

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines Marxism's and liberalism's conceptions of freedom as they appear both in the respective theories and in the societies inspired by these theories. It argues that both Marxism's and liberalism's notions of freedom are illusory, because neither conception of freedom can be adequately implemented in practice. Marxism can neither realize the freedom of the creatively producing individual nor create a society based on total freedom that is not at the same time totally oppressive. Similarly, liberalism cannot deliver on its promise to protect the individual from outside interference with her autonomy. The danger of trying to implement the Marxist and liberal conceptions of freedom is that the resulting societies may push individuals into strictly private, isolated lives which are neither free nor autonomous. But there are, as Hannah Arendt points out, alternative conceptions of freedom within both the Marxist and liberal traditions; these

conceptions view freedom and autonomy as something practiced in public rather than in private. This is the type of freedom which informed the revolutions of 1989, and if we want to give liberal democracy a chance of fulfilling its promise of freedom, we must protect the everyday public spaces in which people can practice alternative forms of freedom.

ILLUSIONS OF FREEDOM

by

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INTRODUCTION

Freedom is quite possibly the most used and abused word in current political discourse; we justify wars, we start revolutions, we create governments, all in its name. Most everyone agrees that freedom is good. Why, then, do attempts to implement freedom in practice lead to *less* freedom? Is there not something fundamentally wrong with a conception of freedom that can lead to tyranny? If so, what is a good conception of freedom?

The definition of freedom is in some sense arbitrary: there is no *true* definition of freedom, but one's definition of freedom shapes the type of politics—and by extension, the type of life—that is possible. Thus, I am not concerned here with the personal feeling of freedom, which is equally possible under any form of government, and hence not particularly interesting from a political standpoint. Instead, I will look at political definitions of freedom—conceptions of freedom which underlie and inform visions of a good society.

The definition of freedom one prefers flows from one's understanding of politics: if one thinks of politics as an administrative process of resource allocation, one will probably view freedom as the liberation from necessity, as having access to whatever resources one might need. And if one sees politics as a burden, as something suspicious and slightly sinister that is best left to professional representatives, one will probably see freedom as something private, as the freedom from having to participate in public life. My understanding of politics is quite

different from either of these: I see politics as the public discussion about how we can best live together. This discussion obviously includes questions of resource allocation, but is not restricted to them; moreover, it is conflictual, inconclusive, unpredictable, and sporadic rather than procedural, categorical, and continuous.¹ But politics is not merely discursive: public actions, actions which address the world rather than the individual needs of the actor, are integral to politics.

Hence, I think of freedom not as an absence of boundaries or as a set of behaviors permitted by a constitution, but as something tied to action and to participation in one's own self-government in the public realm. Freedom is the action of an autonomous individual that can only take place in the human world, in the company of other human beings—it is not the complete self-liberation of the isolated individual. It is an individual freedom, but it is not possible without other human beings, and it is in that respect social as well. This freedom exists only when practiced; it cannot be legislated or brought to a conclusion. And because it exists only when it is performed, it requires a physical space where it can appear. This space must be public, so that it is open and visible to all; where there are no public spaces, there can be no politics and no freedom.

The Marxist and liberal notions of freedom, while different, are similar in some ways: freedom is something universal, transparent and knowable, externally imposed, and passive. Both types of freedom—the Marxist total emancipation of

¹ Sheldon Wolin distinguishes this type of politics from normal, bureaucratic politics by calling the former “the political”: “I shall take the *political* to be an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the wellbeing of the collectivity. *Politics* refers to the legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity. Politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless. In contrast, the political is episodic, rare.” Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy” in *Constellations* (vol. 1, no. 1: April 1994), 11. (Italics in original.)

humanity and the liberal democratic procedural constitutionalism—have their origins in the typically modern project of creating a rational society. But the rational society not only requires freedom: it is also intimately tied to the notion of progress. For both Marxism and liberalism, this is a very specific kind of progress, one defined in terms of an epistemology of order: with a systematically organized and categorized knowledge of the world, it would be possible to control nature to such a degree that scarcity and human suffering could be eliminated, and it would also be possible to construct a society without injustice. Marxism tried to rationalize society by pushing progress to its final stage, while liberal democracy tried, and tries, to do it by creating laws and procedures for a fair, equal, and standardized organization of the public realm that guarantees each individual private autonomy. Both versions of freedom are primarily structural: if society is structured right, freedom will follow by itself.

For Karl Marx, social organization brings about total emancipation: create the correct society, and we will all be liberated, absolutely unbounded to do anything we want. After the historically determined revolution, we will have total control over nature, ourselves, and the world. This is the freedom which Lenin, and later Stalin, tried to realize in the Soviet Union. But Marx also has a conception of freedom that is in constant conflict with his total freedom: freedom as creative production, which is the limited freedom of having control over one's everyday life and the power to create one's life as one oneself chooses. Lenin consistently ignored this creative freedom in favor of total freedom: industrialization was more important than self-government. When the Kronstadt rebellion presented Lenin with an actual attempt at self-government, he crushed it. Stalin later took total freedom to its logical extreme:

the control of *everything* would allow the Party to guide the people to a brave new world of absolute freedom. But rather than emancipate the people, Lenin and Stalin's choice of total freedom created lonely, isolated, and almost totally unfree individuals.

My interpretation of how Marx's thought influenced Lenin and Stalin is part of a long tradition of commentary on the roots of revolutionary socialism; my critique of Marxist society is, in some ways, a dialogue with previous critics.

Isaiah Berlin sees Marx as the self-appointed commander of the forces of the proletariat, which will destroy bourgeois society and therefore embody the progress of reason: "Those men alone are rational who identify themselves with the progressive, i.e. ascendant class in their society..."² Hence, Marx devoted his life to clearing the way for proletarian victory. In Berlin's view, the only thing that mattered to Marx was to defeat the bourgeoisie: since morality was always a product of the current social and economic conditions, moral considerations were irrelevant to Marx. Once the bourgeoisie had been destroyed, society could advance and gain conscious control over nature. "True freedom is unattainable until society has been made rational, that is, has overcome the contradictions which breed illusions and distort the understanding of both masters and slaves."³ Although he does not make it explicit, Berlin seems to perceive a fairly direct link between Marx's and Lenin's thinking: they both believed that history inevitably progressed towards a rational society of collective, total freedom, that current society would have to be destroyed to arrive at

² Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 115.

the new one, and that the revolutionary should not think about anything other than how to achieve victory.⁴ To Berlin, Lenin was a reliable disciple of Marx.

Friedrich Hayek, in *The Road to Serfdom*, also does not make explicit the link between Marx and Lenin. His target is not Marx as such, but rather socialism and its obsession with planning. For Hayek, trying to consciously plan society will not rationalize society, but rather cripple it and rob it of its vitality: “To ‘plan’ or ‘organize’ the growth of mind, or, for that matter, progress in general, is a contradiction in terms. The idea that the human mind ought ‘consciously’ to control its own development confuses individual reason, which alone can ‘consciously control’ anything, with the interpersonal process to which its growth is due. By attempting to control it, we are merely setting bounds to its development and must sooner or later produce a stagnation of thought and a decline of reason.”⁵ Hayek sees socialism as inherently totalitarian, suggesting not merely an affinity between socialism and fascism, but tracing Nazism’s origins to the collectivist thought of socialism. So, while he does not discuss Marxism or Leninism at any length, it is clear that Hayek thinks they share the same danger: attempting to plan society completely, thus threatening liberty rather than bringing it about.

Raymond Aron does not see Marx as a philosopher of total planning.⁶ Rather, Marx is the founder of the church of Marxism, in which “the proletariat is cast in the role of collective savior.”⁷ But, just as a religion divides into sects, each with its own

⁴ See *Ibid.*, 114-15, 119.

⁵ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 165.

⁶ “But the fact remains that Marx, like all of his contemporaries, knew nothing of the problems of centralized planning...” Raymond Aron, “The Impact of Marxism in the Twentieth Century” in Milorad Drachkovitch, Ed. *Marxism in the Modern World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 3.

⁷ Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 66.

interpretation of the holy scripture, so does Marxism; the text is the foundation, but it can be interpreted and acted upon in many different ways.⁸ Thus Lenin thought he stayed faithful to Marx when he formulated the idea of the vanguard party pushing the proletariat towards revolution. Aron suggests that Lenin truly believed that he was a Marxist, but that he adapted Marx's theory to fit his own needs. It is not possible, Aron writes, "to assess Marx's share of the responsibility for the way Marxism has turned out. No one will ever know what the Russian Revolution would have been like in the absence of Marx's ideas. ... Logically, all things considered, Marxism should have deflected the Bolsheviks from the road that they took in 1917. As it was interpreted before 1917, Marxism suggested that it would be impossible to establish socialism in a country like Russia, which had not yet passed through the stage of capitalist industrialization. In this sense one can say that the Bolsheviks took power and built their allegedly socialist system *in spite of their doctrine*."⁹ Marxism inspired Lenin, then, but more as a faith than as a theory.

My own approach to the question of Marx's influence on Lenin is perhaps closest to that of Leszek Kolakowski. Kolakowski thinks that Leninism is simply one of many, more or less plausible, ways to interpret Marx and put his theory into practice. Lenin, in other words, is not inevitable, nor is he necessarily the true heir of Marx. Kolakowski sees both creativity and determinism in Marx, and Lenin used the latter to justify his despotism in the name of freedom. According to Kolakowski, "[it] is not true that this state of affairs followed inexorably once Marxism took on a mass

⁸ "Every movement creates its own Marxism, or reads the writings of Marx in its own way, just as every religious sect has its own way of reading Holy Writ, although of course the texts themselves influence the being and consciousness of the reader, and hence the way he reads them." Aron in Drachkovitch, Ed. *Marxism in the Modern World*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-43. (Italics in original.)

character ... One of the main reasons why this situation arose was the monopolizing of theoretical creative thought.”¹⁰ Marx cannot be blamed for Lenin, whose Marxism was as selective as any other interpretation. But at the same time, “the doctrine is not wholly innocent, though it would be absurd to say that the despotic forms of socialism were a direct outcome of the ideology itself. Despotic socialism arose from many historical circumstances, the Marxist tradition among them. The Leninist-Stalinist version of Marxism was no more than a version, i.e. one attempt to put into practice the ideas that Marx expressed in a philosophical form without any clear principles of political interpretation.”¹¹ The Soviet Union may have been built on a Marxist foundation, but other Marxist foundations were also possible.

Because of the politicization of everything, there was no actual political life in the Soviet Union, only a carefully orchestrated spectacle of meaningless ‘politics’, and citizens had no option other than retreating into the realm of the household. Since participation in public life, i.e., being an active member of the Party, was not an expression of one’s freedom, only of one’s willingness to conform to established ‘politics’, one had to leave the public realm for the private realm if one wanted to be able to express one’s individuality and freedom. This mirrors Alexis de Tocqueville’s fear regarding the tyranny of the majority: that we will all “in the end only form very small coteries.”¹²

Liberalism’s freedom is not total or redemptive, but it is also a universal freedom, caught up in a myth of progress. Rather than focus on emancipation, it tries

¹⁰ Leszek Kolakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 163.

¹¹ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth, and Dissolution. Volume I: The Founders* (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 1978), 419.

¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: HarperTrade, 1988), 604.

to rationalize society by creating correct institutions and procedures. Freedom is intimately tied to the institutions of liberal democracy: the structure of government, the electoral and party systems, the constitution, human and civil rights, and so on all guarantee the sanctity of the individual's private space of freedom. But procedural freedom is too passive: it assumes that once liberal institutions are in place, individual freedom will be protected. But there is a difference between freedom and the liberties promised by liberal democracy—speech, association, market, and so on: having all the liberties necessary for freedom does not mean that one is free. To believe that is to make the same mistake that Marxists make when they believe that the way future society is constructed will automatically make us free: no citizens of any society, no matter how well constructed, can automatically be free. Freedom is a continual process of independent self-creation, which inevitably means that one challenges, but does not necessarily reject, the standards of judging provided by society. What is the point of having the liberty to speak if my speech is merely a reflection of the norms of the society in which I live?

Liberalism certainly takes individuals seriously, but these individuals are primarily private; public action is meaningful as a private expression of freedom or as a means for securing private freedom. Liberal individuals are free first and foremost in private, in their free time; they are not self-governing when at work, for example. Liberalism protects private spaces, securing the individual from encroachment by the state, but it is vulnerable to the loss of the public spaces of ordinary citizens. Liberal freedom is guaranteed by the formal construction of social space rather than by informal, everyday public spaces. And formally constructed social space leaves the

door open for managerial politics and Tocqueville's gentle despotism: procedural freedom could very easily be more concerned with institutional technologies—making representative democracy run more smoothly—than with actually creating freedom. The result, as Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill remind us, is an isolation of materialistic individuals, vulnerable to the tyranny of the majority.

The danger which both Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt see when spaces independent of society, in which we can create ourselves as we want rather than as we are told, are lost is that we escape from freedom altogether into the closed circle of the household. The danger of retreating in the household is that we completely give up our freedom for household concerns; we choose material well-being over self-government.

The idea of a total, universal freedom as the ultimate *telos* of politics, creating freedom once and for all time, is illusory and must fail. The idea that freedom can be guaranteed by social institutions and that we are free once these institutions are in place is as dangerous to freedom as the idea that changing the mode of production will necessarily bring freedom. Both cases ignore that freedom cannot be created externally, but is something which can only be created and re-created by each unique person individually—but not in isolation. Because these versions of freedom try to create system-wide freedom, they may actually end up pushing people to live according to their notions of what freedom is—and thus be threats to freedom instead of actual freedom.

The threats to freedom are on the one hand organized destruction of freedom as in the Soviet Union, and on the other hand Tocqueville's tyranny of the majority. It

is as dangerous to use the institutions of government and society to try to force people to be free as it is to believe that people will be able to navigate these institutions on their own without any risk to their freedom. That freedom can only be guaranteed by the citizens themselves when they participate in their own self-government.

There is, however, a tradition of imagining freedom as self-government; these concepts of freedom appear as alternatives to Marx's total freedom and liberalism's procedural freedom—for example, in the theories of Anton Pannekoek and Thomas Jefferson. But above all, the freedom of citizens who govern themselves and who act in everyday public spaces appears in actual practice, unaccompanied by grand theories. In particular, there is a neglected version of freedom that has appeared in all major modern revolutions. This is a freedom of ordinary citizens to enter localized, spontaneous political spaces as equals, and to show themselves to the world in word and deed. This neglected version of freedom exists in the localized, spontaneous public spaces which can protect against the dangers of everyday powerlessness inherent in the Marxist and liberal traditions. This is why understanding the revolutions of 1989 is so crucial, not simply for political theorists, but for anyone who wants to understand the modern world: the people whose resistance to communism made those revolutions possible created small, fleeting political spaces outside the reach of the administrative state—not because they wanted to defy the state, but because they wanted to be free. They did not want to be totally emancipated or simply exchange a deadly bureaucracy for a more benign one; nor did they want to adopt Marx's freedom as creative production. Rather, they wanted to recover what Arendt

calls “the lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition”: the freedom to be a participant in all areas of one’s own life, public as well as private.

According to this understanding, freedom is a never-ending process: one cannot enter political space once and hope to be free for all time. Rather, the creation of freedom is eternally recurring, something in which one engages when one’s freedom is threatened—or perhaps simply because one wants to reaffirm one’s freedom. It is not something which one can take for granted; it is not enough simply to say that one is free—freedom lies in action, in acting as if one is free. Nor can freedom be legislated: freedom cannot be inherent in any political system, whether it be Marxist or liberal. Rather, the political system can, at best, provide opportunities to be free, but the realization of freedom is always up to the individual citizens themselves.

The practice of both the Marxist total freedom and the liberal procedural freedom seem opposed to this notion of freedom—even though it actually appears in both traditions. This spontaneous, localized freedom may appear to be in opposition to the organizational, universalizing freedoms of Marxism and liberalism—and it certainly *is* opposed to the total, authoritarian freedom of the Leninist interpretation of Marx—but that is not necessarily the case. The formal rights and liberties provided and guaranteed at least by the institutions of liberal democracy, but also quite possibly by a Marxist proletarian democracy, are necessary for the freedom of everyday participation in public life. One cannot have public deliberations without the liberty to speak and assemble. However, they are not in themselves freedom—liberal

democracy can, in the worst case, become a tyranny of the majority, just as the dictatorship of the proletariat can easily become simply a dictatorship.

The notion of freedom as self-government is not antithetical to either the Marxist or the liberal tradition, but, as mentioned, is a neglected strand within both traditions. The relation between the dominant versions of freedom in each tradition and the forgotten freedom as self-government is one of tension, not opposition; this freedom is not meant as a replacement for the dominant notions of freedom but as a coexisting alternative to them. It does not operate in the same political space, residing in everyday public spaces rather than the formal space of official politics.

Therefore, the disappearance of local public spaces to which ordinary people have access threatens the existence of this alternative freedom. The lack of everyday political spaces is as much a threat to freedom in liberal democracy as it is in totalitarianism, although in very different ways. If we lose the political spaces in which ordinary citizens can author their own lives, we run the risk that they will retreat completely into the private realm of household necessity, in which it is impossible to be free—thus leaving the door open for various kinds of tyranny. Liberal institutions will fail to protect us from the tyranny of the majority just as certainly as totalitarian institutions will destroy freedom. The risk with the dominant versions of freedom is not only that they do not lead to freedom, but that they make us isolated and lonely, leaving us *less* free than we would be without them.

CHAPTER ONE: MARX'S TWO FREEDOMS

There are two competing notions of freedom in the thought of Karl Marx: there is the often overlooked creative freedom, which empowers individuals to control their everyday lives, and the familiar total freedom, which promises to liberate humanity totally and create a paradise on earth. The latter is more familiar to us because it is the type of freedom that Lenin, and later Stalin, adopted as the foundation of the Soviet experiment. But the notion of total freedom is really only half the story: Marx also believes that individuals would be free if they could control their own production—because production, to Marx, is the activity that makes us human.

Marx thinks that production cannot be free in bourgeois society. I am forced to work simply to survive, and so I become alienated because my production is alien to me. Man in bourgeois society is not fully human because he has lost control over his production. The solution is to overthrow the bourgeois mode of production in a total revolution that would liberate all of man's alienated capacities. Only then, Marx believes, would production be completely free; only when man is able to control completely the world around him, both material and social, will he be able to once again produce freely. By claiming that freedom is both the capacity to create who one wants to be *and* the total control over one's environment, Marx creates a tension between his creative and total freedom. Both are needed for his communist society, but they are also at odds: creative freedom is concerned primarily with the control over everyday life in the present, while total freedom is concerned with the historical

emancipation of all of humanity. Total freedom is the freedom of the gods, capable of doing anything and seeing everything; creative freedom, while not without its problems, is at least a human freedom.

Creative freedom

To Marx, what makes us human is production—so that “[to] be, man must make.”¹ That is, human beings can be distinguished from animals based on any number of inherent qualities, but what makes us human, as opposed to merely animal, is the fact that when we produce, we also express our life.² Unlike animals, we are not bound by instinct when we manipulate the world around us. It is not, then, the act of production itself which sets us apart from animals, but the fact that we are free to produce as we wish: human production is *human* because we are mentally free to produce whatever we want.³ This is why even if the cells of the best bee are better constructed than the buildings of the worst architect, the architect’s buildings are still superior: unlike the bee, the architect imagines the building before he builds it.⁴ Human production discloses the agent in a way that animal production does not. Using her will, a human being consciously builds the world around her; an animal produces not to build a world, but to survive. For Marx, we express who we are when we produce.

¹ Kostas Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Techne in the Thought of Karl Marx* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 123.

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 31-32. For Marx, human production is not merely “the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are.” (Italics in original.)

³ Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 292, 294.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Volume I* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 178.

Human production is a *creative* act: each produced object is unique, because even if it is materially identical to other objects, it is the result of a unique process of human imagination. Man's ability to create his own world, to freely create objects, is a specifically human activity.⁵ This ability of man to create his own world is a source of freedom to Marx: since we express our lives through production, we are free when we are free to produce according to our own unconditioned will. This is the freedom I call Marx's "creative freedom"—it is a creativity which implies conscious and free choice.

Creative freedom resides in the individual: if anyone other than myself decides what I should produce, then I am not free—my production is always the result of my own desires, inclinations, and decisions. Even if I value the community higher than myself and produce only for the good of the community, that choice is, if I am free, strictly my own. One way of thinking about Marx's creative freedom is that we are free when we have control over our everyday lives, when we are not trapped in relations of dependency. Creative freedom allows me to create or produce myself as I, self-aware and unencumbered by external pressures, want to be.⁶ If I am not free to produce as I wish—if I cannot express my life—then I have lost control over the activity that makes me human. Someone or something else decides what I should do in my everyday life, and when I lose the power to decide what I should do—in

⁵ István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 158. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes that man "duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he himself has created." Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), 76.

