobilization for collective action along class lines. Moreover, if we now move to the level of identity or social imaginary, this synthesis is at its most stable when there is an inner link between national identity and the class-mobilized one.

This is what you do in fact find in some of the countries I named above. The Labour movement consciousness in the United Kingdom was connected to the traditional British patriotic sense of a "free Briton" or "free Englishman." The goals of the Labour movement were seen as the proper fulfillment of this goal or ideal, and there was thus a patriotic dimension to Labour consciousness. That this might not be an unequivocally good thing becomes evident if one thinks of those moments when patriotism tipped over into jingoism. But I am not here describing an ideal but rather a real historical phenomenon.

In a similar way, the French Communist identity was intrinsically linked to the republican one. Communism was seen to be the final fulfillment of the promise or values of the republic; hence the strong cohort of Marxist historians of the revolution, who often painted it in an implausibly positive light. But this consciousness was not confined to academic historians, it was part of the basic appeal of the French Communist Party. There was also a negative side to this French working-class patriotism, as emerged at the time of the Algerian War.

Now this inner link between class movement and the republic, the idea that the goals of our movement (say, Communism) represent the proper form of the republic, draws on an implicit endorsement of the ideal of popular sovereignty.

Our program represents the really adequate form in which the people could rule. An analogous assumption was implicit in the British Labour movement.

We see here a model of a possible vibrant democracy with a strong sense of popular efficacy that depends on the class struggle being canalized through a complex identity, relating class mobilization to patriotic belonging. Each side of this identity strengthens the other: the sense of the Republic gives weight and meaning to the class mobilization, and the fruits of this mobilization make the republic plausible as the matrix of our freedom and efficacy even now, long before the eventual hoped-for realization of the ideal. Where the opposing forces have a similar complex identity, fighting actually brings us together; that is, it strengthens our common commitment. This gives both the truth and the limitation of the traditional lore against faction. Perhaps only Machiavelli in the tradition seems to have perceived this connection.[15]

Here there is inner link between two notions of "people" previously distinguished above. The Greek class concept merges into the modern all-englobing one, via an eschatological hope that the first becomes the second. To quote the concluding line of "The Internationale": "The socialist international will be the human race." This utopianism gave immense political strength to labor movements, even though it constituted a crucial source of intellectual weakness. Or perhaps better put, it was the site of a great deal of ambivalence and division between those who took the eschatology more or less seriously. Put in British terms, the crucial question was: in what sense of socialism is Labour committed to it?[16]

So alongside the Tocquevillian voluntary association model of a healthy democracy with citizen efficacy, I want to place this complex identity conflict model. Our problem is that today both of these seem to be in crisis and decline.

To take the Tocquevillian model first, Robert Putnam has argued that the decline in citizen participation in elections has to be put in the context of declining associations, all the bodies which link citizens together, and thus increase their

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15. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

16. Perhaps we can generalize this Machiavellian point a little further. Fighting can bring us together, wherever there are complex identities of this kind, where both sides see their defining ideals or goals as intrinsically linked to the polity itself. My sense is that the long struggles over Quebec independence, in spite of the very divisive issue that concerns the fundamental needs of the society, have strengthened a common identification with Quebec political society as well as a sense of democratic efficacy on both sides. In this age of declining participation in elections (including in Quebec), the level of electoral participation in the last referendum of 1995 was 94 percent, which I think must be a level unattained even in democracies that make voting obligatory.

"social capital."[17] But this position has been challenged. The claim is that this decline looks true, if one focuses on the traditional associations like the Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), bowling leagues (hence the title of Putnam's book), and chapter-based national associations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Rotary, and the like. But there are other, less formal modes of association which are on the rise, such as various kinds of support and mutual help groups that people join and then leave. The new associations are looser but they are not less extensive, nor in their own fashion less intense.[18]

This is a valid objection to Putnam's thesis as it stands, but another facet of his argument is to the effect that there has been a change in the kinds of organizations that link citizens to politics. One model was that of, say, the NAACP. This was a large membership organization that members could participate in on the local level. It was in one sense specific: its goal was the advancement of African Americans. But within this general brief, it was primed to intervene on a whole host of issues, from civil rights to affirmative action. Now the growing, powerful bodies are national lobbies, such as the Sierra Club. These also have members, which they recruit with well-designed direct mailings; but the members' crucial mode of participation is to send money. If it can generate enough contributions, the lobby can exercise pressure on government and legislatures, in theory on behalf of its whole membership, which can on occasion even be induced to send some standardized card to their congressman protesting or demanding some measure. The other feature that distinguishes this kind of body from the earlier associations like the NAACP is that they are much more narrowly focused. They are, in fact, single-issue bodies. Indeed, the narrow focus is the basis for their wide success in winning members.[19]

I think there is something significant in this change. It fits a pattern that I would like to try to identify. Perhaps we should think of this not so much as a decline in citizen efficacy but as a shift in the sense of what this is.

One model of this efficacy is the broad-gauge one: I seek input or influence over the whole governance of my society — that is, not only over the decision on this or that issue but over the whole way these issues are defined, prioritized, and related to each other. It makes sense in this framework to pick as my vehicle of

17. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
18. Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
19. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, chap. 9.

choice a party that could aspire to govern or take part with others in a governing coalition or, failing this, a broad-gauge association like the NAACP.