⁶ Marx thinks that when we exercise our creative freedom, we are not alienated, and are hence acting according to our highest nature: "free, conscious activity is man's species character." Further, it is because man is a conscious being "that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity." *Ibid.*, 75.

particular, what I should produce—in my everyday life, it is impossible for me to be free.

Production not only makes us human; it also shapes the way in which we live together: “Human society is fundamentally a society of production, a set of ‘social relations’ that men enter in the activity of producing.”⁷ Marx thinks that the mode of production—the tools and methods by which we as a society produce—will determine human relationships and, on an even more basic level, human consciousness. One’s mode of life depends on one’s mode of production—we are what we produce, and also how we produce. Marx believes that if we study the material conditions in which people live, we can also find out their consciousness. Depending on the limitations that every mode of production puts on us, we will see the world differently. “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is ... directly interwoven with the material activity” of human beings: when Henry Ford started mass production of his model Ts, he did not just change the way we produce things; he also changed the way in which we think.⁸ And Marx claims that the change in consciousness that comes with a change in the mode of production is not just a surface change; it changes my consciousness at the very deepest level of my being. Consciousness, then, is not “pure”; it is from the very beginning “‘burdened’ with matter.”⁹

That means that Marx rejects the notion of an unchanging human nature. Rather, human nature is made by man’s activity—so that a transformation of his

⁷ Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 12.

⁸ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 37. A little later, Marx makes this point again, this time more succinctly: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

activities will transform his nature as well.¹⁰ However, Marx does not believe in the infinite malleability of man; he thinks that the essence of human experience is production.¹¹ There is, then, a tension in Marx between the self-creativity of human nature and the fundamental essence of man. On the one hand, Marx believes that changing the mode of production will change social relations and human consciousness. On the other hand, he also thinks that it is in our essence to produce—in fact, it is what makes us human. Marx refuses to acknowledge that production as an expression of creativity might not be essential.¹²

There is a reason for this refusal: according to Marx, when we lose control over our own production, we also lose the power to express our lives—we lose control over creating who we are. Since we express our lives through our production, when we can no longer freely decide what to produce, we can also no longer decide who we shall be; who we are becomes increasingly constructed by the mode of production. In a situation where we have *no* control over what we produce, as in the case of Marx's proletarians under capitalism, we become completely constructed by

¹⁰ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 148. In particular, Mészáros is holding out the hope that “today's egoistic human nature will change in due course.”

¹¹ Some Marxists who want to claim that Marx indeed does believe in the infinite malleability of man make a distinction between his definition of human nature and his claims about the essence of man. This distinction is not particularly helpful; even if we admit that human nature and the essence of man are not the same thing, it is not clear how man can have an innate, unchangeable essence at the same time as he is infinitely malleable. Marx, in fact, cannot allow man to be infinitely malleable without, at the same time, denying the alienation of the working class. To be alienated, one must alienated *from* something: alienation automatically implies that there is a human essence from which one can be alienated; without such an essence, one cannot be alienated, because one would always truly be what one had become. Without a human essence—namely, the fact that we express our lives in production—Marx would not be able to claim that the proletariat as a whole is alienated from its creativity; proletarians might be oppressed, but they could never be alienated. If there were no true essence, any change in self or consciousness would be just that: change.

¹² It is not clear why production must be the only essential human activity: why is production the privileged, unchangeable activity? There is no reason why we should not be able to express our lives or be creative in ways other than by manufacturing objects. For Marx, these other expressions of creativity depend on the social relations of a given society, and are therefore conditioned by a particular mode of production. But if other expressions of creativity are historically contingent, why not creativity as expressed in production?

the mode of production, with *no* self to call our own. Because who we are is more or less constructed by the mode of production, what we think of as an individual will also vary with the mode of production—an individual in feudal society is very different from an individual in bourgeois society.¹³ Morality and how we relate to the world depend on the society in which we live, but nonetheless shape who we are and how we think—“social relations *create* the individual.”¹⁴

Marx does have a point here: the less control we have over our activities in the world, the less control we also have over who we can be. In this sense, Marx’s creative freedom is not so much about creativity and independence in production as about creativity and independence in general: if we do not have control over our everyday lives, it will be very difficult to be free.¹⁵ However, Marx *does* equate freedom with creative production, so that liberation will be “the liberation of man from a kind of work which destroys his individuality, which makes him into a thing.”¹⁶ But creative production is *not* freedom—or at least not the exclusive sphere of freedom. Limiting creative freedom to the realm of production ignores expressions of freedom and creativity that do not leave material traces. Also, it makes creative freedom isolated, impossible to achieve in the company of others.

Marx does not distinguish between laboring to uphold the biological life process and working to produce a world of things.¹⁷ He claims that production is

¹³ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 88-89.

¹⁴ Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 66. (Italics in original.)

¹⁵ One should keep in mind that this is not an argument for unlimited, unbounded freedom: the inhabitants of Hobbes’s state of nature, for example, can hardly be said to have control over their everyday lives.

¹⁶ Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York: Felix Ungar, 1966), 49.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 87.

always social—that it is absurd to think of production outside of society.¹⁸ But the creative production needed for Marx’s creative freedom is always done in isolation: if it were done socially, together with others, we would not be able to exercise complete control over it, and it would therefore cease to be free.¹⁹ The creative producer must produce alone, in isolation; “[only] when he stops working and his product is finished can he abandon his isolation.”²⁰ Marx wants production to be social because it is an expression of our life, and to express one’s life in isolation seems ridiculous, but the only production that can be social is the mindless labor of sustaining life—which is instinctual, performed merely for survival. Marx’s notion of freedom as creative production, then, must be false, or at least incomplete. Social production can only be the labor which preserves our lives, and which does not distinguish us from animals, while creative production can only be done in isolation, separate from other human beings. If we are to express our life through our production, we must do so not in the act of production itself, but in the act of displaying the objects we have produced in

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 85. Marx writes: “When we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development—production by social individuals.”

¹⁹ This raises the question of Marx’s conception of the individual: social production *is* possible, it might be argued, if we understand Marx’s ideal individual as a member of a collectivity. The control exercised over the environment, then, would not be individual creative production, but collective creative production. However, this simplifies Marx’s vision of the individual under communism too much: communism certainly is collectivist, but in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx describes communism as leading to “the all-round development of the individual.” This is *not* simply a collective freedom, but a strongly individual freedom as well; we do not realize our collective freedom together, but each of us realizes our individual freedom more completely because we are now laboring together. This is the meaning of the slogan “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” Robert C. Tucker, Ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 531. Similarly, in the sixth of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx describes the complicated relationship between individual and society: “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.” Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 423. Certainly, Marx replaces the individual with a trans-individual subject (the proletariat) whose viewpoint provides epistemological privilege. This does not mean, however, that individuals per se are dissolved and deprived of dignity within a “mystically” defined party. Even a critic like Popper admits this in the conclusion to *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

²⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 162.

public—including the production of ourselves. Marx does not want his creative freedom to be a freedom of the isolated individual, because he realizes that it would be humanly meaningless, but he would then also have to acknowledge that that freedom goes beyond the realm of production—which he does not do. By restricting creative freedom to the realm of production, Marx cripples that freedom, making it insufficient to capture the wide range of free, creative expressions of which human beings are capable.

All that is solid melts into air

Since Marx thinks that production defines our humanity, he can claim that production, and more specifically, the mode of production, the way we produce, determines all social relations—at least when production is externally controlled and not creative, as all production until now has been. Even the simplest economic categories presuppose a population that produces in specific social relations—and this includes a certain type of family, state, and so on.²¹ Everything in society—politics, laws, religion, morality, even consciousness—depends on the mode of production of that society. In short, “every society fundamentally *is* its mode of production.”²² Even art, the archetype of creative production, will always be specific to our particular mode of production; we can imagine things a certain way only with a certain mode of production. This is why the *Iliad* is not possible with the printing press, or Achilles with powder and lead.²³ The example of art is important to Marx because art symbolizes creativity, and since the mode of production determines which types of art

²¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 101.

²² Robert C. Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* (New York: Norton, 1969), 15.

²³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 110-11.

will be possible, it also determines how we can create things as ordinary people. That is, if even art cannot overcome the mode of production and create freely, what chance does non-art production have? As long as there is such a thing as a mode of production, there will also be limits on our creativity; there will be boundaries on our thinking.

Since Marx thinks that the mode of production determines all social relations, he can claim that it will also determine which class will be the ruling class. Since the mode of production determines what it will be possible to imagine as well, Marx can also claim that “[the] ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force.”²⁴ These ideas are only the expression, in terms of ideas, of the dominant material relationships, and will therefore be the ideas which establish their dominance. The dominant class will always turn its own interest into the interest of the entire society and make the ideas of its dominance appear to be eternal, universal truths.²⁵

This is why Marx is so disdainful of the institutionalized liberties of liberal democracy: extending these liberties to all classes can at best emancipate those classes politically, but it can never make them truly free.²⁶ Political struggles cannot give us back control over our everyday lives; rather, they are merely “illusory forms”

²⁴ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 61. (Italics in original.)

²⁵ Ibid., 62. Marx writes that “each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled ... to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.”

²⁶ In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx writes that political emancipation “may not be the last form of general human emancipation, but it is the last form of human emancipation *within* the prevailing scheme of things.” Marx, *Early Writings*, 221. (Italics in original.) That is, political emancipation is as good as it gets under the current mode of production, but what Marx really wants is human emancipation—the complete emancipation of humanity in all spheres of life, including production.

of the real class struggles.²⁷ As a proletarian, I know that the bourgeoisie is oppressing me, but rather than try to overthrow capitalist society, I will try to get more power within that system by gaining the right to vote. But living in a democracy and having the right to vote is not a guarantee that I am free to Marx—if the division of labor keeps me from creating and producing what I want, then I am still unfree. That is why Marx thinks that bourgeois freedoms are virtually useless: they are all reflections of the particular society, or rather, mode of production, to which they belong. What is the point, Marx asks, of having all these grandiose ways of being free in the political realm if I cannot be free in my everyday life? Why should I even care that I have freedom of speech if all my waking hours are spent trying simply to put food on the table? Institutionalized liberties are meaningless to Marx if we cannot control our everyday life.

And under the current mode of production, we have no control over how we live our lives: we are forced to labor, and we are forced to specialize.²⁸ Marx believes that as long as we do not voluntarily choose how to divide labor between us but are forced into a particular division of labor, “man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape.”²⁹ In other words, *any* division of labor will be alienating, because it eliminates one’s choice of activity—I can no longer choose to hunt, fish, or herd sheep as I want, but

²⁷ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 45.

²⁸ We are, of course, always forced to labor; otherwise we would not be able to survive. However, Marx often uses the word “labor” even when he is discussing production in general; to minimize confusion, I will use the word “labor” when Marx does so as well.

²⁹ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 45.

must become a hunter, fisherman, or shepherd. The division of labor does not just alienate each individual laborer; to Marx, the division of labor is “the social expression of self-alienation.”³⁰ As my skill becomes more and more specialized, my ability to be self-sufficient decreases, and I become more and more dependent on others to provide me with a job in which I can use my skill and with goods which I now have to buy, since I no longer have the skill to produce them.³¹ That is, I become more and more alienated from my ability to produce freely, from my true essence. I do not produce creatively, and so I am not free.

Thus, production is alienated in bourgeois society, because it is not free. What I make in capitalist society are not the things I want to make myself, but things that others tell me to make. The product of my labor is a power that is alien to me and independent of me; it is “labor which has been congealed in an object.” It is the “objectification” of my labor, the loss of my reality—alienation.³² My creative act, labor, which is the act by which I shape the world around me, has been appropriated by the capitalist. So instead of my shaping the world with my labor, the world shapes my labor, and therefore also me. I cannot escape this: the more I put into my labor, into my production, the less I put into myself, into my inner life. Rather than read or

³⁰ Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 185.

³¹ In the *Grundrisse*, Marx uses the example of weavers to illustrate this point: originally, people did a little bit of weaving on the side to add to their main income. But as consumption increases, they weave more and more, because it is more and more lucrative to weave. Eventually, Marx says, people will stop weaving at home, and start weaving in a factory. And when they do that, they will have lost the skills they had before, and will not be able to go back to what they were doing previously. This is a gradual process which probably takes places over several generations, but the effect is that people who used to be fairly self-sufficient have become dependent on the capitalist to provide them with jobs. The weavers “become dependent on selling, on the *buyer*, the *merchant*, and ultimately produce only *for* and *through* him. He bought their labor originally only by buying their product; as soon as they restrict themselves to the production of this exchange value and thus ... must exchange their labor entirely for money in order to survive, then they come under his command, and at the end even the illusion that they *sold* him products disappears.” Marx, *Grundrisse*, 510. (Italics in original.)

³² Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 69.

go out and discover the world, I sell myself to the capitalist for forty hours a week. I literally belong to someone else when I am at work, and even though I put my life into the objects I produce, those objects do not belong to me, but to someone else. My labor does not belong to me, but to someone else. The greater my production, the less I am myself. The activity of labor is alienating because it is self-denying, not self-affirming. The worker does not develop his body and mind; he destroys his body and withers his mind. “His labor is ... not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is ... not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it.”³³ The worker’s labor is his loss of self, his loss of creativity. Also, because we have to restrict ourselves to the types of work we can find in bourgeois society, and because we become dependent on the capitalist economic system, we narrow our options for how we can live our lives—which means that we can no longer be free.

Marx believes that the alienation of labor dehumanizes the workers, because they can no longer “produce in a specifically human manner.”³⁴ Alienated man, because his labor is reduced to mere animal labor, ceases to be fully human; he stops being real and becomes an abstraction.³⁵ It does not matter to him or to anyone else what he does or who he is; he is man in the abstract, because he is completely determined by the mode of production. It is irrelevant to the laborer whether we weaves or assembles cars; the specific work that he does is not important to him as work, only as a means to put food on the table. To him, life begins when the workday

³³ Ibid., 72. (Italics in original.)

³⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth, and Dissolution. Volume I: The Founders* (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 1978), 139.

³⁵ Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 134. See also Marx, *Grundrisse*, 104-05.

ends—at home, at the table, in bed.³⁶ Since work has become merely a means to overcome necessity, the actual content of the work is not important—which is why it cannot be creative, but is abstract and alienated.³⁷

For the alienated worker, the only need is the need for money: hygiene, clothing, and shelter no longer matter. “Even the need for fresh air ceases for the worker.”³⁸ In this sense, his senses no longer exist, either in human or animal form. The only thing that exists for the worker is day-to-day survival, and the only way he can survive is through money. For the worker, capitalism is a kind of ascetic ideal; the ideal worker is the “*ascetic but productive slave*,” the thrifty bee who works hard but has no needs. The cardinal doctrine of capitalism is self-denial, “the denial of life and of all human needs ... The less you eat, drink and read books; ... the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save*.” The more you save, the more you have. And the more you have, the less you are. Or to turn it around: “[the] less you *are*, the more you *have*; the less you express your own life, the greater is your *alienated* life”—the greater is your bank account, your alienated being.³⁹ The more stuff you own, the less you need to develop a unique personality for yourself. All the things you can no longer do, your money has to do for you. When labor is alienated, money replaces creative freedom.

Since, according to Marx, our imagination is limited by the activities possible under a particular mode of production, it is dangerous when that mode of production

³⁶ Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, in Tucker, Ed. *Marx-Engels Reader*, 205.

³⁷ In a sense, creative work has become the labor of upholding life; or rather, this type of labor has taken over the productive function formerly fulfilled by creative work. Arendt discusses this shift at length in *The Human Condition*.

³⁸ Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 119. (Italics in original.)

restricts our activity into a *single* activity. Capitalist society gradually reduces the types of work we can do, and the ones we *do* have lack meaning to us. Capitalism does more than just narrow our options; it also narrows our reality, narrows the scope of our mental horizons. I can no longer be a Homer who imagines gods and heroes; I have to be just another faceless laborer, slaving away at a job I hate to sustain a life that no one, not even I, cares about. I am reduced to an animal, completely alienated from my capacity for creative production, and like an animal, my death has no impact on the memory of the world. In bourgeois society, I am meaningless—only a member of the animal species man, and completely interchangeable with any other laborer.

When labor is abstract, it does not matter *who* performs the labor; all that matters is the workers' labor power. This labor power is bought and sold—through the system of wages—turning it into nothing more than a commodity. By extension, the laborer himself also becomes a commodity—a thing which can be bought and sold like any other thing.⁴⁰ Workers become merely the conscious parts in a system of machinery, and the machines at which they work are not a means for them to transmit their capacity for creative production unto the produced objects; rather, it is the machines' capacity for production which is transmitted to the produced objects. Machines are not instruments, which we use to enhance our own powers of production, to make the worldly object correspond more closely with the imagined object; rather, “it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso.”⁴¹ It is not the worker which has control over how the

⁴⁰ Kolakowski writes that the worker's “brains and muscle, his physical energy and creative powers are reduced to a state in which only their exchange value counts for anything.” Kolakowski, *Main Currents 1*, 282.

⁴¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 693.

machine works, but the machine which controls and regulates the activity of the worker. The machine does not adapt to the movements and rhythm of the worker, but the worker has to adapt to the movements and rhythm of the machine. The ideal worker under capitalism, Marx says, is taught from childhood “to adapt his own movements to the uniform and unceasing motion” of the automatic machine.⁴² As a result, the workers themselves become like machines, or rather, they become mere appendages to the machines. The workers’ senses are used only for utility, to serve the purposes of the machines; the workers do not use their senses for any other of the infinity of *human* purposes.⁴³ The workers have to adapt even their bodies to the machines: they become “crippled monstrosities” whose bodies change to become better suited to work at the machines.⁴⁴ For Marx, working with machines makes us something other than human; it makes us cyborgs.

Because the workers lose control over not only what to produce but also how to produce, because they are forced to become cyborgs, they completely lose control over their lives—they lose the capacity for creative production. Marx is not simply making an argument about the limiting influence of machines on factory workers; it is possible to extend his argument to the influence of technology on our everyday life. With the ever-expanding development of machines, our lives are becoming more and more ruled by technology. In particular American cities are constructed more for cars

⁴² Marx, *Capital 1*, 421.

⁴³ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 202.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital 1*, 360. See also Ollman, *Alienation*, 138. One can apply Arendt’s description of modern motorization to Marx’s thoughts about machine labor as well, so that if we look at the factory workers from a point far enough removed from the earth, machine labor appears to be some sort of “biological mutation in which human bodies gradually begin to be covered by shells of steel.” Arendt, *Human Condition*, 322-23.

than for pedestrians,⁴⁵ meaning that such a seemingly simple human activity as moving around becomes almost impossible without relying on technology. It is not simply that technology more and more limits the options I have for how to live my life—I cannot work, because there is a power outage and I cannot turn on my computer, or I cannot eat, because the stove is broken—it is also that I start living my life *through* technology. I let the gadgets I own live for me. I used to have friends; now I have chat room buddies. I used to imagine things; now the television does that for me. I used to have a personality; now my choice of which brand to buy signals who I am. This is not to say that technology does not do wonderful things for us; it allows me to travel around the globe in an instant, and it allows me to talk with my family on the other side of the world. But as Freud points out, without technology, I would have no need to travel around the globe, nor would I ever have left my hometown so that I now have to talk with my family on the phone rather than in person.⁴⁶ Technology makes us gods—it allows us to do things that were previously the exclusive domain of the gods—but it makes us “prosthetic gods.” When we put on all our equipment, we are truly magnificent, but without that equipment, those artificial limbs and organs, we are as weak, or weaker, than we were before.⁴⁷ Machines are not human, and they do not function like humans—so when we live through our machines, when we let our machines decide how we should live our lives (even though the machines themselves have no consciousness), we move away from the human world into the world of machines.

⁴⁵ With, for example, narrow or non-existent sidewalks, freeways ending right in the downtown area, the replacement of parking garages for street-level store fronts, the absence of car-free esplanades and parks, and so on.

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

But technology is not the only development in modern society which weakens the control we have over our everyday life: in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes how the “army of officials” of the centralized bureaucracy is like a “parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores.” This parasitic body has made itself ubiquitous, forcing all the administered souls into “absolute dependence; ... the state enmeshes, controls, regulates, superintends and tutors civil society from its most comprehensive manifestations of life down to its most insignificant stirrings.”⁴⁸

In other words, bourgeois society makes itself a condition of everyone’s existence: the bourgeois state bureaucracy infiltrates the very foundations of our being, and the bourgeois economy spreads to every corner of the globe, creating new dependencies.⁴⁹ The bourgeoisie creates a universal society, and with it, universal needs. I will no longer be satisfied with the water from the well; I must drink Coca-Cola. I can no longer survive simply farming my own plot for myself; to survive, I must now sell my grain so I get money to satisfy my new universal needs. And even if all I want is to farm my own plot of land, I cannot just do that, because I have to buy grain and fertilizer, and the state will monitor my production of grain to make sure that it gets its taxes to hire more people to make sure that I am paying my

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 61-62, 121-22. Furet perceptively compares Marx’s description of the French bureaucracy to the gentle despotism of Tocqueville’s tutelary state at the end of *Democracy in America*. See François Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 77-78.

⁴⁹ “All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. ... In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1948), 12-13.

taxes.⁵⁰ The bourgeoisie, by the very structure of the society it creates, makes it literally impossible to be self-sufficient.

But dependence is not the only thing that is alienating about life in bourgeois society. The bourgeoisie also makes the world completely fluid, completely impossible to live in because there is nothing fixed to hold on to. In all earlier societies, society was always divided into complicated systems of rank; there were fixed social hierarchies. The bourgeoisie has not done away with class antagonism, but it has simplified it; the bourgeoisie makes society split up into only two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. By doing so, the bourgeoisie has destroyed all old social relations; it has, “wherever it has got the upper hand, ... put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’”⁵¹

That is, all the old standards of judgment disappear, and the only standard we are left with is money; for Marx, capitalism makes us unable to put any other value on the world and the things in the world than a monetary value. We can put an exact value on everything, which means that we can compare things which are utterly incomparable—like the value of a pair of sneakers and the value of breathing fresh air in a national park.

⁵⁰ In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, James C. Scott describes how, among other things, the growth of the state and an increased dependence on the world market led to an growing sense of powerlessness, and ultimately rebellion, among peasants in South-East Asia. See James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

⁵¹ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 11.

Earlier, we did not depend completely on our mode of production to make sense of the world, but now we can only make sense of the world if we see it through the eyes of money. We can no longer take anything for granted, because its price can change overnight, and with the change in price, its place in the world—and ours—changes. “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air.”⁵² The bourgeoisie can survive only through a process in which the only thing which is constant is that everything changes; if the world is not constantly in motion, the bourgeoisie cannot constantly invent new needs for us, and the market would wither and die. “In this world, stability can only mean entropy, slow death, while our sense of progress and growth is our only way of knowing for sure that we are alive.”⁵³ The bourgeois world is one completely without boundaries, a nihilistic world in which everything (except standing still) is permitted. It is a world in which it is only possible to live timelessly in the present, making it impossible to create a common world with any sort of permanence. There is nothing to hold on to, because everything is fluid, and so it almost literally becomes impossible to live in bourgeois society, because everything changes faster than we can adapt to it.

Total freedom

Life in bourgeois society, then, is fragmented and fluid, making those who live there blind—in the sense that they are incapable of seeing reality for what it really is: a

⁵² Ibid., 12.

⁵³ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 95.

totality.⁵⁴ Bourgeois society has robbed us of our capacity for creative freedom, robbed us of our wholeness, and a fragmented person cannot know reality correctly, because reality can be known only if one looks at it as a totality. Thus, “it is perfectly possible for someone to describe the essentials of an historical event and yet be in the dark about the real nature of that event and of its function in the historical totality, i.e. without understanding it as part of a unified historical process.”⁵⁵ Because of the extreme division of labor in bourgeois society, where workers’ skills are so specialized that they adapt their bodies to the machines at which they work, it becomes impossible to view reality as a totality.⁵⁶ The necessary result, according to Marx, of the bourgeoisie’s increasing control over the details of human life is that the proletarians will become completely alienated. They will lose their capacity for creative production, and become universal.⁵⁷

This universality will become the weapon of the proletariat: because the proletarians are universal and abstract, they can see history and reality as a totality, whereas the bourgeoisie can only see it as fragmented. The proletariat can “see society from the center, as a coherent whole. This means that it is able to act in such a

⁵⁴ As Yack points out, the concept of totality is intimately connected to the idea of mode of production: “To justify explaining all social phenomena in terms of the mode of production, one must treat society as a ‘totality,’ as a coherent, integrated whole informed by a particular character.” Yack, *Longing for Total Revolution*, 302.

⁵⁵ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 12.

⁵⁶ Lukács writes that “specialization of skills leads to the destruction of every image of the whole,” meaning that man in bourgeois society will not be able to see the forest for the trees, as it were. *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁷ That is, because the worker has become abstract, because the only thing that matters is his labor power, which is completely exchangeable with that of any other worker from any other country in the world, he has lost all human specificity; he is no longer a local individual, because he does not possess any qualities that are particular to any locality—rather, he is universal. See Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 46-47.

way as to change reality.”⁵⁸ For Marx, it is not enough simply to improve the conditions of life for the workers—giving them more reasonable working hours, better working environments, higher wages, more democratic power, and so on—because he thinks that they would still be blind to reality and would still be dependent on the capitalist economy. Even if they are politically free, they are still not free as Marx defines freedom, because they are still defined by being wage laborers in bourgeois society, not by being independent, creative producers.

Like Hamlet, Marx believes that the present time is “out of joint”; he thinks that the alienation of the workers is so complete that they can become human again only if time itself is made whole once more.⁵⁹ In bourgeois society, I live a double life; I am both a citizen and a private individual. Even if I am politically emancipated, my personality will still be split between the categories to which I belong: religious man and citizen, owner and citizen, worker and citizen, “*living individual* and ... *citizen*.”⁶⁰ A strictly political emancipation can never create a *whole* person, someone whose personality is not fragmented into several alienated and antagonistic parts. And this is why Marx dismisses human rights: he thinks that they at best can help us to become politically emancipated, but will always fail to help us become humanly emancipated. Human rights are always just the rights of egoistic man in the private sphere, that is, of the “individual withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his

⁵⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 69.

⁵⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New international* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁶⁰ Marx, *Early Writings*, 221. (Italics in original.)

private desires and separated from the community.”⁶¹ They are always the rights of man in bourgeois society.

Man in bourgeois society does not control his own production. To be able to control their own production, the workers have to change the bourgeois mode of production in its totality. Marx wants a *total* change of the mode of production, and hence also of the world, because only by changing everything, only by annihilating the society which by its very existence keeps the proletarians in chains, will the proletariat, and with it the rest of mankind, be able to be truly free for the first time in history. This is human emancipation, which liberates human beings *totally*; we are not just liberated economically or culturally, but in every aspect one could possibly think of—we have to be emancipated totally, because the mode of production is overthrown totally.

Marx’s revolution is not only total; it is also predetermined. Marx believes in scientific determinism—i.e., the idea that prediction means predetermination. And since Marx claims that his historical materialism is scientific, his “scientific” findings must also be infallible prophecies.⁶² But Marx fails to take into account the fundamental unpredictability of the realm of human affairs: we cannot predict what the consequences of our actions will be—every human action moves in a boundless chain reaction of other actions and reactions. Since anything is possible in the realm

⁶¹ Ibid., 230.

⁶² But, as Popper points out, “[there] is no reason why we should believe that, of all sciences, social science is capable of realizing the age-old dream of revealing what the future has in store for us. This belief in scientific fortune-telling is not founded on determinism alone; its other foundation is the confusion between *scientific prediction*, as we know it from physics or astronomy, and *large-scale historical prophecy*, which foretells in broad lines the main tendencies of the future development of society.” Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Volume II: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 85-86. (Italics in original.)

of human affairs, since human life is at its heart unpredictable, history, in the sense of humanity's actual progression through time, cannot be predetermined. In other words: "*History has no meaning.*"⁶³ However, Marx needs history to have a meaning; if there were no meaning in history, he could not claim that the alienated proletariat would be able to see history and reality as a totality. It is this point of view that allows the proletariat to become the chosen instrument of the revolution, destined to emancipate humanity because it alone can correctly interpret history.⁶⁴ Marx is only interested in the historical role of the proletariat, not in the individual lives of its members—with all their struggles, desires, dreams, endeavors, accomplishments, and failures. To Marx, the actual proletarians' fight for better working conditions is not interesting: the proletarians are all alienated, so their efforts to improve their lives within bourgeois society are irrelevant—those efforts are interesting only insofar as they assist or promote the inevitable historical revolution.⁶⁵

That revolution, or more specifically, the communist society which is the necessary result of the revolution, will return the workers' true humanity. Since the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 269-70. (Italics in original.)

⁶⁴ The advantage of the proletarian standpoint is that it "provides a kind of privileged access to both past and future: that it yields *knowledge* of the dynamics and direction of history and of the general (though not the specific) direction of the future." Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 146. (Italics in original.)

⁶⁵ However, it is important to keep in mind that the proletarians are *not* actually dehumanized and alienated; they never have been and never will be. Bad working conditions and lack of control over one's life is not the same as dehumanization. Being oppressed or not living up to one's potential is not the same as being dehumanized—it is patronizing to claim that those who happen to live under oppression are not fully human, that their thoughts and feelings are not as worthy as the thoughts and feelings of those who happen to be free. To be dehumanized, one must be denied to possibility of being human. Being denied the possibility to produce freely does not deny one's humanity. Dehumanization can only occur with the extinction of plurality—that is, with the elimination of individual personality, so that each person becomes nothing more than a collection of predictable reactions, making every human being completely exchangeable for every other human being. In other words, dehumanization is possible only when all human beings have become identical—mere things. To accomplish this, one must dominate human beings completely, something which is really possible only in concentration camps. See the section on total domination in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

workers have been *totally* alienated and *totally* constructed by the mode of production, the *total* revolution will liberate them *totally*; communism “is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.”⁶⁶ Although the revolution will certainly liberate man’s alienated capacity for creative production, the freedom which Marx thinks that the revolution will create is not simply his creative freedom. Rather, it is a *total* freedom, a freedom which will not only allow each individual to produce freely, but which will resolve every single problem that has ever plagued humanity.

To achieve total freedom, to return to their true humanity, human beings must once again become social.⁶⁷ Human beings in bourgeois society are isolated, atomistic, egoistic individuals, but after the revolution, those same individuals will be “free to differentiate themselves in the context of a truly social existence.”⁶⁸ Paradoxically, the individual can be free only by becoming social—“freedom here does *not* mean the freedom of the individual.”⁶⁹ However, Marx is not anti-individual; he would claim that communist society is the only one in which human beings can

⁶⁶ Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 102. (Italics in original.)

⁶⁷ Apparently, we discover “the *us* before the *me*.” Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 44. (Italics in original.)

⁶⁸ Ian Forbes, *Marx and the New Individual* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 179. The problem with this argument is that if one wants to keep Marx’s definition of man’s essence as creative production, the only productive activity in which human beings can differentiate themselves, namely, creative fabrication, is not social (see above). Only the labor of upholding life is social, but that is not creative production; it is merely the overcoming of necessity. Individuals will be “free to differentiate themselves” in a social, or rather, political context only in a public space with formal equality—but such a space does not require the total liberation of *all* of humanity’s alienated capacities. It requires political freedom, the freedom to say and think what one wants, not complete material, mental, and physiological equality.

⁶⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 315. (Italics in original.)

truly be individuals, because they would for the first time be able to control their everyday lives—which is something they cannot do in bourgeois society. Communist freedom is self-realization on the level of the species, not on the level of the individual.⁷⁰

To Marx, individuals as such do not matter; he is perfectly willing to sacrifice the current generation of workers in the name of total emancipation. The only thing that matters to Marx is the end result: total liberation.⁷¹ It is the structure, the system, that counts; humans can be explained by the system under which they live (i.e., what their mode of production is), and to make the system free—by overthrowing the mode of production—is to make the people in it free. Freedom has to be instituted on a grand scale, a total scale—it cannot begin by liberating individuals, but must begin by liberating the system. But the system accounts only for “normal” individuals: “Under unspecified commonsensically understood normal conditions, normal individuals will do what people with guns tell them to do. Normally, *but not always*; because persons vary in their conceptions of who they are and what they will tolerate.”⁷² Revolutions are made by unusual people, people who stand up against the people with guns. In Marx’s account, they are not free, because they have not, cannot have, liberated themselves from the bourgeois mode of production. But if they are not free, what are they? They are not alienated or dehumanized, because they have lost their chains and

⁷⁰ What exactly this *means* is an open question: it is not clear how it would be possible to emancipate the entire human race in a single stroke without at the same time denying the plurality of human experiences. Marx is not particularly troubled by this dilemma, since his total freedom is “conceived of not as individual freedom here and now, but rather as a collective salvation in history.” Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁷² Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 105. (Italics in original.)

attempted to win the world; they must be self-realized on some level, even if not on the level of the species. But what if there is no true human essence? Why should we assume, with Marx, that there is a real, true, essential self that has been corrupted by alienation rather than believe that we really do start, if not as a *tabula rasa*, at least as a slate where the writing we put on it is the writing that counts—that we truly are what we become, as Marx’s creative freedom suggests? If there is no essential human nature that can be liberated, Marx’s total revolution is doomed to fail; it will not bring freedom, only more oppression, forcing people into categories according to their supposed true essence, categories in which they ultimately do not, cannot, fit. Because it is total, Marx’s revolution negates human plurality; it is not creative, but “is forced to produce results in order to negate more and more completely.”⁷³

Marx, of course, thinks that human plurality is possible only after the revolution, when our capacity for creative production has been liberated. Once all the boundaries that currently hold us back from our limitless creativity have been removed—that is, with the advent of communism—our production will become happy and spontaneous.⁷⁴ The newly liberated creative production will be reflective of our true selves.

The revolution does more than just de-alienate man and unleash his creative potential, though; it *fundamentally transforms* him. He gains a new consciousness, but that is not all; the revolution, by freeing us from the slavery of objectification,

⁷³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 251.

⁷⁴ Tucker describes production under communism as follows: “Productive activity will become joyous creation. Man will produce things spontaneously for the sheer pleasure it gives him to do so, will develop his manifold potentialities in every sphere. He will cease to be divided against himself in his life-activity of material production, and will no longer experience this activity as activity of and for another alien, hostile, powerful man independent of him.” Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth*, 157.

literally makes us see with new eyes and hear with new ears. It ushers in “the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities: the eyes and ears of the de-alienated people of the future [will] be completely different from the crude inhuman eyes and ears of the dehumanized people of the present.”⁷⁵ So the communist revolution quite literally creates a *new man*, a new type of human beings that are superior to the old, decrepit humans in every way—they even have new senses. These new human beings are not plagued by the particularities of bourgeois society: the new man has no fundamental attachments that cannot be removed without also destroying his personality. In bourgeois society, these attachments—place, family, nation, ideology, tradition, or whatever they might be—weigh us down; they tie us to the present, to the past, to those around us. But the new man is, in a sense, reborn: he is free to choose his attachments; he can choose exactly who he wants to be; he is free from the chains of history.

But Marx’s new man is impossible without the possibility of unbounded productive power, and Marx does indeed believe that the perpetual dependence of bourgeois society “will be transformed by [the] communist revolution into the control and conscious mastery” of the awesome productive powers of the bourgeois mode of production.⁷⁶ This productive power is, like man, not fully realized in bourgeois society; in communism, however, the full potential of bourgeois production will be unleashed. With “the emancipation of the immensely potent productive forces inherent in modern machine industry from the ‘fetters’ of capitalist wage labor, there

⁷⁵ Walicki, *Kingdom of Freedom*, 48. Marx himself puts it the following way: “the *senses* of the social man are *other* senses than those of the non-social man.” Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 88. (Italics in original.)

⁷⁶ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 49-50.

will very soon be created a material abundance so great as to satisfy all proper human needs.”⁷⁷ Scarcity, then, will be overcome by increased production. At the same time, Marx acknowledges that human beings are insatiable, a point illustrated by his story in *Wage Labor and Capital* about the occupant of the biggest house in the village being satisfied with his house until a palace is built next to it. But these are contradictory assumptions: “To assume ... as Marx does that men are insatiable, on the one side, and that scarcity can be overcome by increased productivity on the other, are incompatible premises.”⁷⁸

Marx’s answer to this conundrum is control; he wants us to be able to control our production and our lives—which makes us free. But that is not enough: to be able to control our lives as completely as Marx wants us to, we have to be able to control nature—and not just partially, but totally. If man is to produce completely freely, he must have complete control, he can have *no* obstacles in his path—including ones posed by nature.⁷⁹ The reason we can exercise this type of control in communism is that communist man is a social being: each individual has the entire productive capacity of humanity at her fingertips.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Tucker, *Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, 29.

⁷⁸ Gouldner, *Two Marxisms*, 216.

⁷⁹ Within the limits created by the laws of nature, of course; Marx was not naïve enough to believe that we would be able to transcend the laws of nature. But that does not change the fact that Marx believed that nature should be ruled, controlled, mastered: “The power of nature cannot be broken entirely. *Nature can only be ruled in accordance with its own laws.*” Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), 98. (My italics.) It is telling that the question of the limits of man’s control over nature appears at all.

⁸⁰ Obviously, there is a logical flaw here: if the control we have over nature is derived from the fact that the means of production now serve social needs rather than personal greed, the amount of control that each individual can exercise over the means of production is by necessity quite limited. Marx solves this by claiming that communism eliminates the difference between the common and the particular interest. In other words, he resorts to Rousseau’s general will: “Communism subjects external forces to the power of the ‘*united* individuals,’ which means, for Marx, the general will of all individuals, rather than the collection and distillation of the opinions of particular individuals. According to Marx, any institutional or personal means of collecting and distilling opinions would

Marx promises us a modern garden of Eden, a place where the liberated powers of bourgeois production will grant us total control of everything, total vision, total knowledge, total peace, total freedom, and total happiness. Each person has *total* control over everything that influences her life, including nature. Simply put, Marx wants to eliminate all human suffering, and he believes that human freedom will be the inevitable result of that elimination. By linking freedom to the liberation from suffering, he makes the overcoming of necessity an indispensable requirement for freedom.⁸¹ But these occur in two separate spheres: necessity is linked to the biological life process, while freedom is a political phenomenon: one can be hungry without being oppressed, and one can be oppressed without being hungry. Marx's failure to decouple freedom and necessity means that he does not see that a revolution cannot liberate humanity from necessity; a revolution is a *political* tool, and it cannot liberate men from the need to labor—it cannot create abundance.⁸² Marx wants the revolution to do two incongruous things: it should emancipate man's alienated capacity for creative production, and it should eliminate scarcity. But the liberation from oppression—the precondition for Marx's creative freedom—is separate from the liberation from labor—the total control over nature which is the precondition for

reintroduce some fortuity and chance into the forces that control our lives." Yack, *Longing for Total Revolution*, 265. (Italics in original.)

⁸¹ Again, this derives from Marx's inability to discriminate between labor that upholds life and creative work: his revolution will not only liberate creative production, it will also liberate production to overcome necessity. But since the latter can never be creative, the liberation of it which the revolution brings about is actually a liberation *from* this type of labor, i.e., a liberation from necessity. But overcoming necessity is not freedom, because we do not gain anything (except perhaps time) when we no longer have to labor to uphold life: the liberation from labor sustaining life does not in itself mean that we are more free to express our lives, to produce creatively—in reality, it only means that we are dead (or have become gods). As he makes clear in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx knows that we can never overcome necessity, but he still goes on to say that we should control nature “with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, ... human nature.” *Capital III*, in Tucker, Ed. *Marx-Engels Reader*, 441.

⁸² See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 90-91, 112.

Marx's total freedom. The former can be addressed by a revolution, but the latter must be addressed through administrative or technological means.