The other model abandons this route. It looks to punctual, targeted interventions. The effective citizen is the one who can, for instance, defend her rights or a particular right of some category of individuals, or else is capable of advancing some particular cause which she cherishes. The chosen instruments in this case are, in some jurisdictions, legal—fighting before courts and other adjudicating bodies; or else they take the form of single-issue lobbies such as the Sierra Club in the earlier discussion.

It is clear that on this second model, the importance of voting in elections will be much less. Of course, if I care supremely about a given issue, and one party adopts my position on this, I will probably want to vote for them. But there are frequently countervailing considerations: perhaps I am not all that confident that this party will really deliver (what many right-wing Christians fear—not always without justification—about Republicans who promise to oppose gay marriage and abortion), and perhaps also this party has taken a whole host of other stands on other issues that I do not particularly favor. Voting is not itself a priority, as it is in the first model, provided my party is running.

What seems to have happened over the last decades in many Western democracies is that the model of efficacy that people subscribe to, often just tacitly, has slipped from the first in the direction of the second. This happened first in the United States, but other Atlantic societies seem to be following suit some distance behind. The slippage can sometimes be measured in terms of the differential behavior of generations. Putnam shows that the habit of voting remains high among the older-age cohorts; they generally vote as often as before. The general level of participation goes down because the succeeding cohorts vote less and less. This is not a life-cycle matter. Earlier generations do not vote (appreciably) less now than before; younger people do not vote more as they get older. It is a generational shift.[20]

So how did this change come about? One obvious way of understanding it is to make the crucial factor the development of a more and more elite-controlled democracy, more and more dominated by money, with media that more and more distort public debate in the manner described previously. Then we would see the shift away from the broad gauged and toward the punctual model of citizen efficacy as the result. Because the older form of efficacy becomes less and less available, people switch to the more targeted one.

20. Putnam, *Bowling Alone,* chap. 14.

I think there is some truth in this, but it is not the whole story. I think that there is also an independent movement in people's identities, social imaginaries, and sense of themselves that has been proceeding apace in the latter half of the twentieth century and that has (1) contributed to the lesser availability of the older model of efficacy and (2) made the new model look more plausible and inviting.

Consider, for instance, the decline of the identification with the working class among British workers during the postwar period. This is often attributed to affluence and mobility; in the latter case, moving out of older working-class areas into new suburbs or housing estates. In one way, one can easily explain why this might change what these upwardly mobile workers identify with. It was a condition of the older Labour identity that workers could see a set of connected ways in which they were disadvantaged so that the measures supported by themselves and their party formed a kind of package. Collective provision across this whole package was to be preferred to private acquisition, be it in medicine, unemployment insurance, housing, or whatever.

But then Margaret Thatcher was able to entice some erstwhile Labour voters by offering to sell council housing to tenants. At their level of affluence, the package begins to break up; one no longer wants to go with public provision right down the line. One of the fundamental, unspoken premises of the Labour movement and party begins to come under pressure. At the end of this development, one comes to something like the situation in the United States: there is very little plausibility to the idea of there being such a package of issues that are those of one class, rather a whole host of different issues stand orthogonal to one another.

Or rather, in the American case, the powerful packages have become the lifestyle issues, those that are the object of the present culture wars: abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, sex education in schools. These divisions cut across class, and moreover, they unite very heterogeneous constituencies on each side, and so they do not seem to be able to become the fault line along which a fight that intensifies identification with the polity can take place like the former successful cases of class war. Or perhaps it is because the sense of absolutes here is so great that the divisive force of these battles cancels out the sense that we are struggling in the bosom of the same polity that we all cherish.

So on one level, one might say, objectively, a rise in affluence helps bring about a shift in our understanding of our predicament so that one of the basic retaining walls under the older idea of class war subsides. Each citizen is cut loose on his or her own, perhaps connected from time to time to people with like interests on this or that issue (e.g., first-time homeowners, parents with small children, retired

people) but without a strong ongoing identification to something like a movement. This change of consciousness means that the older kind of broad-gauge citizen efficacy is going to be much harder to recreate. It is not just that the political system in which we operate has become more resistant and opaque; it is also that the solidarities through which we used to get a handle on it are dissolving; the issue space from forming a package fragments into a host of unconnected questions, headway on each one requiring different allies. The route to efficacy can seem to lie more in choosing one's issue(s) and backing court action or single-issue campaigning. We are sliding toward the more punctual, targeted model.

Affluence, as a change in my objective situation, can help bring about this change in my reading of my situation, and through this, my reading of the general situation (e.g., now class politics may no longer make sense to me, and not just for me but for anyone). But I think something deeper is going on — a change in the culture of late capitalist, consumer society and a different way of placing oneself in it, not simply in terms of perceived objective interests but also in identity and the social imaginary.

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I believe, along with many others, that our North Atlantic civilization has been undergoing a cultural revolution in recent decades. The 1960s provide perhaps the hinge moment, at least symbolically. It is on one hand an individuating revolution, which may sound strange, because our modern age was already based on a certain individualism. But this has shifted onto a new axis without deserting the others. In addition to moral, spiritual, and instrumental individualisms, we now have a widespread expressive individualism. This is, of course, not totally new. Expressivism was the invention of the Romantic period in the late eighteenth century. Intellectual and artistic elites have been searching for the authentic way of living or expressing themselves since the nineteenth century. What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon.