The two freedoms in conflict

There is, then, a tension between Marx's creative freedom and his total freedom, corresponding to the tension between man's ability to create his own world and Marx's deterministic belief in the inevitability of the revolution.⁸³ Marx defines freedom as having control over one's everyday life, and more specifically, over one's production, and he pushes this notion of control to the extreme, wanting total control over everything. His creative freedom and his total freedom are not independent of each other: Marx thinks that total freedom is needed in order to liberate man's capacity for creative production totally—so that he can produce *completely* freely. This tension is present in Marx's revolutionary project as well: "Marxism is not attempting simply to understand society; it does not only predict the rise of a revolutionary proletariat that will overturn capitalism, but also actively mobilizes persons to do this. It intervenes to change the world. The problem is that if capitalism is indeed governed by lawful regularities that doom it to be supplanted by a new socialist society (when the requisite infrastructures have matured), why then stress that 'the point is to change it'? Why go to great pains to arrange capitalism's funeral

⁸³ Some interpreters of Marx, most notably Althusser, dismiss this tension as an "epistemological break" between the young Marx and the mature Marx. Although this claim is not without its merits—the vocabularies and categories of the young and mature Marx are very different, and the young Marx undoubtedly focused more on the liberation of man's alienated creativity while the mature Marx focused primarily on why the contradictions within capitalism would inevitably lead to total revolution—it ignores the tension that *is* present in all of Marx's works. For a summary of his argument about the "epistemological break," see Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 33ff.

if its demise is guaranteed by science?”⁸⁴ Marx is torn between his belief in man’s capacity for world creation—which includes the ability to “make” history—and his belief that man is, like a leaf, helplessly swept along by the winds of history.⁸⁵ But just as Marx’s creative freedom is problematic because it is rooted in production, rather than, for example, action in the public realm, so is Marx’s more voluntaristic interpretation of history, that it can be “made,” problematic because it relies on a metaphor of fabrication. If history is a process of fabrication, it must, like other processes of fabrication, have an end, a finished object—that is, an ultimate society. The present and the infinite past then become irrelevant, because all that matters is the ultimate society at the end of history. Events themselves are meaningless when history has an end—they have a meaning only insofar as they help “build” the ultimate society: “single events and deeds and sufferings have no more meaning here than hammer and nails have with respect to the finished table.”⁸⁶

When presented in reality with a choice between creative freedom and total freedom, Marx always chooses the latter. In *The Civil War in France*, his essay on the Paris Commune, Marx describes how the Commune was made up of municipal councilors who had been elected by universal suffrage in the wards of Paris and how the Commune quickly took over all functions previously held by the state. But unlike

⁸⁴ Gouldner, *Two Marxisms*, 32.

⁸⁵ The beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* captures this tension: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 15.

⁸⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 79-80. Arendt is also skeptical about similar claims outside of Marxism: “Whenever we hear of grandiose aims in politics, such as establishing a new society in which justice will be guaranteed forever, or fighting a war to end all wars or to make the whole world safe for democracy, we are moving in the realm of this kind of thinking.”

the state, the Commune was, on Marx's account, truly a government by the people for the people.⁸⁷ As such, it tried to ease working conditions in the present—for example, abolishing night work for apprentice bakers and prohibiting employers from levying fines meant to reduce the workers' wages. He hints at the fact that the Commune, “which [broke] with the modern State power,” was an entirely new form of government.⁸⁸ It was a direct democracy, in which each municipality would administer its own affairs and send deputies to a national delegation. Power would be decentralized, residing in the local communities rather than the centralized state.

However, Marx does not think that local autonomy was the true novelty of the Commune. Rather, it was a completely new form of government because it was “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor.”⁸⁹ Once labor has been emancipated, everyone is a proletarian, and political injustice—which is rooted in class struggle—ceases to exist. Marx cannot escape trying to turn the Commune into a precursor of total revolution, even though he himself clearly describes it as a political form in which everyday people have an increased amount of control over their lives by reconstructing the public realm. The Commune was not a utopia, and Marx acknowledges as much, but he still claims that it is a link in the inevitable chain of events leading to total revolution.⁹⁰ While he provides plenty of evidence that the Commune is a new *political* form of self-

⁸⁷ Marx writes that “nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchic investiture.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 74.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁰ “The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men.” *Ibid.*, 77.

government, Marx gives no indication, other than his own assertions, that the Commune would indeed be the political form through which to emancipate labor.⁹¹

Similarly, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx criticizes the Paris proletariat for failing “to rediscover revolutionary greatness in itself” after its June insurrection of 1848 was crushed. Instead, he ridicules the workers for engaging in “*doctrinaire experiments, exchange banks and workers’ associations,*” that is, for trying to be self-sufficient under the conditions of bourgeois society—for adopting his creative freedom rather than his total freedom.⁹² But even if the revolution of 1848 failed to bring about communism, it is still the seed from which the total revolution will grow. Marx describes the revolution as dormant, waiting for the bourgeois state to complete itself, so that the state will be the single target on which the revolution can concentrate its fury when the historical moment has come for it to erupt.⁹³ For Marx, the proletarian revolution is *both* creative and total; it is self-critical and self-limiting while also destroying the old world completely and giving birth to an entirely new one.⁹⁴ But the creative, self-limiting revolution is always a messenger and nothing more; it heralds the coming of total revolution and the daybreak of total freedom.

⁹¹ Marx captures his ambivalence about the meaning of the Commune in a single sentence: “If the Commune was thus the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly national Government, it was, at the same time, as a working men’s Government, as the bold champion of the emancipation of labor, emphatically international.” *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹² Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 24. (Italics in original.)

⁹³ “But the revolution is thoroughgoing. It is still journeying through purgatory. It does its work methodically. By December 2, 1851, it had completed half of its preparatory work; it is now completing the other half. First it perfected the parliamentary power, in order to be able to overthrow it. Now that it has attained this, it perfects the *executive power*, reduces it to its purest expression, isolates it, sets it up against itself as the sole target, in order to concentrate all its forces of destruction against it. And when it has done this second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exultingly exclaim: Well grubbed, old mole!” *Ibid.*, 121. (Italics in original.)

⁹⁴ Marx writes that “proletarian revolutions . . . criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the

Conclusion

The reason Marx chooses total freedom over creative freedom is that he does not allow creative expressions of the self to exist outside the sphere of production. Freedom is not possible until after the revolution: once Marx defines his creative freedom as an *absolutely unbounded* capacity for creative production, creative freedom becomes possible only after total freedom has already been instituted. To be able to produce completely freely, one must first have complete control over every aspect that could possibly affect one's life. Marx disregards political—as opposed to productive—expressions of freedom for the simple reason that he thinks politics is determined by the mode of production; all politics are a reflection of the dominant ideas of the ruling class. Therefore, politics is “*impotent*.”⁹⁵ Since he cannot see that we can express our life in ways other than through creative production, Marx dismisses the political sphere as unimportant to human freedom. After the revolution, all spheres of human activity which could get in the way of freely expressed production will have to disappear—which is why Marx hopes “for the ‘withering away’ of the whole public realm.”⁹⁶

Marx's rejection of politics stems from his confusion of politics and society: in the *Grundrisse*, he writes that “[the] human being is in the most literal sense a *zōon politikon*, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.”⁹⁷ But being a political animal and a social animal are

earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals—until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!” Ibid., 19.

⁹⁵ Popper, *Open Society* 2, 119. (Italics in original.)

⁹⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 60.

⁹⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 84.

not the same: the reason human beings can individuate themselves in politics is because the political realm is one of formal equality—we all have equal rights and obligations in the body politic. The social realm, however, is different: material, class, and other inequalities are factors in the social realm—which they are not in the political realm.⁹⁸ The social realm is not a realm of equality, and it should not be; to enforce absolute equality in the social realm would deny human plurality and make individual existence quite literally meaningless.⁹⁹ Because Marx fails to make the distinction between the political realm and the social realm, he sees politics as a function of social relations, and believes that freedom requires equality in the social realm just as it does in the political realm.

Marx does not recognize that we can express our life in word and deed just as well, if not better, than we can through production. His emphasis on production leads him to glorify violence, because in all processes of fabrication, one must apply a certain measure of violence to the object in order to shape it—whereas *logos*, speech, is completely irrelevant in the process of material production.¹⁰⁰ By disregarding expressions of freedom in the public realm, in the sphere of human interaction, Marx ignores the fact that alleviation of oppression and greater autonomy within the current system—in short, a greater control of one’s everyday life in the here and now—are worthy goals.¹⁰¹ When Marx denies the power of politics to effect change, he also denies the legitimacy of the suffering in the present: the workers should not fight

⁹⁸ At least in the strictest sense: my vote does not count more if I have more property, just as my right to make myself heard does not depend on material wealth.

⁹⁹ This obviously does not mean that the social realm should be one of great *inequalities* either; it is very difficult to be free without a certain measure of material security.

¹⁰⁰ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 23.

¹⁰¹ Popper, *Open Society 2*, 126.

oppressive working conditions and low wages, because those are merely symptoms of the larger disease that is plaguing bourgeois society. Instead, the workers should sacrifice themselves for the well-being of future generations. Rather than supporting workers in their attempts to establish creative freedom in the present, Marx opts for a dream about the future collective salvation of all of humanity. Lenin, in his attempt to create communism, makes the same choice.

CHAPTER TWO: SOVIETS AND ELECTRIFICATION

Lenin and the Bolsheviks inherited Marx's conflict between self-governing, creative individuals and a meticulously controlled society preparing its subjects for total freedom—and like Marx, they favored total freedom over creative freedom. On the one hand, the Bolsheviks' ultimate goal was the total emancipation of all human beings and the creation of a new, self-governing man—the *homo sovieticus*. On the other hand, Lenin believed that the only way to total emancipation was for the revolutionary vanguard to impose socialist consciousness on the masses—which requires total control over everyday life through the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Following Marx, Lenin saw these as two separate stages of the revolution and, like Marx, he did not see the antagonism between the two stages. In the first stage, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the masses must be ordered and controlled if they are not to devolve into bourgeois consciousness. But in the higher stage, communism, each person rules himself and is perfectly just of his own accord. That is, during the dictatorship of the proletariat, the masses cannot be trusted to make *any* decisions for themselves—not even about their everyday lives—for fear that they will slow down progress towards communism, but once in communism, the masses are suddenly capable of complete self-government without even the need for some kind of state. The reason Lenin thought this transformation was possible is because he confused self-government with self-administration: even when he wanted to give all power to the soviets, he did not want to give them power in a governing capacity, but in an

administrative capacity. In the dictatorship of the proletariat, people will themselves be able to administer the state, and as the state slowly withers away, people will continue administering themselves. This, however, is not the same as self-government—which Lenin did not realize for the simple reason that he did not take politics, our public discussion about how to live in this imperfect world, seriously.

Since Lenin failed to distinguish between politics and administration, there is a constant conflict between spontaneity—action initiated on one’s own accord—and control, both in Lenin’s theory and in Bolshevik practice. Lenin believed that communist man would govern himself, and that ordinary people would be capable of running the state during the dictatorship of the proletariat; but at the same time, he explicitly wanted to “combat spontaneity,” since he thought that any thoughts or actions not guided by the correct revolutionary theory would inevitably lead to bourgeois consciousness. And in practice, the Bolsheviks saw electrification as controlling—the rationalization of society by giving man complete control over his environment—while it was also emancipatory: it would give people more control over their everyday lives. Similarly, Lenin recognized the soviets as organs of self-government, but he and the Bolsheviks treated them merely as instruments of the revolution, and later of the dictatorship of the proletariat; the soviets were transformed from representative organs into a tool for the transmission of theory.

Because they were blinded by theory into thinking that they had to control the path towards the final goal of communism, Lenin and the Bolsheviks could not allow any alternative paths—not to mention the creation of self-government by ordinary people in the present. When the Kronstadt sailors rebelled in the name of the soviets,

the Bolsheviks crushed the rebellion; the lesson Lenin learned from Kronstadt was not that the dictatorship of the proletariat took the power over their lives out of the hands of everyday people but that more party unity and even greater control over society was needed. With Kronstadt, it becomes very clear that the Bolsheviks had chosen total freedom—which needs total control before it can allow self-government—over actual self-government. Lenin was not interested in political freedom as such; he wanted social emancipation, the complete overcoming of necessity and the withering away of the political realm. Seduced by the fantasy of a perfect society, he ignored the small spaces of freedom—the soviets—that were right beneath his nose: he wanted to control the unpredictability of the human realm, and so took refuge in the predictable order of a world run by technical experts and social engineers: the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The dictatorship of the proletariat

That Lenin favored a centralized, ideologically unitary party running the state over a system of local soviets is hardly accidental; after all, the theme of a revolutionary vanguard taking power and teaching correct consciousness to the mass of the proletariat runs like a red thread throughout his writings. But Lenin did not want power simply for the sake of having power: his goal was always to create a society that would lead to true communism—the total emancipation of humanity.¹

¹ There are alternative explanations for Lenin's actions, of course: perhaps Lenin was an heir of the Jacobin tradition rather than of Karl Marx, so that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were merely repeating the French Revolution. But as Marx himself writes in *The 18th Brumaire*, although revolutionaries “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes,” he goes on to point out that this borrowing from the past serves “the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, nor of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its

However, Lenin put far more emphasis on the initial or “lower” stage of communism—the dictatorship of the proletariat—than he did on the final or “higher” stage. According to Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary because it prepares the masses for communism—it inculcates them with the correct proletarian consciousness. Lenin distrusted everyday people’s ability to govern themselves through the soviets because he distrusted their ability to think—or more precisely, he distrusted their ability to think *correctly*. Lenin believed in a very simple epistemology: there is an absolute, objective truth, and Marxism is the only way to reach it. Actual proletarians, who are not trained in Marxist theory, are blinded by their own empirical conditions and therefore do not possess correct consciousness.² Left to themselves, the workers will only be capable of developing bourgeois consciousness—they will not be able to develop socialist consciousness.³ Since the masses are blind to the world as it really is, they need someone who can guide them towards the objectively true society: communism. That guide is the revolutionary vanguard—i.e., Lenin and the Bolsheviks—who will be the leaders of the dictatorship

ghost walk about again.” Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 14, 16. The identification with old revolutions may be a source of confidence, but each revolution is its own new beginning. The Bolsheviks may embody many Jacobin traits, but they are not actual Jacobins: the Bolshevik idea of the importance and structure of the Party was new, and Bolshevism was a marriage between the authoritarianism that existed in Marx’s own writings and the Russian tradition of militant authoritarian conspiratorialism. Lenin, after all, was a great admirer of Chernychevsky, and his idea of a vanguard party of militant intellectuals had been developed a generation earlier by Peter Tkachev, the human bridge between Nechaevism and the intelligentsia. See James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 401, 410; Alain Besançon, *The Rise of the Gulag: Intellectual Origins of Leninism* (New York: Continuum, 1981), 155-56.

² Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 294.

³ Vladimir Ilich Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 105-07. Lenin himself puts it as follows: “Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is: either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course ...” (Italics in original.)

of the proletariat, teaching the masses the right consciousness—namely, proletarian consciousness.

This need to impose correct class consciousness overrides all other considerations, because “[without] revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.”⁴ For the Bolsheviks (as for most other socialist groups at the time), the world was defined strictly class along class lines, echoing Marx’s dictum in the *Manifesto* that “[the] history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”⁵ Since the world is defined by class, not by individuals living in it, the Bolsheviks quite naturally chose control and order over spontaneity and self-government: all differences of opinion are the result either of lingering bourgeois forces or of insufficient class consciousness, and should be met with repression and reeducation, respectively.⁶ The same is true within the party as well: even though Lenin knew that separate groups would form within the party, he thought that such factionalism was a disease, since there can be only one true opinion.⁷ Hence, the dictatorship of the proletariat is always justified, since it teaches us to overcome bourgeois differences of opinions with true proletarian consciousness.

While he dismissed differences of opinion as irrelevant, Lenin was acutely aware that “the majority of the population in the ordinary peaceful course of events is excluded from participation in the life of public politics.” That is, bourgeois society

⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵ Robert C. Tucker, Ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 473.

⁶ A. J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 73-74.

⁷ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth, and Dissolution. Volume II: The Golden Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 392-93. Kolakowski writes: “Believing as he did that all differences of view, not only on questions of major principle and strategy but also in matters of organization, in the last resort ‘reflected’ class antagonisms, [Lenin] naturally regarded his opponents in the party as ‘carriers’ of some kind of bourgeois deviation or as symptoms of bourgeois pressure on the proletariat. As to the fact that he himself at all times represented the true and best-understood interests of the proletariat, Lenin never had the slightest doubt.”

creates myriad restrictions on the expressions of freedom in everyday life, effectively excluding the poor from the polity.⁸ This would seem to indicate a concern on Lenin's part for a lack of efficacy which he perceived that a majority of citizens feel in their everyday lives. However, Lenin did not want to give everyday people a chance to participate actively in 'public politics' because, while he was aware that they are not free in their everyday lives, he did not trust them with politics—they would only acquire bourgeois consciousness. Lenin was very explicitly concerned with masses of people, not collections of individuals—and masses cannot rule themselves, because mass man is generic, incapable of original thought and action. Once Lenin had labeled the rank and file 'masses,' he could safely ignore them; they were now only a tool in the class struggle, the irresistible tidal force which will overwhelm bourgeois society with numbers. The masses are "a huge, formless, milling crowd without any cohesion," and they must be formed and led by the revolutionary vanguard, just as sheep are led by their shepherd.⁹

Since the masses cannot act correctly on their own, the revolutionary vanguard has to think for them and tell them what to do. But while the revolutionary vanguard should think for the masses, they are not completely free to think for themselves. Lenin allowed the revolutionary intellectuals (as well as the revolutionaries recruited from the working class) to act only if their actions correspond to his version of the truth. He wanted his revolutionaries to understand the

⁸ Vladimir Ilich Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 78-79. Lenin's list of these restrictions includes limited suffrage, the structure of representative institutions, the exclusion of the poor from public buildings because of their appearance, and the organization of the capitalist press. Although each restriction may seem petty, the sum total of them amounts to the exclusion of the poor from active participation in politics and democracy.

⁹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 150.

laws of history, but he would not allow them to come to any conclusions other than the ones he himself had reached. In a sense, the revolutionary vanguard should be trained, not educated: their training is instrumental, learning the fundamentals of Marxism but not being able to critique it. The reason for this is simple: Lenin's epistemology disallows alternative interpretations, which means that any conclusions other than the true ones he has already reached must be false, and can thus be dismissed. Even within the revolutionary vanguard, there is no space for anything except obedience to the received truth; the party is the only legitimate source of political action.

In *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin stated that correct consciousness could only be brought to the workers from without by the vanguard fighters—that is, by the party with “the most advanced” (i.e., correct) theory.¹⁰ The spontaneous struggle of workers in the present for higher wages and better working conditions does nothing to further socialism, because the workers are fighting for themselves, not for future generations.¹¹ Hence, the task of the professional revolutionaries is to “combat spontaneity”—the more spontaneously the masses act, the more the revolutionaries need to organize them.¹² That the workers belong to the proletariat and that the revolutionaries are sprung mostly from the bourgeoisie is irrelevant in this context: what matters is having the correct proletarian consciousness, and “the party with its ‘correct’ theoretical consciousness embodies the proletarian consciousness irrespective of what the real, empirical proletariat may think about itself or about the

¹⁰ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 92, 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹² *Ibid.*, 107, 118-19.

party.”¹³ The party can claim to embody proletarian consciousness because it understands the laws of history and society, and can see the emancipatory historical role of the proletariat in a way that the proletariat itself cannot.

That role is first and foremost the creation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, in which the masses acquire the correct consciousness—eventually allowing them to create communism. But before they can be free and self-governed under communism, they have to be controlled and organized under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Since spontaneity leads to bourgeois consciousness, the vanguard party must control the consciousness of the masses to make sure that they do not stray from the correct path. To be able to exercise this type of control, the vanguard party must, almost by necessity, be highly centralized and rigidly controlled from above. First, Lenin’s epistemology leaves no room for dissent—since that dissent is bound to be false—implying that the central committee, which knows the correct theory, understands the needs of the localities better than the localities themselves do, and should therefore determine their activities. Second, since any display of spontaneity might lead the masses down the wrong path, the vanguard party must not only rigorously control the masses, but must also organize the entire lives of the masses.¹⁴

This total organization of human life is intended to create freedom—that is, to set the stage for a world in which human beings are capable of controlling their own fates. Unlike Marx, however, Lenin did not concentrate on the emancipation of our creative capacities once we are liberated from contingency; his freedom leaves out the

¹³ Kolakowski, *Main Currents 2*, 390. See also Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 158.

¹⁴ Walicki, *Kingdom of Freedom*, 296-97. Although Walicki describes Lenin’s organization of the party, it is clear that Lenin wanted society under the dictatorship of the proletariat to be as rigidly controlled and organized as the party should be before the revolution. The theme of organization is also a recurring theme in *What Is to Be Done?*

development of creativity and focuses almost exclusively on freedom from want.¹⁵ Because he was concerned only with overcoming necessity—which can be done only through the dictatorship of the proletariat—Lenin was willing to sacrifice freedom to bread: as the name implies, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not meant to be a free state. The disappearance of spontaneous human relations was not a problem to Lenin, since such relations necessarily hamper progress towards communism. This does not mean that Lenin wanted his future society to be as rigidly controlled as the dictatorship of the proletariat: he believed that once he had eliminated contingency and overcome necessity, people would spontaneously act according to his notion of true consciousness—something which they previously must be disciplined to do. In other words, once the social question has been solved, people will automatically become just.¹⁶

For Lenin, the goal was everything, and the goal of creating a communist society justifies any means used to reach that goal. The “final ideal should not influence in any way the struggle to achieve it. The means used in that struggle should be ruthlessly violent, unrestricted by any rules except one: disciplined subordination to the vanguard party.”¹⁷ If the Bolsheviks would have to use terror to mold the masses in the desired way, then they should use terror—which they did

¹⁵ Ibid., 278.