Everyone senses that something has changed. Often this is experienced as loss or breakup. A majority of Americans believe that communities are eroding — families, neighborhoods, even the polity. They sense that people are less willing to participate, to do their bit; and they are less trusting of others.[21] Schol-

21. See Wuthnow, *Loose Connections*, 1–2; also Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), chap. 6; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 20; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

ars do not necessarily agree with this assessment,[22] but the perception itself is an important fact about today's society. No doubt there are analogous perceptions widespread in other Western societies.

The causes cited for these changes are many: affluence and the continued extension of consumer lifestyles; social and geographic mobility; outsourcing and downsizing by corporations; new family patterns, particularly the growth of the two-income household with the resulting overwork and burnout; suburban spread, whereby people often live, work, and shop in three separate areas; the rise of television; and others.[23] But whatever the correct list of such precipitating factors, what interests me here is the understandings of human life, agency, and the good that both encourage this new (at least seeming) individuation and also make us morally uneasy about it.

The shift is often understood, particularly by those most disturbed by it, as an outbreak of mere egoism or a turn to hedonism. In other words, two things which were identified clearly as vices in a traditional ethic of community service and self-discipline are targeted as the motors of change. But I think this misses an important point. Egoism and the mere search for pleasure (whatever exactly these amount to) may play a larger or smaller role in the motivation of different individuals, but a large-scale shift in general understandings of the good requires some new definitions of the good. Whether in a given individual case this functions more as rationalization or as animating ideal is neither here nor there; the ideal itself becomes a crucial facilitating factor.

Thus one of the most obvious manifestations of the individuation in question here has been the consumer revolution. With postwar affluence and the diffusion of what many had previously considered luxuries came a new concentration on private space and the means to fill it, which began distending the relations of previously close-knit working-class[24] or peasant communities,[25] even of extended

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22. Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) holds that the decline in social capital is real, whereas this is contested by Wuthnow (*Loose Connections*), who sees the declining older forms being replaced by new kinds of "looser" connections. See also Wolfe (*One Nation*), 252–53; and John A. Hall and Charles Lindholm, *Is America Breaking Apart?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 121–22. Whereas the critics may be right about associations in general, Putnam seems to be onto something important in the sphere of political participation. The new lobbies and single-issue organizations operate rather differently from the older membership associations.

23. See Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, sec. 3; Wuthnow, *Loose Connections*, chap. 4.

24. Cf. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).

25. Cf. Yves Lambert, *Dieu change en Bretagne* (Paris: Cerf, 1985).

families. Older modes of mutual help dropped off, perhaps partly because of the receding of dire necessity. People concentrated more on their own lives and the lives of their nuclear families. They moved to new towns or suburbs, lived more on their own, tried to make a life out of the ever-growing gamut of new goods and services on offer, from washing-machines to packaged holidays, and of the freer individual lifestyles they facilitated. The pursuit of happiness took on new, more immediate meaning, with a growing range of easily available means. And in this newly individuated space, the customer was encouraged more and more to express her taste, furnishing her space according to her own needs and affinities as only the rich had been able to do in previous eras.

One important facet of this new consumer culture was the creation of a special youth market, with a flood of new goods, from clothes to records, aimed at an age bracket which ranged over adolescents and young adults. The advertising deployed to sell these goods in symbiosis with the youth culture that develops as a result helped create a new kind of consciousness of youth as a stage in life — between childhood and an adulthood tied down by responsibility. This was not, of course, without precedent. Many earlier societies had marked out such a stage in the life cycle with its own special groupings and rituals, and upper-class youth had enjoyed their student days and (sometimes) fraternities. Indeed, with the expansion of urban life and the consolidation of national cultures, upper- and middle-class youth began to become conscious of itself as a social reality toward the end of the nineteenth century. Youth even becomes a political reference point, or a basis of mobilization, as one sees with the German Jugendbewegung and later with Fascist invocation of youth in their famous marching song "Giovinezza." But this self-demarcation of youth was a break with the working-class culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where the necessities of life seemed to exclude such a time-out after childhood and before the serious business of earning began.

The present youth culture is defined both by the way advertising is pitched at it and to a great degree autonomously, as expressivist. The styles of dress adopted and the kinds of music listened to give expression to the personality, to the affinities of the chooser, within a wide space of fashion in which one's choice could align one with thousands, even millions, of others.

I want to talk about this space of fashion in a minute, but if we move from these external facts about postwar consumerism to the self-understandings that went along with them, we see a steady spread of what I have called the culture of authenticity.[26] By this I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the

26. See Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991).

Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, that each one of us has his or her own way of realizing our humanity and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, by the previous generation, or by religious or political authority.

This had been the standpoint of many intellectuals and artists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One can trace the strengthening and radicalization of this ethos among some cultural elites throughout this period, a growing sense of the right, even duty, to resist bourgeois or established codes and standards, to declare openly for the art and the mode of life that they felt inspired to create and live. The defining of its own ethos by the Bloomsbury milieu was an important stage on this road in early twentieth-century England, and the sense of the epochal change is reflected in the famous phrase of Virginia Woolf: "On or about December 1910, human nature changed."[27] A somewhat parallel moment came with André Gide's coming out as a homosexual in the 1920s, a move in which desire, morality, and a sense of integrity came together. It is not just that Gide no longer felt the need to maintain a false front, it is that after a long struggle he saw this front as a wrong that he was inflicting on himself and on others who labor under similar disguises.[28]

But it is only in the era after World War II that this ethic of authenticity begins to shape the outlook of society in general. Expressions like "do your own thing" become current; a beer commercial of the early 1970s enjoined us to "be yourselves in the world of today." A simplified expressivism infiltrates everywhere. Therapies multiply that promise to help you find yourself, realize yourself, release your true self, and so on.