¹⁶ Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 80. Lenin writes: “Only in communist society ... will a truly complete democracy, democracy without any exceptions whatever, become possible and realized. And only then will democracy begin to *wither away* because of the simple fact that, relieved of capitalist slavery, of countless horrors, savageries, absurdities and infamies of capitalist exploitation, people will gradually *become accustomed* to observing the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for ages and repeated for thousands of years in all copybooks—and to observing them without force, without compulsion, without subordination, *without the special apparatus* for compulsion which is called the state.” (Italics in original.)

¹⁷ Walicki, *Kingdom of Freedom*, 304.

quite willingly.¹⁸ If law stood in the way of the Bolsheviks, then they should act outside the law—and they would always be justified in doing so, because the goal of human emancipation justifies all human costs. Lenin was even less concerned than Marx with human beings in the here and now; to him, even the most enlightened in the present—that is, members of the Bolshevik party—should submit completely to the party, deriving their entire identity from it. All differences of opinion within the party, all tolerance for other ideologies, is treason.¹⁹ Difference and tolerance slow down progress towards the final goal, and are therefore diseases that should be rooted out.

The control of the dictatorship of the proletariat, then, is justified by the ultimate freedom of communism—but that is not all. The total control over society is also justified by another, implicit assumption of Lenin's: the rationalization of human life. Lenin whole-heartedly believed that Marxism is a science, and that it can be used to predict and construct the most rational—i.e., the best—of all human societies. The idea that a completely rational society is better than the current society is not new; Russia has a long history of this type of “administrative utopia.”²⁰ To Lenin, the vanguard party needed to control everything to ensure that everyday life is as rational as possible. Of course, what the Bolsheviks perceived as a rational life is not necessarily a life better suited for human beings—or even very rational. A controlled environment is hardly more rational than an uncontrolled environment—control is not the same as rationality. Lenin and the Bolsheviks dreamt of a society which is

¹⁸ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 790.

¹⁹ Walicki, *Kingdom of Freedom*, 318-19.

²⁰ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 19-24.

transparent and legible to the centralized party, where every operation can be overseen and understood. This is not a dream of rationality, but a dream of visual simplicity, in which standardized human relations are considered rational because they are easier to oversee, codify, and above all, control. It did not really matter to the Bolsheviks if ordinary people are unable to live in their supposedly rational society; if they cannot, that is because they have not yet gained communist consciousness, and not because the Bolshevik society is unlivable.

The needs of actual people were less important to the Bolsheviks than the creation of a brand new, rational world, and the means for building that world were science and technology. Lenin believed that the use of machinery in all aspects of life would increase productivity.²¹ Presumably, increased productivity would make life better, but Lenin did not discuss technology in terms of improving everyday life, only in terms of increased productivity. He believed that technological progress is a good in itself, that a society with more advanced technology is necessarily a better society. This myth of progress led the Bolsheviks to “a kind of fetishism of the machine, of technology.”²² But it was not only technology that would help create a new world: since the old, bourgeois world was so thoroughly corrupt, even the memory of it had to be eradicated. The Bolsheviks continued the practice that had begun after the

²¹ For example, Lenin thought that machinery in agriculture increased productivity—see Vladimir Ilich Lenin, *The Agrarian Question and the "Critics of Marx"* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 36.—and he pushed for innovation in the field of agricultural mechanization. The results were more often than not failures, as in the case of the electric plow, which was supposed to symbolize the Bolshevik revolution in agriculture (because it was a machine) but was practically useless. After a few years, the program died quietly. Jonathan Coopersmith, *The Electrification of Russia, 1880-1926* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 166.

²² Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 92.

February Revolution of renaming streets, squares, and towns—often to such an extent that people had trouble learning all the new names.²³

The new world will function automatically, but before we get to the freedom of the higher stage of communism, we have to live in the ordered society of the lower stage of communism. Lenin was not concerned with self-government in the dictatorship of the proletariat, but with accounting and control: “Accounting and control is the *main* thing required to bring about the smooth working, the correct functioning of the *first phase* of communist society. All citizens are transformed here into hired employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers. *All* citizens become employees and workers of a *single* all-people state ‘syndicate’.”²⁴ The syndicate is ordered, rational, supervisable—and it virtually runs itself.²⁵ In the syndicate, all routines will be standardized, all behavior will be guided by rules, so that we continuously discipline ourselves to act as if we already live in a fully communist society.²⁶

In this new world, we will all be social: private man will disappear, replaced by communal, communist man. The tension between private man and the collective is reflected in the two major architectural movements of early Soviet Russia: the Disurbanists and the Urbanists. The Disurbanists believed that excessive “collectivism” would only be oppressive; instead, they wanted a decentered world in

²³ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 66; Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 57-60.

²⁴ Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 90-91.

²⁵ In Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch-22*, Milo Minderbinder runs a syndicate that violates the laws of thermodynamics in a way similar to Lenin’s, and which illustrates the absurdity of Lenin’s plan: “You’ll be paying money to yourself when you buy from the syndicate, since you’ll own a share, so you’ll really be getting everything you buy for nothing. Doesn’t that make sense?”

²⁶ Lenin sees the syndicate “as a technical net whose mesh will confine workers to the appropriate routines by its rationality and the discipline of habit.” Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 163.

which the citizens' private dwellings are surrounded by small-scale communal spaces. They thought that "[only] in the collective of space ... can the individual come into full play." The Urbanists, by contrast, wanted to centralize and communalize all aspects of everyday life on a massive scale. In their most extreme schemes, they imagined the entire population living in massive residence buildings, eating in communal dining rooms, raising all children in separate child-rearing centers, and so on. All menial domestic tasks would be "industrialized," leaving both men and women free to labor without distractions. For both the Disurbanists and the Urbanists, the very construction of space would shape consciousness.²⁷

Of course, most of the Bolshevik plans for creating a new world were never implemented. Some, however, were, and one of these in particular came to symbolize the power and superiority of the Bolshevik vision of society: electrification.

Electrification

Lenin famously claimed that "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country." But these are concerned with two completely different, and often contradictory, spheres of life: soviets are organs for self-government whereas electrification, at least in Lenin's view of it, is a tool for the rationalization and ordering of life, a technical instrument for creating the new man of communist society. Yet the two are not unrelated: Lenin believed that all economic and social problems could be overcome through technological progress, and as society progresses—when material productivity and the discipline of the people increases—

²⁷ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 193-200.

the state will wither away, and people will become capable of self-government.²⁸ Electrification had a privileged status to the Bolsheviks, because it promised a new tomorrow—it was one of the cornerstones of the Bolshevik vision for a new and transformed society. In the new society, the machine would triumph over nature; with the help of machines we could overcome necessity and rule over the natural world which is rightfully ours to control.²⁹

An important part of controlling nature is the rationalization of human life: with electrification, that rationalization is quite literally quantifiable. It is now possible to calculate exactly how much energy goes into baking a loaf of bread, or producing a tractor, or lighting a city block.³⁰ With quantification, life also becomes easier to oversee—or so it would seem. The relevant question is shifted from “How good are the citizens’ lives?” to “How much electricity do the citizens have?”—a much easier question to answer, not to mention remedy. It does not matter if the citizens are miserable—that is only because of their lingering bourgeois consciousness, anyway—what matters is that their lives are more rational now that they have electricity.

²⁸ Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 86-87; Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks: The Intellectual and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 457-58. Lenin writes: “The state will be able to wither away completely when society fulfils the rule: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,’ i.e. when people have become so accustomed to observing the fundamental rules of social intercourse and when their labor becomes so productive that they will voluntarily work *according to their ability*.” (Italics in original.)

²⁹ Coopersmith, *Electrification of Russia*, 147, 151; Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 52.

³⁰ The quantification of the quality of life could sometimes become quite bizarre. One Soviet author lists the possibilities of a single kilowatt-hour of electricity: it “enables people to polish 250 square meters of floor space, to wash 60 kilograms of clothes, to shave 400 persons or to play 100 gramophone records.” Why anyone would want to shave 400 persons or play 100 records is not explained, nor is it explained how being able to do so improves the quality of life; it is simply assumed that more electricity means a better life. V. Y. Steklov, *Electrification in the U.S.S.R.* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 69.

Electricity also has powerful symbolic value: Lenin believed that electricity would sweep away the dirt of the present and create a clean future. Electricity implied hygiene, sanitation, bright lights, not only literally, but also for society: it “stood for heat and shelter in a land of arctic climates, light and knowledge in a land of darkness and bigotry, energy and economic growth in a land of poverty and sloth.”³¹ For Lenin, electricity was magical: it is silent, it can be transported over long distances, and machines running on electrical power run “more smoothly and precisely” than steam-powered machines.³² Like the society he envisioned, electricity appeared perfect to Lenin: it is completely calculable and extremely precise—it is ordered and predictable in a way that other power sources are not. It does not suddenly flare up, but hums along quietly, almost invisibly, at an even level. Even the distribution of electricity parallels Lenin’s vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat: it is legible because it can be centrally monitored, and it can also be centrally controlled.³³ The electrical power emanates from, and can be cut off by, a central power station, which gives the party organization more control over the distribution of electrical power than do localized power sources like firewood or peat. Electricity, in short, represents the triumph of the party organization in controlling not only nature but also the nature of how the citizens live.

The Bolsheviks thought that electricity was more scientific than other power sources, and hence that it was less tainted by the bourgeois mode of production. Since science was rational to the Bolsheviks, it was also neutral: “They assumed that technology was neutral toward particular interests; ... ends could be deduced from

³¹ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 49. See also Coopersmith, *Electrification of Russia*, 153.

³² Lenin, *Agrarian Question*, 46.

³³ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 166.

science, while reason, married to power, could accomplish marvels thought impossible under the tsars.”³⁴ Science, not politics, could build the new world, because while politics was unpredictable and uncontrollable, science was both predictable and allowed control. Consequently, a society founded on science must also be predictable and controllable—which is necessary if one is trying to construct a world without contingency. Electricity—as Lenin perceived it—would allow the Bolsheviks to exercise centralized control over the supply of power, and thereby ensure that they did not fail to impose communist consciousness on the masses because they had failed to make society rational enough or because the masses could (spontaneously) control their own material standard.

However, the story of the Bolshevik implementation of electrification shows that reality was not as simple as the Bolsheviks believed it to be. There were several choices for how to electrify Russia: the state could have supported and expanded the existing utilities in cities, it could have embarked on a radical program of rural electrification (with small, localized power stations), or it could have chosen centralized electrification, with large power stations serving entire regions. That the Bolsheviks chose the centralized approach with regional power stations was by no means obvious; the choice was politically and ideologically, rather than technologically, motivated.³⁵ The supporters of centralization managed to link electrical engineering elites and political leadership, while their opponents did not: both the Bolsheviks and the electrical engineering leadership favored centralized electrification because it promised the most radical and rapid transformation of

³⁴ Thomas F. Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia: Ideology and Industrial Organization 1917-1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 19.

³⁵ Coopersmith, *Electrification of Russia*, 7.

Russian society. The critics of the centralized plan demonstrated its economic and technical infeasibility, but lacked the political ties necessary to seriously present an alternative.³⁶ The choice of centralized electricity, then, was not strictly ideological: centralization won not simply because it was the correct way to electrify Russia, but also because of a highly contingent factor: the political ties of its advocates.

Even though the focus of electrification lay on building large regional power stations, local power stations were built in rural areas. In the four years following the October Revolution, 157 new local power stations were built—an increase of over 50 percent. But this was not a result of central planning: the centralized administration soon discovered that it could not plan local development of utilities—for that, local initiative and local resources were needed in addition to the central economic and technical support. In the early 1920's, the center actively discouraged local electrification initiatives, as they took resources away from the large national projects.³⁷

The Bolshevik emphasis on centralization was not simply an ideological stance reflecting distrust of spontaneity and local initiative; it also had very real and tangible effects. If the Bolsheviks had chosen small-scale electrification instead of a centralized model (which, to be fair, followed European and American models of electrification), they could have had a “true revolution” in electrification. The decentralized model of electrification would have been unique to the Soviet Union, and it could have electrified the countryside—with the social and economic transformations that electrification brings—much quicker and more effectively than

³⁶ Ibid., 178-85.

³⁷ Ibid., 237; Remington, *Building Socialism*, 132-33.

actually happened under the centralized plan.³⁸ The two plans create very different networks of political and electrical power: “Instead of a web of transmission lines radiating within a few economically developed regions, thousands of small-scale stations would saturate the country, producing a very different economic and political map [than the centralized plan].”³⁹ In the case of electrification, centralization was most likely not the best solution, and the Bolshevik favored centralization primarily because of ideological prejudice and political maneuvering rather than a realistic notion of how best to electrify Russia. The Bolsheviks tried to adapt reality to fit their ideology instead of adapting their ideology to fit reality.

The Bolsheviks pushed for centralization not only for electrification, but in all spheres of state influence. Even very early on, the Bolshevik state tried to centralize control over the economy, and did so by creating institutions with jurisdiction over entire spheres of society—as opposed to territorially based institutions with local jurisdiction. Local agencies were not allowed to coordinate the local efforts of central agencies until 1920, resulting in competition between various central agencies for local resources. Centralization multiplied the chains of command, leading to overlapping and conflicting authorities both across central agencies with nominally different jurisdictions and among agencies that were internally superior or subordinate. For example, a condensed milk plant with no more than fifteen workers had six central, regional, and local organizations competing for months for authority over it.⁴⁰ In Petrograd, the Bolsheviks had defeated their enemies by the summer of 1918, but that did not mean that they had replaced the old government with a new

³⁸ Coopersmith, *Electrification of Russia*, 191.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁰ Remington, *Building Socialism*, 50, 70.

one. It was not clear who had authority over what in the city. Local institutions sprung up, but as the Bolshevik state solidified, more centralized institutions took power from the more localized ones—causing conflicts between the localities and the center. The centralization was not the result of an organized united effort on the part of the central Communist Party to gain control over society as a whole with a single authority. “On the contrary, *individual* institutions (Commissariats, the Economic Council, the Cheka) gained control over a particular sphere, pushing out rivals and subordinating local organizations. The impetus for change, the actors, and the issues varied from one sphere to another but in all cases local institutions lost out to more powerful central agencies, whether government or party.”⁴¹

Centralization, then, was not simply a matter of course to the Bolsheviks; it was not accidental, but neither was it an explicit strategy. Nonetheless, centralization marked a clear shift in the locus of authority: in industry, centralization was possible only when factory committees and trade unions became extensions of the apparatus of the party, and workers’ representatives were replaced by appointed managers.⁴² Similarly in the political sphere, deputies were elected not to represent their constituents, but to execute orders from above.⁴³ Centralization shifted authority away from localities to the center, from the citizens to the state—instead of flowing upward from the people, authority flowed downward from the party.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Mary McAuley, *Bread and Justice: State and Society in Petrograd 1917-1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 115-16.

⁴² Remington, *Building Socialism*, 108.

⁴³ McAuley, *Bread & Justice*, 131-32.

⁴⁴ Trotsky had warned against overcentralization within the party long before the Bolsheviks came to power, claiming that allowing only the vanguard to be revolutionary would lead to a substitution of the party for the proletariat: “the organization of the party takes the place of the party; the Central Committee takes the place of the organization; and finally the dictator takes the place of the Central Committee.” Quoted in Walicki, *Kingdom of Freedom*, 298.

The Bolshevik preference for centralization stems partly from their ideological conviction that the vanguard party must control and organize the masses to instill the correct consciousness, but it also stems from Lenin's view of the factory as a metaphor for society. Lenin was an admirer of Taylorism, and he believed that Russia needed to adopt the methods of Taylorism and apply them to society as a whole. The Russian Taylorists wanted "to introduce scientifically rational order into every corner of life: family, school, art, war, government, and even friendship and leisure."⁴⁵ The problem, of course, is that many of these things are not improved if they are made more efficient, and the same is true of society: if the factory is the dominant metaphor for society, efficiency and utility become the primary measures of a good regime. An efficient regime is not concerned with politics or any other non-useful discussion; indeed, most human relations would be discarded for the simple reason that they do not *produce* anything. A factory society is not concerned with the well-being of its citizens or with their ability to participate democratically in the decisions that affect them, because that does not help the society produce, for example, electricity. In such a society engineering is supreme, not politics—which, strictly speaking, becomes wholly unnecessary.

More than simply unnecessary, politics becomes illegitimate, because the decisions that need to be made are technical ones, best left to the engineers. Just as a factory worker subverts the authority of the engineer when he questions the engineer's technical decisions, a citizen in a factory society subverts the government's authority when he questions its administrative decisions. If the only decisions that have to be made in a society are technical ones, there is no need for

⁴⁵ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 147, 161-62.

politics—only for management. And since technical decisions are better left to experts trained in specialized fields, a factory society will prefer expert rule over workers’ control. This is precisely what the Bolsheviks did: the technical experts they had recruited to help build society were troubled by the power of factory committees and by workers’ control, so Lenin moved to limit that power and control as early as March of 1918.⁴⁶ But it is not enough simply to limit workers’ control if one wants to create a society modeled on a Taylorist factory; one also has to train and order the worker-citizens so that they produce as efficiently as possible. This was the purpose of Trotsky’s militarization of labor in 1920: “The whole economy was to be redrawn to fit military tables of organization, and the population incorporated into regiments, brigades, and divisions under the command of army officers who were trained in industrial centers. A culture of precision and obedience had to be imposed as well as a fusion of military and industrial psychology.”⁴⁷ The workforce should be disciplined, following orders without questioning the authority giving the orders. Trotsky’s plan did not work as he had hoped; Lenin opposed it, it met with enormous resentment among the workers, and so it fell apart completely with the shift to the NEP.

The society as factory metaphor is directly contradictory to the first half of Lenin’s definition of communism: soviets cannot run Taylorist factories, nor can they create a centralized electricity grid. Lenin failed to see this contradiction; he failed to see that once he chose electrification, he could no longer have the soviets.⁴⁸ And so

⁴⁶ Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917-1941* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 21, 48.

⁴⁷ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 50-51.

⁴⁸ Similarly, Kolakowski points out how Lenin failed to see the contradiction between his insistence on accounting and control and his ire at the ever-expanding bureaucracy: “He demanded that people be imprisoned right and left for inefficiency, and then wondered why they were afraid to take decisions and referred them higher up whenever they could. He demanded vigilant supervision and exhaustive

instead of rethinking his theory about the primacy of the revolutionary vanguard and the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Lenin sacrificed the soviets.

Soviets

In the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks rallied their supporters behind the slogan “All power to the soviets,” and the state they founded was the Soviet Union. Clearly, soviets were of considerable importance to the Bolsheviks, at least symbolically. But what a soviet was in 1905 or 1917 is very different from what a soviet was in 1921 and later, and the story of that transformation illustrates how the Bolsheviks abandoned self-government for control and order.

So what exactly *were* the soviets? On the most basic level, the soviets were a type of representative council for workers, soldiers, or farmers which appeared in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. In all cases, the soviets were spontaneous, meaning that they were created by the workers or soldiers who elected representatives to the soviets. Although not explicitly the purpose, the soviets strove for “the most direct, far-reaching, and unrestricted participation of the individual in public life.”⁴⁹ That is, whatever their origins and whatever their explicit goal, the soviets quickly became organs of self-government for the strata of the population that were otherwise denied access to the public realm.

records, and yet was astonished at the amount of ‘pen-pushing’. ... He created a system in which , depending on the whim of a local party or police authority, any criticism might be regarded as counter-revolutionary and expose its author to imprisonment or death, and at the same time he urged the working people to be fearless in their criticism of the state apparatus.” Kolakowski, *Main Currents 2*, 489-90.

⁴⁹ Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 4.

The first soviets appeared in the summer of 1905 in the factories of Russia's industrial centers. They were formed as strike committees, bodies elected by the workers to help organize the strikes, but were quickly transformed into revolutionary councils representing all workers—from strike committees into organs of the revolution. Instead of disappearing at the end of the strike, the soviets survived as more general “workers’ parliaments.” This transformation was “neither intentional nor conscious;” once the soviets had opened up the possibility of political participation for the workers, who were excluded from the “official” public sphere of the state, they changed from temporary organs of the strikes into the political sphere of the workers. The structure of the soviets is important here: most workers were ignorant of how a full-blown parliamentary system operates, so the direct, radical democracy of the soviets enabled them to participate politically. Also, since the workers were excluded from parliamentary politics, they tended to be wary of political parties; the nonpartisan nature of most soviets allowed even the workers who were hostile to party politics to participate without feeling like the soviets were being hijacked by the parties.⁵⁰

In 1917, soviets sprung up spontaneously during the February Revolution; as in 1905, the soviets were created to allow workers and soldiers representation in the public realm. Although internally democratic, the soviets did not claim to represent the population as a whole—they were the voice only of certain classes, but still served as a substitute for the underdeveloped local and national political institutions.⁵¹

In 1905, the revolution had failed to overthrow tsarism, and consequently the soviets

⁵⁰ Ibid., 39-47. See also Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 40-42; Edward Hallett Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Volume One* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 46-48.