The contemporary ethic of authenticity thus has a long prehistory, and we can see that it is set in a wider critique of the buffered, disciplined self, concerned above all with instrumental rational control. If we think of the 1960s as our hinge moment, among leading intellectuals we note a widespread critique of our society in the period immediately preceding it. The society of the 1950s was castigated as conformist, as crushing individuality and creativity, as too concerned with production and concrete results, as repressing feeling and spontaneity, as exalting the mechanical over the organic. Writers like Theodor Roszak and Herbert Marcuse turned out to be prophets of the coming revolution. As Paul Tillich said

27. Quoted from Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), 325.
28. Michel Winock, *Le siècle des intellectuels* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), chap. 17.

to a graduating class in 1957, "We hope for more non-conformists among you, for your sake, for the sake of the nation, and for the sake of humanity." In one sense (but perhaps not the one he intended) his wish was granted in profusion in the following decade.[29]

The revolts of young people in the 1960s (which really extended into the 1970s, but I am using what has become the standard term) were indeed directed against a system that smothered creativity, individuality, and imagination. They rebelled against a mechanical system in the name of more organic ties; against the instrumental and for lives devoted to things of intrinsic value; against privilege and for equality; and against the repression of the body by reason and for the fullness of sensuality. But these were not seen just as a list of separate goals or demands. Following axes of criticism already laid down in the Romantic period, their understanding was that inner divisions (between reason and feeling), social divisions (between students and workers), and divisions between spheres of life (between work and play) were all intrinsically linked with each other and inseparable from modes of domination and oppression (reason over feeling, those who think dominating those who work with their hands, serious work marginalizing play). An integral revolution will undo all these divisions and oppressions at once. This clearly was the outlook that came to expression in the May 1968 student movement in Paris. An equal society was meant to emerge from a simultaneous breaking down of the three barriers just mentioned (*le décloisonnement*). Although the theory did not come to exactly this articulation everywhere, it is clear that the May event had an immense resonance throughout the world and that in turn it reflected some of the themes of the earlier movement in the United States, which started at Berkeley in 1964.

This outlook goes back to the Romantic period; it is articulated, among other places, in Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.[30] The outlook is carried down into the 1960s in part through the continuing chain of related countercultures, in part expressly through the influence of writers such as Marcuse. Like the ethic of authenticity which is embedded in it, it moves in this period out of elite milieus to become a much more widely available option, a stance and sensibility recognizable to the society as a whole (however much disliked and maligned).

29. See David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 117–24; Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 60–64 (quotation, 61).

30. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); see especially letter 6.

But of course we cannot read the culture of the succeeding decades simply through the aspirations of the 1960s. We have to factor in not only the reactions of those who opposed, and still oppose, this whole outlook but also the contradictions and dilemmas that these aspirations themselves generate. Perhaps everyone would now recognize the Utopian nature of the ideals of May 1968. In a sense, this was even so at the time; the *soixante-huitards* lacked completely the steely political determination of Lenin and the Bolsheviks; indeed, the movement emerged partly in criticism of the French Communist Party. In this sense, their hands were clean. But Utopianism has its costs. To the extent that the goals of integral self-expression, sensual release, equal relations, and social bonding cannot be easily realized together — and it seems that they can only be united with difficulty, and for a time, in small communities at best — the attempt to realize them will involve sacrificing some elements of the package for others.

This, of course, is what we see happening in the aftermath. David Brooks sets out the synthesis between "bourgeois" and "bohemian" that he sees in the contemporary U.S. upper class. These "bobos," as he calls them, have made their peace with capitalism and productivity but they retain their overriding sense of the importance of personal development and self-expression. They retain the wholehearted embrace of sex and sensuality as a good in itself, but they pursue it with the kind of earnest concern for self-improvement that is light-years away from the Dionysian spontaneity of the 1960s. They have developed what he calls the higher selfishness: "Self-cultivation is the imperative. . . . So this is not a crass and vulgar selfishness, about narrow self-interest or mindless accumulation. This is a higher selfishness. It's about making sure you get the most out of yourself, which means putting yourself in a job which is spiritually fulfilling, socially constructive, experientially diverse, emotionally enriching, self-esteem boosting, perpetually challenging, and eternally edifying."[31]

Among the things that get lost in the original package are, on one hand, social equality; bobos have made their peace with the Reagan-Thatcher revolution, with the slimming down of the welfare state, and with increasing income inequality where they sit at the upper end. On the other hand, their highly mobile lifestyle has helped to erode community. But there is more than a residual unease about this among many of these highfliers. They want to believe that they are contributing to the welfare of everyone, and they yearn for more meaningful community relations.

31. Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, chaps. 3, 5, 6 (quotation, 134).

In fact, this kind of capitalist subculture, which one found mainly in the information technology world, is not unanimously accepted among the rich and powerful. There still exists a culture of the big vertical corporations, and there is a tension between the two.