⁵¹ Anweiler, *Soviets*, 111-12.

had been crushed with the insurrection. In 1917, however, the revolution succeeded, and the soviets played a large role even after the fall of the monarchy. Kerensky's Provisional Government governed Russia together with the Petrograd Soviet in an uneasy system of dual power. The Provisional Government, which was supposed to have an administrative and legislative role, was constantly undermined by the Soviet, which often wrote its own laws and acted without consulting the cabinet. In practice, the Provisional Government survived only at the mercy of the Soviet, which had a very different goal than the government: the Soviet wanted to continue the revolution and create a workers' state, while the government wanted to contain the revolution and create a liberal democracy. The fragile system of dual power lasted only a few months, until the Bolshevik coup in October.⁵²

Lenin recognized that the soviets could be a revolutionary new political form in which everyday citizens would govern themselves and in which the institutions of government would derive authority from below, not from above.⁵³ However, he did not take this notion very seriously; he thought of the 1905 soviets as nothing more than temporary organs of the revolution, and he rejected the 1917 soviets because they cooperated with the Provisional Government rather than take power in the name of the proletariat. Lenin wanted the soviets to be instruments of the revolution, not institutions of self-government.⁵⁴ Even in *State and Revolution*, in which he called for the establishment of a self-administering "republic of Soviets of Workers' and

⁵² Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 296, 323-36; Robert Service, *The Russian Revolution, 1900-1927* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 35-36, 38-40.

⁵³ Lenin writes: "What is necessary is not only representation on the model of democracy, but also the structuring of the entire state administration from the bottom up through the masses themselves, their active participation in every step of life, their active role in administration." Quoted in Anweiler, *Soviets*, 158.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 153; Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 363.

Soldiers' Deputies" modeled on the Paris Commune, Lenin could not escape making the soviets mere instruments serving the dictatorship of the proletariat. The soviets would be a "simple machine" which the workers would use to suppress the bourgeoisie—as opposed to the situation under the Provisional Government, where the soviets had been converted "into mere talking shops."⁵⁵

Once in power, the tension between the Bolsheviks' desire for workers' self-government and their belief in the need for absolute control under the dictatorship of the proletariat unequivocally resolved itself in favor of control. The soviets could not "exist to express the 'vacillating' political will of the masses," but to serve as catalysts for what Stalin later called the "transmission" of consciousness from the vanguard party to the masses. The Bolsheviks were too closely linked to the soviets to abolish them without also making their rule seem illegitimate, so they transformed the soviets "from organs of proletarian self-administration and bulwarks of radical democracy to organs used by the party elite to guide the masses."⁵⁶ Elections to the soviets were no longer representative; the soviets elected the lists of candidates given to them by the party without opposition. The soviets, in accordance with the desire of the Bolsheviks, emphasized the common interest and excluded opposition voices in their proceedings—i.e., they did as they were told. Soviet officials were turned from elected representatives into bureaucrats—and as the new state extended its influence into all spheres of life, the bureaucracy grew with it.⁵⁷ After a few years of Bolshevik rule, there was no trace of the soviets as spontaneous revolutionary councils; they were soviets in name only.

⁵⁵ Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 42, 81, 108.

⁵⁶ Anweiler, *Soviets*, 239-40.

⁵⁷ McAuley, *Bread & Justice*, 135, 137-38, 154-55.

That does not mean that Lenin did not want to create a communist utopia: “Central to *State and Revolution* is the theme of the revolution’s victory over the state, which would disappear in the wake of the unleashed energies of the masses—meaning both the spontaneous skills of the people as a whole and the super energies of the New People.”⁵⁸ But establishing utopia comes after the dictatorship of the proletariat, in which the vanguard party must strictly control and impose socialist consciousness on the masses, who would at the same time run the new state through the soviets. There appears to be a contradiction between party rule and popular rule here, but there probably was no contradiction in Lenin’s mind, for one very simple reason: Lenin was not concerned with the soviets as organs of self-*government*, but as organs of self-*administration*. Self-government would come later, under communism.

Lenin believed that capitalism had simplified administrative routines to the point where any literate person could administer the state, and that the revolutionaries could replace the bourgeois administrative apparatus literally overnight with a socialist one consisting of ordinary workers.⁵⁹ Lenin did not distinguish between representative institutions and the rest of the state apparatus—meaning that “[the] elected deputies are to be civil servants, ministers and representatives of their constituents at one and the same time. They have to make the laws, carry them out

⁵⁸ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 43. Lenin himself puts it as follows: “We set ourselves the ultimate aim of abolishing the state, i.e. all organized and systematic violence, all use of violence against people in general. ... [In] striving for socialism, we are convinced that it will develop into communism and that, in connection with this, the need for violence against people in general, for the *subordination* of one person to another, of one section of the population to another, will vanish altogether since people will *become accustomed* to observing the elementary conditions of social life *without violence* and *without subordination*.” Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 73-74. (Italics in original.)

⁵⁹ Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 90.

and criticize them.”⁶⁰ Lenin conflated politics and administration: the elected representatives have to be administrators, carrying out orders from above.⁶¹

The reason for this conflation is that Lenin was unable to handle differences in opinion. To him, differences in opinion were the result of false or uninformed consciousness, a failure to see the world as it really is. He had to eradicate politics, because if he did not, he implicitly admitted “that political positions are opinion, not fact; values, not science.” And if he admitted that disagreement over values is legitimate, his epistemology of the objective truth of the class struggle would come crashing down, and with it the justification for the dictatorship of the proletariat. What Lenin did was to ensure “*that politics is an ontological impossibility*. That is, there can be no genuine differences of *opinion* within political life.”⁶²

Since differences of opinion are illegitimate, the space in which to express those differences—i.e., politics—becomes illegitimate as well. The masses are allowed to have a politics only insofar as their politics is identical to that of the government—or more precisely, the administrative bureaucracy. Lenin would not allow the people to use the soviets as a political space, but he would allow them to use the soviets as an administrative space; administration, which works best when it does not deal with differences of opinion, is legitimate whereas politics is not. In other words, politics was strictly instrumental to Lenin: it was only a means to reach a goal—total freedom—but had no value in and of itself. Lenin wanted politics only when politics is useful, when it serves the dictatorship of the proletariat—that is, when it has become administration. But administration is internal to an institution—it

⁶⁰ Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics*, 80-81. (Italics in original.)

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 128-29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 175-76. (Italics in original.)

is concerned with the internal processes of an institution—while politics is external to it, concerning itself with relationships to other institutions. A politics which is trapped within isolated institutions is not public, and a politics which is not public is not a politics at all; at best, it is participatory administration.⁶³ What is missing from Lenin's politics is a site in which to practice actual politics: even the soviet, which is a political body, has only administrative functions. Lenin did not distinguish between the soviet as a political form and the bureaucracy as an administrative form, and so his "state form is one-dimensional. It allows for no distances, no spaces, no appeals, no checks, no balances, no processes, no delays, no interrogations and, above all, no distribution of power. All are ruthlessly and deliberately excluded ..."⁶⁴

To Lenin, who wanted to combat spontaneity, creating a politics without any spaces was precisely the point: if the masses were allowed to govern themselves, they would not engage in the accounting and control so necessary for the success of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is the accounting and control—self-administration, not self-government—that will lead to the freedom of the higher phase of communism. In *State and Revolution*, Lenin wrote that "any escape from this popular accounting and control will inevitably become so incredibly difficult, such a rare exception, and will probably be accompanied by so swift and serious a punishment ... that the *necessity* to observe the uncomplicated basic rules of all human intercourse will very soon become a *habit*."⁶⁵ In the society of the future, then, the unpredictability of human relations will disappear, meaning that once the mechanism for disciplining behavior is firmly in place, the revolutionaries can concentrate on the

⁶³ Ibid., 77-78, 95-96.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁶⁵ Lenin, *State & Revolution*, 92. (Italics in original.)

more worthwhile *technical* problems of how to overcome necessity.⁶⁶ And once necessity has been overcome, people will acquire socialist consciousness and “observe the uncomplicated basic rules of all human intercourse” by their own initiative. This is why electrification was more important to Lenin than soviets: soviets were merely a tool to impose correct consciousness on the masses, but electrification would radically alter the conditions of human life—it would make *everything* different.

The soviets held no such promise, and worse, independent soviets threatened Bolshevik control over society through the dictatorship of the proletariat. Because of his inability to separate politics and administration, government by the people and bureaucracy by the people, Lenin could not see the soviets as a new political form, and would not allow them to be spaces in which everyday citizens could enter public life and be free—or as popular institutions from which the central government could draw its authority and legitimacy. Instead, the Bolsheviks took over and emasculated the soviets, turning them from spontaneous organs of self-government into another level in the hierarchy of the state administration. The soviets did not create a new world, and they did not promise to create a new world—they merely offered the citizens of the present an opportunity to participate in public life—and so they could not be the correct route to communism. Since Lenin wanted to create a brand new world which would unleash all of humanity’s alienated potential rather than establish freedom in the messy world of the present, he chose the dictatorship of the proletariat, with its control and rationalization, and with its ordered promise of a future in which humankind would be totally free. And so technology, with its promise of infinite

⁶⁶ Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics*, 204-05.

progress, replaces politics as the sphere of revolutionary action—electrification becomes more important than soviets.⁶⁷ Although the workers are necessary to overthrow capitalism and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, they are no longer needed once that dictatorship is in place: it is the technical experts, not the workers, who will create the brand new world—engineers and agronomists should be allowed into the public sphere, not politicians or proletarians.⁶⁸ Therefore, any attempts by everyday people to subvert the dictatorship of the proletariat, even if to give power to the soviets, should be met with repression, reeducation, and violence—hence the response to the Kronstadt uprising.

Kronstadt

Just as Marx dismissed the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune as failures because they attempted to found creative freedom rather than opt for his total freedom, Lenin dismissed as a counterrevolutionary conspiracy the attempt of the Kronstadt sailors in 1921 to fulfill in practice the October Revolution's slogan of "All power to the soviets." Lenin could not allow everyday people to decide for themselves how to live and how to be free; instead, if the proletarian revolution was to succeed in liberating humanity, everyone must abide by the rigid control and discipline of the centralized party—even if the localities did not differ from the party in their goals and methods. Rather than permit Kronstadt to carry on its experiment of government, the Bolsheviks crushed the rebellion. For Lenin, the power of the party,

⁶⁷ Ulam, *Bolsheviks*, 481.

⁶⁸ Coopersmith, *Electrification of Russia*, 175.

which was trying to institute total freedom, was clearly more important than the power of the soviets trying to establish creative freedom.

The sailors at Kronstadt, the naval fortress on an island in the Gulf of Finland close to Petrograd, had a history of rebelliousness: they had risen up against tsarist authority in 1905 and in the February Revolution in 1917, and they had helped the Bolsheviks to power in the October Revolution. In March 1921, they revolted against the Bolshevik government, which they felt had betrayed the core principle of the revolution, namely, the idea that power belonged in the hands of the people, not the centralized state. But the revolt was not simply an uprising against the Bolsheviks; it was also an attempt to create in reality the type of government the sailors thought had been promised by the October Revolution—a government in which each locality would be self-governed, independent from any form of central authority. In the little more than two weeks that the revolt lasted, Kronstadt was governed as a commune, according to soviet ideals: the conference of delegates, elected by the citizens of Kronstadt, was the equivalent of a “free soviet.” The conference of delegates elected fifteen of its members to the Revolutionary Committee, which was given power to govern the town. However, the Revolutionary Committee regularly reported back to the conference of delegates, allowing the conference to approve of its decisions and policies. The commissions established by the Revolutionary Committee were also elected rather than assigned by the members of the committee. In this way, the

Kronstadt rebels tried to fulfill the slogan of the revolt: “All power to the soviets but not the parties.”⁶⁹

In establishing a government of free soviets, the rebels were attempting to recreate what they considered Kronstadt’s golden age of soviet democracy: the summer of 1917, when the Kronstadt Soviet declared that it was the “sole power” in the town of Kronstadt—in effect declaring itself an independent republic. The government of the Kronstadt Republic, like the government of the revolt four years later, was modeled on the Paris Commune, and a commune-like society sprung up quickly:

Almost overnight, the ships’ crews, the naval and military units and the workers created and practiced a direct democracy of base assemblies and committees. Raised on them was the representative democracy of the Soviet, its Executive Committee and commissions. The elective principle was applied to all public offices. ... Wage differentials were reduced to a minimum and all epaulettes and insignia of rank were abolished. A new-born and vigorous political and social culture of socialist parties, clubs and *landsmannschaften*, newspapers, lecture courses, public addresses, Anchor Square mass meetings and mass rallies enveloped and permeated Kronstadt’s Soviet democracy.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 239-40; Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt, 1921* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 157, 162.

⁷⁰ Getzler, *Kronstadt*, 248.

The Kronstadt Republic was a spontaneous, self-organized government in which the citizens themselves took an active part. In addition to participating in local committees, people formed small agricultural communes to cultivate what little arable land there was on the island.⁷¹ In the Kronstadt Republic, authority flowed from the local assemblies up to the Executive Committee of the Soviet, and the citizens of Kronstadt were both willing and capable of participating in this experimental government—they did not need a vanguard party to tell them what to do.

Lenin's reaction to the Kronstadt Republic demonstrates that his commitment to soviet power was not about popular self-government: publicly, he supported the Kronstadt Soviet—after all, as recently as in the *April Theses* just a few months earlier, he had claimed that “the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies are the *only possible* form of revolutionary government”—but privately, he criticized the Kronstadt Bolsheviks for having participated in the Kronstadt Republic without first consulting the Central Committee of the party. He believed that they had violated “elementary party discipline” by acting independently.⁷² But Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not fully reveal their lack of commitment to the local, self-governing power of the soviets until they themselves were in power.

The role of the Kronstadt Soviet, which had been primarily political before the October Revolution, became economic and social after the Bolsheviks seized power.⁷³ Kronstadt's grass-roots democracy withered when locally elected committees were replaced by Communist party collectives and commissars carrying

⁷¹ Avrich, *Kronstadt*, 58.

⁷² Vladimir Ilich Lenin, *Selected Works, Volume 2* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 14; Getzler, *Kronstadt*, 84.

⁷³ Getzler, *Kronstadt*, 171.

out the instructions of the central party. The Soviet itself, “which had thrived on polemics and debate, became a mere forum for the announcement and confirmation of resolutions and decisions and for exhortative oratory and mobilization.” The Soviet as a space for public debate was replaced by the Soviet as a staged spectacle legitimizing Bolshevik policy. The spontaneous mass meetings in Anchor Square were also turned into spectacles (called “meeting-concerts”): institutionalized propaganda sessions, controlled and organized by the “section for agitation and propaganda,” intended to instill in the masses a consciousness of the principles of communism.⁷⁴ All in all, “the Bolshevik organizational structure, which had pushed out and replaced Kronstadt’s and the Baltic Fleet’s democracy, had—by 1920—been turned into an elaborate system of controls, statistical accounting, and surveillance ...”⁷⁵ The Bolsheviks had, in the name of giving all power to the soviets, destroyed the power of the soviets, replacing it with the power of the bureaucratized, centralized party.

It was against this bureaucratization and centralization that the sailors revolted in 1921, trying instead to recreate the soviet system. In the *Petropavlovsk* resolution of February 28, the Kronstadt sailors demanded, along with freedom of speech and assembly, immediate new elections to the soviets, since these did “not express the will of the workers and peasants.” By demanding new elections, the sailors challenged the legitimacy of the Bolshevik dictatorship in the name of the proletariat; they were asking Lenin to live up to his promise of “all power to the soviets.” To the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 190-95.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 202.

Bolshevik government, suspicious of any spontaneous actions, questioning its authority was tantamount to counterrevolution.⁷⁶

Indeed, the Bolsheviks were so suspicious of any action independent of party control that they assumed that the Kronstadt revolt was the result of a foreign-controlled counterrevolutionary conspiracy. Lenin claimed that “the enemies of the proletariat” would “take advantage of every deviation from a thoroughly consistent communist line” to overthrow the dictatorship of the proletariat; in other words, that the Kronstadt sailors were controlled from abroad by counterrevolutionary forces using the slogans of the soviet system to destroy that system.⁷⁷ This is why Lenin thought that regardless of how small a shift of party policy the rebels demanded, the answer was to increase discipline and unity within the party: since the Communist party was the true guardian of the proletarian revolution, any demand to change party policy could only be a disguised call for counterrevolution. Hence Lenin, in a speech to the Tenth Party Congress, wanted to counter the Kronstadt revolt “with rifles, no matter how innocent it may appear to be.”⁷⁸

From this perspective, it is actually irrelevant whether or not the Kronstadt rebels were controlled by foreign plotters (as it happens, they were not): Lenin could not tolerate any initiative on the local level, since the very notion of spontaneous action—action not controlled and organized by the party—went against his idea that the Communist party was the vanguard party supervising the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was supposed to mold the masses into a race of new, superior human beings. That is, local, spontaneous action was counter to Lenin’s choice of

⁷⁶ Avrich, *Kronstadt*, 73, 75-76.

⁷⁷ Vladimir Ilich Lenin and Leon Trotsky, *Kronstadt* (New York: Monad Press, 1979), 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

total freedom over creative freedom. Any action not mandated by the party—even if it strove to reach the same goal as the party—was not an expression of the abilities of individuals in specific localities to be free and to govern themselves as they themselves saw fit, but a symptom of lingering bourgeois consciousness, which had to be combated with propaganda and increased discipline or, as in the case of Kronstadt, deadly force. For the dictatorship of the proletariat ever to institute total freedom, the party had to control totally the lives and actions of the masses.

Because he preferred total freedom over creative freedom, Lenin had to dismiss the Kronstadt revolt as a counterrevolutionary conspiracy, and he could not see it for what it really was: a popular protest against an authoritarian government. This does not mean that the rebels were opposed to the idea of communism as such; they had fought in the October Revolution to put the Bolsheviks in power. Rather, they wanted to reform Bolshevik Communism, “to purge it of the dictatorial and bureaucratic tendencies which had been thrown into relief during the Civil War. ... [The] Kronstadters deplored the growing isolation of the party from the people and attacked the Bolshevik leaders for violating the essential spirit of the revolution—for sacrificing its democratic and egalitarian ideals on the altar of power and expediency.”⁷⁹

The Kronstadt rebels opposed the exclusive rule of *any* single party, not just the exclusive rule of the Communist party. The rebellion crossed party lines and had no specific ideology—although the rebels were all socialists of one stripe or another. Instead of having a clearly defined program of action, they relied on the power of

⁷⁹ Avrich, *Kronstadt*, 182.

freely elected soviets to effect change.⁸⁰ The rebellion's slogan "All power to the soviets but not the parties" shows that the rebels were suspicious of parties in general, not simply the Bolsheviks—although Lenin, completely in accordance with his misinterpretation of the rebellion, seems to have believed that the slogan was actually "soviet power without the Bolsheviks."⁸¹

The rebellion was not simply a rebellion *against* the Bolsheviks; it was also a rebellion *for* soviet power—something which Lenin did not, perhaps could not, understand. The rebels were trying to cast off an oppressive government, but they were also trying to create a new form of government, one based on the belief that localities are fully capable of governing themselves. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the Kronstadt Soviet, both in its 1917 and its 1921 form, was not perfectly egalitarian. Kronstadt was to be a "toilers' republic," and the propertied classes were excluded from participating in the affairs of the Soviet. Kronstadt was an exclusive, class conscious democracy.⁸² It was also a socialist democracy: even though they rejected Lenin's path to total freedom, the rebels believed that by establishing creative freedom in a soviet system, they were setting the stage for a future communist society of emancipated human beings. Like Marx, they could not avoid linking creative freedom with a *telos*, a future higher stage of humanity.

So even though the rebels shared the same goal as the Bolsheviks, and even though they established a government of soviets— to which Lenin had professed himself sympathetic in *State and Revolution* and the *April Theses*—the Bolshevik government saw the rebels as a threat to its own monopoly on power, and

⁸⁰ Ibid., 170-71.

⁸¹ Getzler, *Kronstadt*, 237; Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 55, 58.

⁸² Avrich, *Kronstadt*, 162; Getzler, *Kronstadt*, 250.

consequently sent troops across the ice to violently crush the revolt. Partly, this was a military necessity: Russia needed its Baltic Fleet to defend Petrograd, and if Kronstadt was in rebellion, the security of the regime was threatened. But the Bolsheviks did not use the language of security to justify their assault on Kronstadt—they used the language of competing ideologies. The rebels questioned the fundamental assumption legitimizing Bolshevik oppression: that the masses could not be trusted to govern themselves spontaneously, and that the dictatorship of the proletariat therefore had to be imposed from the outside by a vanguard party.

The lesson that Lenin learned from Kronstadt was *not* that creative freedom, the freedom of everyday people to decide for themselves how to live their lives, is possible, but that party discipline had to be strengthened to prevent further spontaneous outbursts. The Bolshevik government did not restore freedom of speech or assembly, nor did it allow free election to the soviets. In a speech about a week after the end of the Kronstadt revolt, Lenin urged his audience not to be blinded by slogans such as “freedom,” “constituent assembly,” and “free soviets;” what was needed, he said, was “much more proletarian solidarity and discipline,” something which “we must achieve ... at all costs, and win.”⁸³ Lenin got what he wanted: the leading members of the party were unanimous in their denunciations of Kronstadt. Even Alexandra Kollontai, who was very critical of the increased bureaucratization of the Bolshevik state, proudly announced her support for the attack on the rebels.⁸⁴

Lenin failed to see Kronstadt as an example of the spirit of revolution, because for him, just as for Marx in 1848 and 1870, revolution meant the establishment of a

⁸³ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 57.

⁸⁴ Getzler, *Kronstadt*, 256.

dictatorship of the proletariat, striving for total freedom—not the spontaneous creation by everyday people of a form of government in which they themselves could participate and decide over their own lives. Instead, he tried to make it seem as if the alternative presented by Kronstadt had never existed: in an attempt to erase the memory of the age of soviet power in Kronstadt, all of the places connected to the revolt were renamed. For example, Anchor Square, the place of almost daily spontaneous mass meetings during the Kronstadt Republic and the revolt of 1921, was turned into Revolution Square.⁸⁵ Lenin was so committed to a revolution for total freedom that he could not recognize that the spontaneous appearance of soviet power in Kronstadt was at least as revolutionary as his own project, and more significantly, that the type of freedom embodied by soviet power is possible, allowing ordinary citizens to enter the public realm and be free—while his own freedom is an impossible utopian dream, leading only to brutal oppression by trying to create a new type of human being, by forcing people to become something they cannot be.

Conclusion

Although Lenin shared Marx's dream of a perfect society in which human beings can finally live according to their full human potential, he did not emphasize the fundamental creativity of human beings as strongly as Marx did. As a result, while Marx's total freedom is always entangled with his notion of creative freedom, that is not the case with Lenin. Lenin was so fascinated by the promise of the dictatorship of the proletariat—a completely ordered, completely rational, completely transparent society—that he often forgot that the dictatorship of the proletariat is only the lower

⁸⁵ Ibid., 244.

stage of communism. This fascination with the promise of technological emancipation led Lenin to ignore the human component of life: to him, society will be better when even human relations are guided by technical reason. In other words, Lenin disregarded the experiential dimension of reality: he chose total freedom over creative freedom because he thought that theory is a higher form of understanding than human experience.

There are several problems with trying to shape reality to fit a theory rather than adapting the theory to reality: first, it is too neat—no matter how advanced one’s theory is, it cannot describe all the dimensions of human experience, which means that when reality is reshaped to fit the theory, legitimate human experiences are delegitimized because the theory does not explain them. Simply put, striving for theoretical neatness in reality denies human plurality. Second, the theory becomes absolutely true: if there is an incongruence between the theory and reality, it is reality, not the theory, that is wrong. There is no room for learning, because to revise the theory is to admit that one was wrong.⁸⁶ Third, and probably most importantly, it is invariably oppressive: when theory is more real than experience, experience has to be controlled so that it will not contradict the theory. When Lenin proposed the dictatorship of the proletariat as the cure for society’s ills, he took the power over everyday life from the hands of the people and claimed that the revolutionary vanguard knows better than we do what is good for us. This is not only arrogant, and it not only allows the vanguard party to destroy us in the name of our own greater

⁸⁶ Of course, theories get rewritten all the same—although the consequences can become extremely absurd. Under Stalin, it was easier to rewrite history than to admit that one had revised the theory: once Trotsky, Bukharin, and others had fallen out of favor, they were simply erased from all history books and official documents. It was simpler to pretend that they had never existed than to admit that the theory had changed. See chapter 3.

good, but it completely overlooks the fact that politics, and with it human relations, is *not* instrumental, not concerned primarily with the overcoming of necessity. Rationalizing human relations might create a more efficient society, but it will not be a *human* society, strictly speaking—problems of human relations cannot be solved by technical experts and engineers.

This is precisely what Lenin failed to understand: electrification and soviets are mutually exclusive. If the soviets are to survive, they require spontaneity, the ability to escape external control—while electrification, at least in Lenin’s understanding of it, works best when it is centrally controlled and supervised. Electrification is compatible with the dictatorship of the proletariat; soviets are not. And since Lenin was not interested in freedom, only in emancipation, he dismissed the soviets as instruments of the revolution, subservient to theory—and as the case of Kronstadt shows, theory was more important to Lenin than human life or the capacity of human beings for self-government.

A society in which theory is more important than experience is bound to be sterile and oppressive. Lenin justified his oppression with the promise of a better world—however wrong or naïve that promise may have been. The danger with a society ruled by a theory is that in trying to put the theory into practice, the leaders will choose to destroy society rather than dismiss the theory—which is exactly what happened with Stalin.

CHAPTER THREE: BUILDING SOCIALISM

The Communist Party under Stalin tried to fulfill Lenin's promise of a society of total freedom. To do so, it would have to change the world—which is exactly what it tried to do: the Five-Year Plan, forced collectivization, the Great Terror, and the gulag system were all elements of a megalomaniac plan in which socialism would transform nature, society, and humanity.

This total transformation, which would be achieved through progress in science, industry, and agriculture, would not only modernize the Soviet Union; it would bring it into a superior form of modernity, where the Soviet citizens would benefit from the blessings of modernity—increased production, higher standards of living, an enlightened and rational society—without having to suffer from its flaws—squalid working conditions, massive income inequalities, alienation. But, with its typically Leninist obsession with organization and fear of spontaneity, the Party could not let society transform by itself; Stalinist transformation was always intimately tied to Party control.

Without control, the citizens would revert to bourgeois consciousness. But more importantly, control was itself transformative: by controlling the lives of its citizens, the Party trained them to behave as if they were the new socialist man, *homo sovieticus*. The horrors of the great purges and the gulag camps were a brutal lesson about the level of control demanded by the Party: the citizens had to learn that,

despite their best intentions, even their own minds could betray them, and so they should give themselves over completely to the Party and let it guide all their actions.

Despite the obvious disaster of the Stalinist plan of controlled transformation—namely, that it brutally murdered and exiled millions of citizens in the name of social progress—it was deeply flawed in other ways as well. The Bolsheviks' understanding of modernization was visual: the new society had to *look* modern. As a result, they favored symbolic, visually satisfying projects that promised an appearance of progress over less glamorous and symbolic, but more worthwhile projects—the number and size of steel mills were more important than their functionality. As a result of this preference for visual simplicity, real transformation would have been impossible, because the Bolsheviks disfavored projects that might lead to actual progress.

Also, using control as an instrument of transformation did not have the effect the Party intended: it did not create a new race of superior socialist men and women. Rather, the isolation and atomization of the citizens, which was supposed to make them easier for the Party to mold into the new man, merely left them lonely, radically separated from the world around them. And on the social level, the Party's control created something akin to a concentration camp society—all autonomous spaces and actions tended to disappear, replaced by the collective spaces and organized activities directed by the Party. So the Party did, after all, succeed in creating a completely new and unprecedented society—but not a transformation to a socialist utopia of total freedom; the new society was the terror and control of totalitarian domination.

Transformation

Stalinism was an Enlightenment utopia, an attempt to create a rationally ordered, technologically driven society—and hand in hand with that utopia came the creation of a new type of man and the transformation of nature and the world to serve the new society.¹ In this utopia of a predictable, clean world that is based on science, not tradition, the project of transformation inseparably overlaps with the project of control: to be able to transform the world exactly according to its vision, the Party had to have control over even the most microscopic details of society.

The Stalinist drive of “building socialism” was precisely such an attempt to transform man and nature in a way that would bring about Marx’s kingdom of freedom. Its main thrusts—an emphasis on science and the twin projects of industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture—all strove to fundamentally transform the world, to build a new world according to the Party’s specifications. The Bolsheviks had to overcome Russian backwardness—that is, everything belonging to pre-revolutionary Russia—and replace it with modernity.² The new man would be a clean, punctual, cultured technocrat; a scientifically calculable personality, not an obstinate peasant.

The new man had to *look* right, both personally and administratively, and so did the new society. The Bolshevik notion of transformation operated primarily on a surface level: the Party had a particular idea of how a modern society should *look*, but only a vague notion of the various socioeconomic processes that actually govern

¹ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 186; Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 364.

² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15.

society. The inherent danger in an approach that judges based on appearance rather than actual performance is that the representation comes to substitute for reality—that, since one *appears* to be transforming man and nature, one really believes that one is doing so. As we shall see, this is precisely what happened in the Bolshevik plans for science, industry, and agriculture.

Science

Science was integral to the Stalinist project of building a new, rational world; the Bolsheviks sought legitimacy for their regime in the claim that their government was scientific—just as Marx himself had claimed to be a “scientific socialist.” To the Bolsheviks, Leninism was a science, which, according to Marxist epistemology, meant that it was objectively correct. This is the problem with Leninist scientism: not only does it give its version of science an automatic claim to truth, but it also makes that science normative. Science equals progress; for the Bolsheviks, science meant the annihilation of Russian backwardness and the creation of the shining society of tomorrow. This view of science is very mechanistic; it mistakes mathematical formalism for reality and confuses a particular conception of scientific method with normative prescriptions for society—but it fit the Bolshevik project of total freedom. Science, like socialism, could accomplish anything—and if something claimed to be scientific, it must also be true and good.

The Bolsheviks relied on a faulty leap of logic to justify their worship of science: they believed that science, which supposedly is rational, ordered, and predictable, lends itself to creating a society that is rational, ordered, and predictable.

That is, science can be used to create a new man and a new world—it can be used to take the leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.

The Bolsheviks had a strictly utilitarian view of science, similar to Lenin’s view of technology and machines. The good of science was not that it increased human knowledge; rather, it was justified by the service it could perform for the Party. Specifically, science would increase industrial production.³ And it would do so in a rational, ordered, and controlled manner; with the application of science to socialist production, improvements could be predicted and planned, and those improvements would benefit all of society, not merely be refined tools of the capitalists to exploit the proletarian masses.⁴ But for that to occur, science had to progress correctly, which meant that it could not develop spontaneously: it had to be controlled and planned by the Party.⁵ Science had to be turned into a “productive force,” and to do that, centralized planning (and with it, state control) was introduced into science.⁶

³ Stephen Fortescue, *The Communist Party and Soviet Science* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1986), 35; Nikolai Kremmentsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 17, 48.

⁴ Jeffrey L. Roberg, *Soviet Science under Control: The Struggle for Influence* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 31.

⁵ In the 1930s, the Bolsheviks’ desire to use science as a tool for economic and industrial development led them not only to expand support for science, but also “to establish a complicated system of control over all aspects of scientific activity.” Kremmentsov, *Stalinist Science*, 32. The debate in the 1920s between the Deborinists and the mechanists on the correct relationship between philosophy and science is also instructive: the Deborinists, despite a poor grasp of the methods and history of science, convinced Party ideologues that science should be supervised by dialectical materialism—i.e., the Party. Although the Deborinists were later discredited, the long-term effect of the debate was the complete servility of philosophy to the Party. See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth, and Dissolution. Volume III: The Breakdown* (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 1978), 63-76.

⁶ Kremmentsov, *Stalinist Science*, 42.

As a result, the only real science was science approved by the Party.⁷ Science not approved by the Party or not in accordance with its ideology was dismissed as not being real science. The Bolsheviks controlled appointments to research institutes and created a centralized bureaucracy to supervise and plan science; research in entire disciplines and research agendas for whole regions of the country were dictated from centralized institutions.⁸ In short, the Stalinist vision and practice of science was one of Party control. What this meant in reality was that scientific projects were approved or rejected not on their scientific merits, but on the political skill of scientists.⁹ Scientific agendas generally were successful to the extent that they could be (and were) translated into Party jargon; if the scientists could present their project as ideologically correct, they were more likely to have it approved than if it were scientifically correct.¹⁰

The Party was not genuinely interested in science, only in its own narrow definition of science as a productive force. Above all, it was interested in appearing scientific: it wasted immense resources on creating what might be called Potemkin research institutes—institutions which appeared to be producing scientific knowledge and which employed what were called scientists, but which in reality produced nothing but warehouses full of Stalinist ideology dressed up in the vocabulary of science. Just as Lenin worshipped technology not because it could improve the everyday lives of ordinary people, but rather because it promised increased productivity, the Party under Stalin did not want to use science to improve everyday

⁷ Fortescue, *Communist Party and Soviet Science*, 17.

⁸ Kremontsov, *Stalinist Science*, 36.

⁹ Fortescue, *Communist Party and Soviet Science*, 17-18.

¹⁰ Kremontsov, *Stalinist Science*, 81.

life; science was useful in terms of production—and not to produce better, but to produce more. The slogan “We must increase output” applied to science as well as to industry and agriculture.¹¹ In keeping with the Party’s desire to *appear* scientific, its focus was on quantity, not quality. The number of scientists had to be increased, and to accomplish that, degree requirements were lowered; it was not the responsibility of students to acquire the knowledge and training necessary to become scientists, but of the teachers to give them degrees—even if the teachers had to write their students’ theses. It was not important that the scientists were well trained, but that there were many of them. In fact, genuine scientists had a difficult time in Stalin’s Soviet Union; since their allegiance was primarily to science, not to the Party, their research sometimes led them into conflict with what the Party had declared to be the truth in their disciplines.¹² In any case, important research posts were given as rewards for service to the Party, not as rewards for original research. Stalinist science was above all about administration; consequently, capable scientists were replaced by Party hacks.¹³

The result of this focus on quantity was, as might be expected, widespread mediocrity. This does not mean that all Soviet science was bad; the Soviet Union had many deservedly world-renowned scientists (especially in the disciplines that managed to stay more or less independent of Party control, such as mathematics), but the notion that science could be subject to Party ideology led to entire scientific

¹¹ Mark Aleksandrovich Popovsky, *Manipulated Science: The Crisis of Science and Scientists in the Soviet Union Today* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16-25.

¹³ Popovsky writes: “The Bolsheviks did not want an association of thinking human beings who might be tempted to disobey instructions from above. At the outset, it is true, many academic institutes were headed by genuine scholars; but it soon turned out that academicians and men of ideas ... were not the type that the authorities required, as they could not grasp that a director’s function is not to have ideas but to transmit directives.” *Ibid.*, 27-28.

disciplines being hijacked for decades by charlatans.¹⁴ The Stalinist scientific system created an army of incompetent bureaucrats, incapable of understanding, much less doing, even the most basic research. Wanting to do genuine science became a form of rebellion, because to do so would mean breaking any number of prohibitions:

Suppose you want to repeat an investigation carried out in another laboratory? You're not allowed to—duplication is against the rules. Or suppose you want to leave your present field of study for one related more closely to a discovery that interests you? You can't do that either; the second field is outside the scope of your institute. ... Perhaps your experiments are incomplete; they need working a bit longer? That won't do, your work is part of the Institute's plan, laid down by the Ministry as an element in the Five-Year Plan of the Soviet Union. Ready or not ready, you must submit everything by the due date.¹⁵

Appearance was more important than results; the production of knowledge took precedence over the content of that knowledge.

The extreme example of all these trends—centralization, Party control, politicization of science, and mediocrity—is the case of Lysenko's agro-biology. Lysenko famously denied the validity of Mendelian genetics, claiming that it was a bourgeois science, opting instead for his own Lamarckian version of heredity, in

¹⁴ Roberg, *Soviet Science under Control*, 27.

¹⁵ Popovsky, *Manipulated Science*, 214.

which acquired characteristics can be passed on to the next generation.¹⁶ Despite his dismal understanding of biology and his near-total lack of experimental skill and rigor, Lysenko gained almost complete power over Soviet biology. He rose to power because of his political, not his scientific, skill: “Lysenkoism was by no means a result of the erroneous, unscientific views of one individual, supported by the leaders of the official ideology and the machinery of state, but *a social phenomenon* in conditions ostensibly of planned science but actually of harsh and unceasing Party dictatorship over the scientists.”¹⁷ At the same time, Lysenko’s theory that environmental influences could be inherited was undoubtedly attractive to Stalin, whose Marxist-Leninist ideology claimed that nature could be transformed and controlled, especially under conditions of socialism.¹⁸ Lysenko caused Soviet science great harm; a whole generation of scientists were raised in his image. More importantly, his promises of new, high-yielding varieties of crops and of mass-producing milk and meat cows were never fulfilled, and seriously crippled Soviet agriculture.¹⁹ The most telling example of this arrogant ignorance is perhaps the “Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature”: in 1948, Lysenko planted monocultures of trees (on the premise that plants of the same species do not compete for resources) in so-called “shelter belts” in an attempt to stop the hot, dry winds from blowing over the steppe. The purpose was to alter the climate of the Soviet Union to guarantee bountiful harvests. The result was a resounding failure: only those trees

¹⁶ Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Rise and Fall of T. D. Lysenko* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 22.

¹⁷ Valery N. Soyfer, *Lysenko and the Tragedy of Soviet Science* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 4. (Italics in original.)

¹⁸ Kolakowski, *Main Currents* 3, 102-03.

¹⁹ Soyfer, *Lysenko*, 3.

which had been planted in violation of Lysenko's instructions survived. The climate of the Soviet Union did not change at all.²⁰

The case of Lysenko highlights two of the problems faced by Soviet science: first, the impossibility of being a genuine scientist. One could criticize the scientists favored by the Party only at the risk of being thrown into a labor camp.²¹ The options were professional corruption or exile. Second, the Party's attempts to use science to transform nature were based on ideological considerations, not scientific ones—which meant that its projects were unrealistic, wasteful, and doomed to fail. However, that did not matter; what mattered was what the projects *claimed* to accomplish, not what they actually *accomplished*—as long as the Party still appeared to progress scientifically towards socialism.

In trying to implement total freedom by using science as a tool to transform man and the world, the Party could not let science develop spontaneously; control was more important than transformation, and appearance more important than reality. This follows from the logic of total freedom: as soon as the Party relinquishes control, science can develop spontaneously, which might not be in the direction the Party has envisioned. If science does develop spontaneously, that is because the scientists have false bourgeois consciousness; hence, science must be controlled by the vanguard party—which of course possesses the correct class consciousness—to keep science from reverting to its bourgeois roots. This is parallel to Lenin choosing electrification over soviets: Party control is more important than the transformation of nature, because the transformation follows (or should follow) from the control. As long as the

²⁰ Ibid., 205-08.

²¹ Loren R. Graham, *Science, Philosophy, and Human Behavior in the Soviet Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 15-16.

Party can appear to be working towards transformation, its continued control over science and society is legitimated. Thus, at the very heart of the Stalinist project of transformation is a need for control over all aspects of society: the Party claims that the transformation to socialism can occur only through its control over the dictatorship of the proletariat. And since the Party constantly claims to be progressing towards socialism, it must constantly *appear* to be progressing towards socialism—hence the need to engage in huge-scale scientific projects of transformation. That is also why the Party must control science and all projects of transformation: if any progress towards socialism occurs outside of Party control, the Party loses its legitimacy to rule—because then there would appear to be other roads to socialism and to the kingdom of freedom.