What this shows, however, is that fragments of the ideal, selectively acted on, remain powerful; and even the abandoned segments may still tug at our conscience. The ideal, however distorted, is still powerful enough in a society like the United States to awaken strong resistance in certain quarters and to be the object of what have been called "culture wars." This latter term may be in some sense an exaggeration, because there is some evidence that the number of full-scale, utterly down-the-line warriors on each side may be relatively small; in fact, the great majority of Americans are caught in the middle. But the dynamic of the system, the interaction between single-issue organizations, the media, and the American party system, and perhaps the American obsession with rights, keeps the polarization at fever heat and prevents saner and lower key treatment of the issues.[32]

The fact that the ideal can only be selectively fulfilled also changes the significance of those parts we do act on. Self-expression has a weight and significance when we see it as not just compatible with but as the road toward a true community of equals. It has to lose much of this when it turns out to concern only ourselves. Hence the invitation to irony which, for instance, David Brooks responds to in the quote above about the higher selfishness (and indeed, throughout his book). Selectivity takes a toll not only in the loss of the abandoned bits but also in the potential trivialization or banalization of what remains. It carries the danger that in holding on to our now reduced goals we will hide from ourselves the dilemmas involved here: that we are willy nilly impeding other valid aims and reducing the ones we espouse and proclaim. The reduced and simplified fragment becomes the limit of our moral world, the basis of an all-encompassing slogan.

A good example of this is *choice*, that is, bare choice as a prime value, irrespective of what it is a choice between or in what domain. Yet we have to admit that this is regularly invoked in our society as an all-trumping argument in weighty contexts. I can think of a number of reasons against the idea of forbidding by law at least, say, first-trimester abortions, including the fact that in our present society the burden of bearing the child falls almost totally on the pregnant woman, or the high likelihood that the law would be widely evaded and the operations carried

32. For a good treatment of these polarizing mechanisms, see James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), and *Before the Shooting Begins* (New York: Free Press, 1994). Alan Wolfe (*One Nation*) attempts to minimize the divisions.

out in much more perilous conditions. But being in favor of choice as such has nothing to do with it—unless one would like equally to legitimate the choice of prospective parents to selectively abort female fetuses to reduce their eventual dowry costs. This kind of appeal trivializes the issue. It trades on the favorable resonances of a word which is also invoked in other contexts: for instance, in advertising, where it serves to invoke the sense that there are no barriers to my desires, the child-in-the-candy-store feeling of hovering alongside a limitless field of pleasurable options. It is a word that occludes almost everything important: the sacrificed alternatives in a dilemmatic situation and the real moral weight of the situation.

And yet we find these words surfacing again and again, slogan terms like *freedom*, *rights*, *respect*, *nondiscrimination*, and so on. Of course none of these is empty in the way *choice* is, but they too are often deployed as argument-stopping universals, without any consideration of the where and how of their application to the case at hand. This has something to do with the dynamic of our political process in many Western democracies (I am not taking a stand one way or another on whether it is better elsewhere), the way in which advocacy groups, media, and political parties both generate and feed off a dumbed-down political culture. James Davison Hunter relates the poignant fact that studies showed the pro-life side of the abortion debate that the best way they could make their case was in terms of rights and choice.[33] These favored terms acquire a Procrustean force. Shallowness and dominance are two sides of the same coin.

But for that very reason, one can wonder how much they reflect real-life deliberation of the human beings in the society. Hunter reveals how complex and nuanced is the thinking of people who can be lined up on one side or the other by some simplifying question, such as, "Are you pro-life or pro-choice?"[34]

We find another interesting reflection of this in Alan Ehrenhalt's fascinating study of 1950s Chicago and of what has become of life in America since.[35] The book begins, "Most of us in America believe a few simple propositions that seem so clear and self-evident they scarcely need to be said. Choice is a good thing in life, and the more of it we have, the happier we are. Authority is inherently suspect; nobody should have the right to tell others what to think or how to behave. Sin isn't personal, it's social; individual human beings are creatures of the society they live in."[36] Anyone can recognize here widespread ideas that are often used

33. Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins*, 118.
34. Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins*, part 3.
35. Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City*.
36. Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City*, 2.

as trumps in arguments, or enframing assumptions, even though they are often contested. Ehrenhalt's main point is very convincing here. It is absurd to adopt any of these three propositions as universal truths. It is clear that to have any kind of livable society some choices have to be restricted, some authorities have to be respected, and some individual responsibility has to be assumed. The issue should always be which choices, authorities, and responsibilities, and at what cost. In other words, falling back on slogans like these hides from us the dilemmas we have to navigate between in our choices. Properly understood, what happened in the last half of the twentieth century in America was that some choices were freed and some authorities overthrown, with some resultant gains and at the cost of some losses. Most of the people who help these slogans circulate are at some level aware of this, because they may also in another context bemoan the loss of stable, reliable, and safe communities. We saw above how the majority of Americans believe that community has been undermined and that people are less trustworthy today.

In a way, the costs may be hidden by the fact that we are especially indignant, even today, about some of the restrictions and oppressions of the 1950s: women confined to the home, children being forced into molds in school. We feel these things should never occur again. Whereas the costs, like the unraveling of social connections in the ghetto or the way so many of us channel surf through life, come across either as bearable or as simply systemic, and thus to be borne regardless.

But what emerges through all the muddle and evasion is that there has been a real value shift here. We see this in the fact that things which were borne for centuries are now declared unbearable, such as the restrictions on women's options in life, for instance. And so there are two points to be made about our situation. One is to pick up on the flattening and trivialization of many of the key terms of public discourse; another is to see that our actual deliberations, while distorted and partly captive of such illusions, nevertheless are always richer and deeper than these allow.

I make this point because I think we need to allow a similar double assessment of a turn like that which inaugurates the Age of Authenticity. It is tempting for those out of sympathy with this turn to see it simply in the light of its illusions; to see authenticity, or the affirmation of sensuality, as simply egoism and the pursuit of pleasure, for example, or to see the aspiration to self-expression exclusively in the light of consumer choice. It is tempting on the other side for proponents of the turn to affirm the values of the new ideal as though they were unproblematic, free of cost, and could never be trivialized. Both see the turn as a move within a stable,

perennial game. For the critics, it involves the embracing of vices which were and are the main threats to virtue; for the boosters, we have reversed age-old forms which were and are modes of oppression.

I want to view the turn differently. When we undergo some such transformation, the moral stakes change. I do not mean that we cannot make a reasoned overall judgment about the gains and losses in the transition. (I believe that this one has been on balance positive.) But I do mean that the available options have changed. First, some options available in earlier days are not possible today, such as a general return to the ideal of clear and fixed gender roles in the family. Secondly, there are options today, within the new context, and some of them are better than others. This is something that the constant harping on the most degraded forms by critics tends to occlude. They become unwitting allies of the trivialized forms because they attack the new context as a whole as though it were defined by these. That one side in the abortion debate calls itself pro-choice has something to do with the dynamic of its battle with its polar opposite. Root and branch attacks on authenticity help to make our lives worse, while we are powerless to put the clock back to an earlier time.

What are the consequences of the turn for our social imaginary? One important facet of these harks back to our previous discussion about youth culture. It also constitutes an important locus of possible trivialization.

I have spoken elsewhere[37] about the typically modern, horizontal forms of social imaginary in which people grasp themselves and great numbers of others as existing and acting simultaneously. The three widely recognized forms are the economy, the public sphere, and the sovereign people. But the space of fashion alluded to above is an example of a fourth structure of simultaneity. It is unlike the public sphere and the sovereign people because these are sites of common action. In this respect, it is like the economy, where a host of individual actions concatenate. But it is different from this as well, because our actions relate in the space of fashion in a particular way. I wear my own kind of hat, but in doing so I am displaying my style to all of you, and in this, I am responding to your self-display even as you will respond to mine. The space of fashion is one in which we sustain a language together of signs and meanings, a language that is constantly changing but that is at any moment the background needed to give our gestures the sense they have. If my hat can express my particular kind of cocky yet understated self-display, then this is because of how the common language of

37. See Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries.*

style has evolved between us up to this point. My gesture can change it, and then your responding stylistic move will take its meaning from the new contour the language takes on.

The general structure I want to draw from this example of the space of fashion is that of a horizontal, simultaneously mutual presence that is not of a common action but rather of mutual display. It matters to each one of us as we act that the others are there as witness of what we are doing and thus as codeterminers of the meaning of our action.

Spaces of this kind become more and more important in modern urban society where large numbers of people rub shoulders, unknown to each other, without dealings with each other, and yet affecting each other, forming the inescapable context of each other's lives. As against the everyday rush to work in the Metro where the others can sink to the status of obstacles in my way, city life has developed other ways of being-with—for instance, as we each take our Sunday walk in the park, or as we mingle at the summer street-festival or in the stadium before the play-off game. Here each individual or small group acts on their own but aware that their display says something to the others, will be responded to by them, and will help build a common mood or tone that will color everyone's actions.

Here a host of urban monads hover on the boundary between solipsism and communication. My loud remarks and gestures are overtly addressed only to my immediate companions; my family group is sedately walking, engaged in our own Sunday outing but all the time we are aware of this common space that we are building in which the messages that cross take their meaning. This strange zone between loneliness and communication strongly impressed many of the early observers of this phenomenon as it arose in the nineteenth century. We can consider the paintings of Manet, or Baudelaire's fascination with the urban scene in the roles of flaneur and dandy, uniting observation and display.

Of course, these nineteenth-century urban spaces were topical—that is, all the participants were in the same place, in sight of each other. But twentieth-century communication has produced metatopical variants—when, for instance, we watch the Olympics or Princess Diana's funeral on television, aware that millions of others are with us in this. The meaning of our participation in the event is shaped by the whole vast dispersed audience we share it with.

Because these spaces hover between solitude and togetherness, they may sometimes flip over into common action, and indeed, the moment when they do so may be hard to pinpoint. As we rise as one to cheer the crucial third-period goal, we have undoubtedly become a common agent, and we may try to prolong this when we leave the stadium by marching and chanting, or even wreaking vari-

ous forms of mayhem together. The cheering crowd at a rock festival is similarly fused. There is a heightened excitement at these moments of fusion, reminiscent of Carnival or of some of the great collective rituals of earlier days. Durkheim gave an important place to these times of collective effervescence as founding moments of society and the sacred.[38] In any case, these moments seem to respond to some importantly felt need of today's "lonely crowd."

I have just spoken here of common action, but this is not always the right category. It is the right term, perhaps, when the mob smashes the police cars or throws stones at the soldiers. But at the rock concert, at the princess's funeral, what is shared is something else — not so much an action as an emotion, a powerful common feeling. What is happening is that we are all being touched together, moved as one, sensing ourselves as fused in our contact with something greater, something deeply moving or admirable, something whose power to move us has been immensely magnified by the fusion.

This brings us back into the category of the festive: moments of fusion in a common action or feeling that both wrench us out of the everyday and seem to put us in touch with something exceptional beyond ourselves. This is why some have seen these moments as among the new forms of religion in our world.[39]

Consumer culture, expressivism, and spaces of mutual display connect in our world to produce their own kind of synergy. Commodities become vehicles of individual expression, even the self-definition of identity. But however this may be ideologically presented, this does not amount to some declaration of real individual autonomy. The language of self-definition is defined in the spaces of mutual display, which have now gone metatopical — they relate us to prestigious centers of style-creation, usually in rich and powerful nations and milieus. And this language is the object of constant attempted manipulation by large corporations.

My buying Nike running shoes may say something about how I want to be or appear, the kind of empowered agent who can take "Just do it!" as my motto. In doing this, I identify myself with those heroes of sport and the great leagues they play in, and I join millions of others in expressing my individuality. Moreover, I express it by linking myself to some higher world, the locus of stars and heroes, which is largely a construct of fantasy.

Modern consumer society is inseparable from the construction of spaces of dis-

38. Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 5th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968).

39. See Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *La religion pour Mémoire* (Paris: Cerf 1993), chapter 3, esp. 82.

play—topical spaces, palaces of consumption such as the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris thematized by Walter Benjamin, and the giant malls of today—and also metatopical spaces which link us through commodities to an imagined higher existence elsewhere.

But all this conformity and alienation may nevertheless feel like choice and self-determination, not only because consumer spaces with their multiplying options celebrate choice, but also because in embracing some style within them, I may feel myself to be breaking out of some more confining space of family or tradition.[40]

Of course it goes without saying that a more genuine search for authenticity begins only where one can break out of the Logo-centric[41] language generated by transnational corporations. This language occupies a large place in metatopical space of display, but it is not the whole story. Admired stars, heroes, political slogans, and modes of demonstration also circulate. These can suffer their own distortions (think of Che Guevara T-shirts), but they can also connect us to transnational movements around genuine issues.

How else is the advance of expressive individualism altering our social imaginary? Here I can once again only sketch an ideal type, because we're dealing with a gradual process in which the new coexists with the old.

Our self-understandings as sovereign peoples have not been displaced by this new individualism, but perhaps there has been a shift of emphasis. A human identity is a complex thing, made up of many reference points. It still seems important for many of us that we are Canadians, Americans, Britons, or French. Just watch us when the Olympics are on. But the weighting, the importance of this in our overall sense of identity, can shift.

One could argue that for many young people today, certain styles that they enjoy and display in their more immediate circle, styles that are defined through the media in relation to admired stars and even products, occupy a large place in

40. Achille Mbembe, in his fascinating analysis of contemporary Johannesburg, "Aesthetics of Superfluity" (*Public Culture* 16 [2004]: 373–405), describes whole mall environments in the new upscale north end of the urban area, Melrose Arch and Montecasino. These form the dreamed of elsewhere to which shoppers are linked. In artful imitations, even including a careful treatment of the stone to make it look weathered through centuries, they place us in Tuscany. This is a center of first-world design but also in its medieval roots it bespeaks the integrated community that modern consumer capitalism is dissolving. Shoppers there can square the circle emotionally, and enjoy both the excitement of expanding choice and the nostalgically desired community with a long past of deep meanings (393–404).

41. I apologize for the pun. The oblique reference here is to Naomi Klein's pathbreaking book, *No Logo: Taking Aim at Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 2000).

their sense of self, and that this has tended to displace in importance the sense of belonging to large-scale collective agencies such as nations, not to mention churches, political parties, agencies of advocacy, and the like.[42]

As for the modern moral order of mutual benefit, if anything this has been strengthened. Or perhaps, better put, it has taken on a somewhat different form. Certainly it is clear that the ideals of fairness, of the mutual respect of each other's freedom, are as strong among young people today as they ever were. Indeed, precisely the soft relativism that seems to accompany the ethic of authenticity — let each person do their own thing, and we should not criticize each other's values — is predicated on a firm ethical base, indeed, demanded by it. One should not criticize the others' values because they have a right to live their own life as you do. The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance. This injunction emerges clearly from the ethic of freedom and mutual benefit, although one might easily cavil at this application of it.[43]

Where the new twist comes in, evident in the relativism, is that this injunction stands alone where it used to be surrounded and contained by others. For Locke, the Law of Nature needed to be inculcated in people by strong discipline, so although the goal was individual freedom, there was no felt incompatibility between this and the need for strong, commonly enforced virtues of character. On the contrary, it seemed evident that without these, the regime of mutual respect could not survive. It took a long time before John Stuart Mill could enunciate what has come to be called the harm principle, that no one has a right to interfere with me for my own good but only to prevent harm to others. In his day, this was far from generally accepted; it seemed the path to libertinism.

But today, the harm principle is widely endorsed and seems the formula

42. I am speaking here of the countries of the North Atlantic. Globalization has meant that these market- and popular culture–driven spaces of mutual display have become international, and young people relate to them in Bombay and Shanghai as well as London and New York. I have no doubt that this has an impact on their sense of identity, but we do not need to assume that this impact will be as great or as deep in societies less penetrated by consumer culture and not already shaped by an ethic of authenticity. The full effect of this culture and this ethic in loosening older modes of integration in the political system may have been felt only (so far) in the West.

43. Jean-Louis Schlegel makes the point that the values which constantly emerge from studies of young people today are "droits de l'homme, tolérance, respect des convictions d'autrui, libertés, amitié, amour, solidarité, fraternité, justice, respect de la nature, intervention humanitaire" [human rights, toleration, respect for the convictions of others, freedom, friendship, love, solidarity, brotherhood, respect for nature, humanitarian intervention]. *Esprit*, no 233 (June 1997): 29. Sylvette Denèfle concurs for her sample of French unbelievers, in *Sociologie de la sécularisation* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), chap. 6. Tolerance is for them the key virtue (166–67).

demanded by the dominant expressive individualism. (It is perhaps not an accident that Mill's arguments also drew on expressivist sources, in the person of Humboldt.)

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What are the consequences of this for our notions of political efficacy? I think that the new sense of ourselves as expressive individuals, partly working out our identity in the wider metatopical spaces of display, undermines earlier modes of identification with the nation or polity, particularly to the degree that this is connected to some religious or strong ideological commitments. These are what I have called neo-Durkeimian political identities.[44]

This means a relative withdrawal or disinvestment from these public identities, both from the republic and from those class or party identities which were interwoven with the republic. But this shift undermines the earlier broad-gauge modes of political efficacy, because it critically weakens the parties which were its crucial instruments, not only in this negative way, by undermining the institutions of the older dispensation, but also intrinsically, where the new identity as an expressive individual makes it more natural to see myself as existing in a heterogeneous space of only loosely connected issues, without a permanent set of natural allies. Indeed, it offers me another domain of choice: I can determine whether I want to intervene and on what questions. It is not obligatory for me to find my citizen efficacy in the voting booth in the service of my party; I can determine the degree and mode of this efficacy as I decide what causes to support and by how much, in a fashion perhaps not always very far removed from my choice of what running shoes I will wear.

These changes obviously have a powerful impact on our ideals of transparency. They do not put paid to them altogether, but they obviously render less and less credible the French or Rousseauian variant and they correspondingly give greater strength to the American version in which each acts to fulfill him- or herself in conditions of transparent independence, fairness, and equality. And indeed, in the foregoing pages I've been drawing examples mainly from the United States, but the phenomenon of the decline of voter participation is plainly widespread in Western societies, even though it may have gone farther in the United States than elsewhere. Can one find an analogous shift in the culture of individualism in other North Atlantic societies? It seems to me that one can.

44. See Charles Taylor, *The Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Marcel Gauchet has made an interesting analysis of the recent change in French politics that goes very much along the same lines.[45] According to him, the center of concern has shifted. What is crucial is not so much to ensure that the general will is actually expressed in legislation but to see that different individuals and groups, the different identities in society, are represented in the processes of decision, even though this very often makes it difficult if not impossible to come to a clear, consensual conclusion. Whence this greater importance laid on representation and the recognition of identities? Crucial for Gauchet is the eclipse of the old, Rousseau-inspired republican model whereby the citizen reached a higher level of dignity and freedom in the general will. What undermined this was in a sense its very success in seeing off the threat from a Catholic-monarchist, heteronomous alternative. Once the threat fades, the prestige of this republican idea of freedom through the general will declines as well.[46]

In a sense, one needed this metaphysic and ethic of human freedom through collective will in order to stand up to a rival theology and ethic. The republic, like the sacral monarchy before it, was held together by a commonly accepted vision of the human good. But once this rivalry comes to an end, we are ready to move to a new stage, one in which the crucial ethical-metaphysical choices are relegated to individuals and groups and the political society itself can only be held together by overlapping consensus. We take another further step away from the age-old condition of human society in which the polity was held together by some common overarching sense of the sacred, a further phase in the millennial process which Gauchet calls "the exit from religion" (*la sortie de la religion*).[47]

Of course, in Gauchet's view this society is no more stable than its predecessor. It is riven by deep tensions. The very insistence on hearing everyone in a society where a fragmentation of identities and demands is encouraged in the name of authenticity makes consensual solutions harder and harder to reach. And yet decisions have to be made. They tend thus to happen outside the blocked political arena, by bureaucracies, among technicians, or by judicial process. But this, of course, entrenches further the sense among citizens at large that they are not being heard and that their voices do not count, to which politicians reply by ever more public displays of their readiness to listen. Political society promises to be

45. Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

46. However, some of this may be reversible, given the recent recurrence of the old republican idea of *laïcité* in the face of the perceived threat of "political Islam." See John Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

47. Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie*, 89–102.

more and more transparent, while its processes of decision making become ever more opaque.

If some of this is not too wide of the mark, the transfer in the dominant mode of citizen efficacy, both in Europe and America, has been a very complex development, not a simple reaction to the failures of and obstacles to the older mode but rather a very complex shift of perceived situation and also culture of identity, which has itself added to the obstacles to the old mode as well as making the new one appear more plausible.

Much of this may be hard to reverse. But this is not to say that I consider the two modes of citizen efficacy equivalent. On the contrary, there is much to be regretted in this shift. I believe there are issues that the new mode has trouble addressing — not abortion (though this may stalemate forever); and not issues of ecological responsibility, because we can hope that many years of militant advocacy will change the general climate and make the kind of reversals we see under the U.S. Bush administration harder and harder to pull off. But on questions where it is not just a matter of being for or against some principle, such as whether to have a public system of health care, the dispersed, single-issue approach may never allow the public to act effectively. I have discussed this elsewhere.[48]

What is to be done? I confess that I do not have any clear recommendations. But perhaps it might help to demystify further our ideals of transparency and popular sovereignty. Perhaps we need to go back to something more like the ancient Greek model, where democracy means strengthening the weight of the demos that is nonelites in the decisions arrived at. As Claudio Lomnitz and Dilip Gaonkar both show in other essays in this issue, this would connect with a trend in contemporary Latin America and India toward a mobilization of the demos, with the aim of empowering it in a process in which it has been neglected and left aside. Could we all learn something from this?

48. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).