Industrialization

If science promised to provide the tools for transforming man and nature, industrialization would build socialism in practice; it was the implementation of the October Revolution's promise of total freedom in a socialist society. It is important to keep in mind that even though there was a high degree of coercion from the state, there was also a tremendous amount of popular support for and voluntary participation in the building of socialism.²² The fervent pace of industrialization intoxicated both planners and workers: "It seemed that one more effort, one more factory built, one more dam constructed—and happiness would be there, right around

²² Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 358.

the corner.”²³ The Soviet Union was not simply modernizing; it was creating a superior form of modernity: it was a hopeful modernity where everyone would be equal, taken care of, and living up to his or her potential.²⁴ But hopeful though it was, Stalin’s utopian vision was not the dreamy utopianism of the 1920s: Stalinism sought to transform the world through planning, centralization, normalization—socialism would not evolve by itself; it had to be planned and imposed by the Party.²⁵

Under Stalinism, industry symbolized the planned building of the future. In the cities of the future, streets would be wide, well-light, clean avenues, not narrow, dark, dirty alleys. Well educated and high-cultured workers would live in large, rationally planned apartment buildings.²⁶ At the heart of this enterprise was the steel plant; it was a symbol of Soviet power, demonstrating the legitimacy of its promise. Steel was somehow magical, a philosopher’s stone for society (very much the same role played by nuclear power in the US in the 1950s). The steel plant “was a device for transforming the country: its geography, its industry, and above all its people.”²⁷ Under the deterministic slogan “technology decides everything,” socialism meant

²³ Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 225. Ilya Ehrenburg’s novel *The Second Day* captures the madness of industrialization—how workers without proper boots or equipment, living in squalid barracks among lice and dirt, would build factories at a furious pace, as if socialism could not wait another day: “They were called shock workers. Some were going hell for leather just so they could have fruit drops with their tea, or a length of trouser cloth. . . . Other idolized the factory; the machines were alive to them. . . . Still others believed that people would be better off as soon as this factory was finished: there’d be rails, and along those rails would come sugar, tea, cloth, and boots. Shock workers there were aplenty—straight and not so straight. But they all worked fast—as fast as they could. They worked faster than humanly possible.” Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Second Day: A Novel* (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1984), 53-54.

²⁴ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 358.

²⁵ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 226.

²⁶ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 70, 71.

heavy metallurgy; progress was turned into a simple quantitative formula: enough machines equals socialism.²⁸

Although industry was the revered tool for building socialism, its purpose was a radical transformation of life, of everything from how people lived together to how they thought and acted. This too had to be planned: in the plans for the steel town Magnitogorsk, workers would be housed in identical “superblocks” and eat in public dining halls. Making all buildings identical would not only simplify planning and construction; it would also make the lives of the workers uniform and identical—there should be no reason to go to any particular superblock.²⁹ But the planners of Magnitogorsk did not understand that a city is more than workers: they did not plan for those who would not work at the steel plant—wives, teachers, cooks, grocers, administrators—for the simple reason that socialist cities were to be devoted to industry, not to “non-productive” services. “The Bolsheviks thought that once the steel plant had been established, everything else would flow naturally: build a steel plant and civilization will follow; more exactly, build a steel plant, and that *is* civilization.”³⁰

The building of society was literally about construction: the very construction of space was supposed to encourage and inculcate communal and collectivist living and thought. To accomplish this, the planners needed to be able to define, measure, and manipulate space. The concept of living space—the floor surface area available to each person, regardless of walls, doors, or windows—made the calculation of how collectivist people had become quite easy. Since it was numerical, living space

²⁸ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 201-02.

²⁹ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 115-16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-23. (Italics in original.)

appeared to be scientific—but it was merely a visual simplification to make the administration of space easier.³¹ For the administrators, living space was an administrative surface—just numbers on a page—but for the inhabitants, it was their homes. Consequently, they treated it as such, which meant that space was not used as the authorities had planned; it was used according to the needs and wants of the inhabitants.³²

Not only space was planned in order to alter man; so was culture. Originally started as an attempt to encourage workers to produce the new proletarian culture (since a socialist society could not have a bourgeois culture), the organization Proletkult was quickly brought under Party control. By the 1930s, culture had become centrally planned and existed only to serve the political purposes of the Party.³³ The Stalinist approach to culture was as utilitarian as its approach to science: on the one hand, the Party used culture as a transmission belt for propaganda, and on the other hand, culture was useful as a tool to improve the population. Cultured persons would acquire a certain kind of industrial ethics—punctuality, cleanliness, agreeable manners—but culture was also a means for self-improvement: the cultured person should have read certain great books and seen certain plays, ballets, and musical performances. One should become the type of person that a Party member was supposed to be.³⁴ Culture was not valuable in and of itself, but it had value for its positive powers of human transformation.³⁵

³¹ Ibid., 161. See also Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 46.

³² Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 175; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 46-47.

³³ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 230, 233.

³⁴ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 195; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 82.

³⁵ Cf. Arendt's discussion on the philistine, who reads the classics "prompted by the ulterior motive of self-perfection, remaining quite unaware of the fact that Shakespeare or Plato might have to tell him

Both the construction of space and the planning of culture were supervisable by the authorities; presumably, what could be planned could also be controlled. Perhaps more importantly with regard to the Party's fetishism of science: what could be planned could also be calculated. One could quite literally calculate the Soviet Union's progress toward the new, perfect society. All of the newly constructed supervisable spaces or planned activities were intended to transform man according to the plans of the Party. The biggest and most grandiose of these plans for transformation was the Five-Year Plan.

The Five-Year Plan was a project of institutionalizing miracles in production—of overcoming the constraints of time itself. The call to fulfill the first Five-Year Plan in four years—“Five in Four”—would mean “not only to achieve a high growth rate but *actually to compress five years' time into four.*”³⁶ This miniaturization of time could, in principle, be reduced infinitely—meaning that socialist production could become infinitely productive, as opposed to bourgeois production, which would always be bound by the constraints of ordinary time. Another example of the idea that time could be controlled in the service of socialist transformation is the abolition of the seven-day week in 1929. It was replaced by the “continuous work week,” with four days of work and one day of rest.³⁷ One reason for the Bolshevik attack on time was to overcome the traditional Russian conception of time—which was imprecise, irregular, and inefficient—with a modern conception

more important things than how to educate himself...” Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 203.

³⁶ Stephen E. Hanson, *Time and Revolution: Marxism and the Design of Soviet Institutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 152. (Italics in original.)

³⁷ The purpose of the continuous work week was not simply to overthrow the time of the traditional calendar, but also to abolish Sundays, thereby weakening the power of the Church. See Heller and Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, 224.

of time, whose preciseness and regularity would allow for careful calculation, planning, and standardization. Rather than present-oriented, it would be future-oriented: the Five-Year Plan had specific, time-bound production targets, as well as rules and norms according to which work could be evaluated.³⁸ Once time had become administrative, it could be planned. And if time can be planned and predicted, then so can the future—all one has to do is build enough factories.

That is, increase production, and socialism will follow. Hence, the production numbers had to increase: many of the production targets of the first Five-Year Plan had doubled within a year of its inception.³⁹ Exactly *why* production had to be continually increased was not clear; Stalinist society worshipped heavy industry because it constituted modern civilization, but there was no comprehensive plan or justification for how to use the industrial output. Industry came perilously close of becoming “production chiefly for production’s sake: making steel to make machines to make more steel to make more machines, regardless of whether anyone was in a position to use them or to use them effectively.”⁴⁰ No one knew *how* industrial production or technology would transform the world and bring about socialism, but everyone knew that it *would*, and that was enough. Hence, the Five-Year Plan did not include any concrete plans for the transformation to socialism, but only plans for continuously increased production.

³⁸ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 162, 163; Hanson, *Time and Revolution*, 153.

³⁹ Partly, this is because of a chain reaction in production targets: when the targeted production of metal was revised upwards to meet the revised target production of tractors, a whole host of other targets had to be revised as well. See Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin’s Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928-1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 143-44.

⁴⁰ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 66.

The targets for this continuously increased production were never meant to be fulfilled; to build socialism, workers would have to work at an increasingly furious pace as time itself was reduced, and the ever-wilder production targets were a tool to make the workers continually work at the very maximum level of their abilities.⁴¹ As with science, what mattered was not the actual production, but the appearance of production—numbers, statistics that could be recited to “prove” that the Soviet Union was progressing towards socialism. If the real numbers were not to Stalin’s satisfaction, the statisticians were shot and their findings falsified.⁴² To achieve total freedom, the appearance of transformation was more important to the Party than the transformation itself, because as long as the Party seemed to be transforming society into a truly socialist one—regardless of whether or not it actually *was*—it could legitimately remain in control. And without the control of the Party, total freedom would be impossible.

The logic of transformation through industry is similar to that of science: industrialization would transform the Soviet Union into a modern civilization, but it could do so only if industrialization was controlled by the Party. That is perhaps the only unqualified success of the first Five-Year Plan: it restructured the economy to make it more dependent on the centralized administration, gearing it towards fulfilling targets set by the center. Just as with science, the attempt to implement total freedom in practice encountered a conflict between change and control. The Party opted for control, believing that it could dictate change, that if it forced enough

⁴¹ Peter Rutland, *The Myth of the Plan: Lessons of Soviet Planning Experience* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 88. The anti-Taylorist movement opposing Lenin’s use of the factory as a metaphor for society critiqued Taylorism along a similar vein: it “meant not the optimum use of labor but rather the maximum use.” Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 147.

⁴² Kolakowski, *Main Currents* 3, 77.

people to become industrial workers, they would acquire class consciousness—or if it built enough factories, nature could be brought into the service of the proletariat. The future could be planned and the world transformed, but it had to be planned and transformed under the supervision of the Party.

Collectivization

Stalin's project of transformation was not restricted to enhancing humanity's capacity to control nature through industry; it was also an attempt to transform nature itself. This is the logic behind collectivization (the creation of collective farms, or *kolkhozy*): bourgeois methods of farming would not be able to transform nature into the service of the proletariat. Also, bourgeois—i.e., traditional—agriculture, driven by individual profit, could not possibly be as productive as socialist agriculture serving the collectivity. The Bolsheviks thought that processes dealing directly with nature could be mechanized just as processes in a factory could; thus, using the factory as a model, they believed that large mechanized and automated farms would be the most productive. This shows how mechanistic the Bolshevik conception of nature really was: to them, nature was a kind of machine whose workings could be calculated, supervised, and controlled.⁴³ And like a machine, it could be made to serve a master; under the control of socialism, the most rational of sciences, nature could become anything its master wanted it to be—it, too, would be liberated by the socialist revolution.

⁴³ It is illustrative that cybernetics, the study of the dynamics of interaction between complex processes, was, until the 1950s, condemned in the Soviet Union as a “bourgeois science.” To be fair, though, cybernetics had high status as a science in the 1960s and 1970s. See Graham, *Science, Philosophy, and Human Behavior*, 266ff.

Regardless of ideology, Russian agriculture desperately needed to modernize; seed was mostly sown by hand, and many households did not own draft animals or plows.⁴⁴ But there are many ways to modernize, and the Bolsheviks believed that industrial methods should prevail in agriculture as well, biasing them towards giant, mechanized kolkhozy.⁴⁵ Equating tradition with backwardness and irrationality, the Bolsheviks rejected the idea of building their “new” agriculture on existing structures; they wanted to overthrow and destroy the current world to build a new one, one uncontaminated by remnants of bourgeois methods or history.⁴⁶ The Bolsheviks would literally invade the countryside with Party functionaries and industrial workers who were supposed to create and manage the modern collective farms rationally and efficiently. They would bring with them tractors and agricultural machines that would transform agriculture and make it technological. Stalin’s goal was quite explicitly to transform (or replace) the peasants of the old type with a new kind of peasant.⁴⁷

The problem with Stalin’s plan for modernizing agriculture is that it, like the plans for science and industry, was based on a visual, simplifying metaphor, not a concrete understanding of real conditions. “Although the Bolsheviks might disagree about means, they did think they knew exactly what modern agriculture should look like in the end; their understanding was as much visual as scientific.”⁴⁸ This vision was one of gigantic identical farms which were rationally operated by a uniform and

⁴⁴ R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 9.

⁴⁵ R. W. Davies, *The Soviet Collective Farm, 1929-1930* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 37. The Bolsheviks were not alone in this belief; applying industrial methods to agriculture was popular in the US as well. See Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 197.

⁴⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105.

⁴⁷ Davies, *Socialist Offensive*, 208-09.

⁴⁸ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 210.

disciplined agricultural proletariat, and which produced a predictable and regular bounty of superior, scientifically enhanced grain. The larger the farms—that is, the better the control from the central Party—the higher the productivity and efficiency; therefore, Stalin favored “grain factories” of up to 250,000 acres. The Party was not interested in the warnings that large, centrally controlled collective farms would in fact be *less* productive than small-scale autonomous farms; the former fit its vision of modernity, while the latter did not.⁴⁹ For the Bolsheviks, class consciousness automatically yielded superior knowledge; collectivizers often used maps, not knowledge of local conditions, to make plans for an area.⁵⁰ Simply by virtue of being socialists, they understood more about agriculture than peasants who had tilled the same plot of land for generations. The same arrogant preference for visual simplification applied on the largest scales of planning as well: entire regions would become monocultural, growing only a single crop—regardless of whether local conditions favored it. This functional specialization, imported from industry, made administration easier for central officials.⁵¹ That it would devastate Soviet agriculture and lead to a famine of unfathomable proportions was not even an issue; ideology took precedence over reality. If the Party willed that nature should be controlled and harvests be plentiful, it would become so.

In order to transform agriculture according to its vision, the Party needed total control over it. And so even though the rhetoric and implementation of collectivization was the modernization of agriculture, the direct impetus was for the

⁴⁹ Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 108-09.

⁵⁰ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 211.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

state to gain control over grain production after the grain crisis of 1927-28.⁵² In this respect, collectivization was successful: the peasants still labored on the land, but they had lost even temporary control over the grain. Productivity had not increased—in fact, it had diminished drastically—but the state had gained control over the crops, and the kolkhoz system had been implemented.⁵³ Collectivization allowed Stalin to impose “a designed and legible rural landscape that would be far more amenable to appropriation, control, and central transformation.”⁵⁴ Unlike traditional, independent farming, kolkhoz farming could, at least in principle, be planned and directed by the Party.

Of course, the implementation of collectivization did not go exactly as the Party had planned. At all levels, from the local to the national, collectivization was caught up in a strategic play of definition and redefinition, as individuals and groups involved in it tried to mold the kolkhozy to their own benefit.⁵⁵ Although Party historians claim that collectivization was largely voluntary, the peasants did not accept the state’s takeover of their land peacefully.⁵⁶ Peasants resisted as well as they could; since they could not defeat the state in a violent conflict, peasant resistance was primarily passive. This could take any number of forms, from foot dragging and feigned incomprehension to stealing and burying grain, transferring property, and

⁵² Davies, *Socialist Offensive*, 109.

⁵³ Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*.

⁵⁴ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 218.

⁵⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 9.

⁵⁶ A typical example: “All this [i.e., participation in collectivization] showed the heightened political and economic awareness of the peasant and the growing creative initiative which emerged in the midst of the mass of the peasantry.” S. P. Trapeznikov, *Leninism and the Agrarian and Peasant Question* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), 142-43.

even refusing altogether to sow.⁵⁷ The state tried to control and collectivize every aspect of peasant life (down to individual chickens), even denying the peasants the right to grow crops for household use.⁵⁸ Still, an informal and illegal economy that circumvented state regulations appeared; often, it was only because of this informal economy that peasants could survive at all.⁵⁹ Despite the state's intentions of controlling and supervising the countryside through the creation of collective farms, in an attempt to create a new type of man who would live and be according to the ideology of the Party, people found ways of existing outside of the administrative hierarchies and categories the Party wanted to impose on them—they did not become completely defined by the Party.

However, the Party did manage to fundamentally redefine the basic aspects of peasant life. The Bolsheviks destroyed the old village structures and replaced them with new ones—officially to transform rural life, but also to disrupt traditional sites of resistance. Foremost among these sites was the *mir*, the peasant land commune, which was replaced by the village soviet; but the Bolsheviks also constructed other, supposedly more rational, institutions of public life in place of the old, traditional ones.⁶⁰ With the destruction of the *mir* and dekulakization, which was responsible for the deportation or execution of millions of village leaders, peasants were left without many of the traditional avenues for rebellion, and the Bolsheviks could strengthen

⁵⁷ See Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10, 212; Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*, 103; Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 5, 62.

⁵⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 50.

⁵⁹ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 203-04.

⁶⁰ “Almost everything had changed. All the focal points for an autonomous public life had been eliminated. The tavern, rural fairs and markets, the church, and the local mill disappeared; in their places stood the kolkhoz office, the public meeting room, and the school. Nonstate public spaces gave way to the state spaces of government agencies, albeit local ones.” *Ibid.*, 214.

their power over the villages.⁶¹ Collectivization created easily supervisable administrative units where there had previously been an illegible network of local farmers, and thus extended the reach of the state into the everyday life of the peasants—in effect making them dependent employees rather than semi-autonomous farmers.⁶² At the same time as its control over peasant life grew, the state also gained control over grain—including control over how to measure the grain: new statistical methods of measuring the crop created, through various numerical sleights-of-hand, the illusion of increasing yields while the old, more accurate methods of calculation were outlawed. It did not matter to the Party if millions of people starved to death, because the creation of a future socialist society of total freedom, which required modern, mechanized collective farming, was more important than the suffering of the present.⁶³ The control of the Party over society and the transformation of man and nature—in particular, the *appearance* of transformation of man and nature—took precedence over the individual lives of Soviet citizens.

That is the horrible logic of total freedom: whoever defines it is always right, and is justified in doing anything—no matter how inhumane—to bring it about. Collectivization was not simply a strategy for Stalin to consolidate his power; it was an attempt to put into practice the total freedom that Marx had envisioned.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Davies, *Socialist Offensive*, 412.

⁶² Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 214. Fitzpatrick points out that this extended to the attitude of the peasants as well: “They made a point of describing themselves as a mere workforce, toiling in the kolkhoz for somebody else’s benefit.” Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 14.

⁶³ Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*, 186-87, 301. Conquest calculates that 14.5 million people died because of the collectivization famine and dekulakization; presumably, they were all suffering not from lack of food but from false consciousness.

⁶⁴ As Tucker points out, “[a] prominent tendency of Soviet thought during the last years of Stalin’s reign was the quest for formulas by which reality could be transformed and remolded to the dictates of the Soviet regime. Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalin Change* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 144. The goal of this “transformism” was not simply to extend the

Absurdly, the famine and the repression were carried out in the name of human freedom, with the aim of creating a new, better world. That is precisely the seduction that makes total freedom so ruthlessly cruel: its perfect world can only be born from violence, and that violence has to be wielded and controlled by the revolutionary dreamers who aspire to make that world a reality.

Control

The Stalinist utopia was as much about control as about transformation. Because of the nature of the transformation—a carefully planned progress towards the communist future—the Party had to control society. Control was necessary for the transformation: without control, social development might occur spontaneously, which would inevitably mean a return to bourgeois consciousness. The Party demanded *total* control over the life and environment of the citizens, because the new, socialist world would be a *total* change from the old world—and failure in any area, no matter how minute or seemingly insignificant, would mean failure of the entire project of transformation. A society aiming for total transformation is by necessity totalitarian: it has to eradicate *all* autonomous activities—not for the sake of oppressing its citizens, but for the sake of emancipating them.⁶⁵

For the Bolsheviks, control was not only prophylactic—a tool to keep the masses from sliding back into bourgeois consciousness—but it also had a transformative function. Control enabled large transformative projects, such as crash

power of the regime; Stalin's goal really was to create the New Man. See also Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879-1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973) and Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 322.

industrialization or collectivized agriculture. More importantly, control was in itself transformative: the control over the everyday activities of individual citizens trained those citizens to behave as the Party thought they should behave. That is, control was a form of discipline, preparing the citizens of the Soviet Union for total freedom.

Discipline

The Party wanted to create a new breed of human beings, the superior *homo sovieticus*. Through the control over even their most minute movements, the citizens would not merely learn to behave correctly, but actually change into wholly new human beings. They would transform through discipline.

In this context, discipline is the control over the activities of the body through various methods, or “economies,” of coercion. It does not primarily rely on violence, but on training and repetition. This training shapes individuals, and it “will not only impart skills but will do so while reducing the political efficacy of the individuals involved.”⁶⁶ Moreover, discipline breaks up space, assigning an isolated space to each individual. It creates functional sites, spaces that are not only easy to supervise, but which have a particular function—for example, in hospitals or Fordist factories. Fragmented thusly, “spread out in a perfectly legible way over the whole series of individual bodies, the work force may be analyzed in individual units.”⁶⁷ Discipline makes legible not only the spaces, but the individuals themselves; grades, standardized tests, and various kinds of statistics are all forms of measurement which

⁶⁶ John S. Ransom, *Foucault's Discipline: The Politics of Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 37.

⁶⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 145.

are easily quantifiable and against which any individual can be compared. Disciplinary knowledge is hierarchical, meaning that each variable of knowledge can be ranked, and a composite of all variables can be used to completely characterize the individual, to put her in a predetermined category.

Above all, discipline is transformative; it trains us to behave as if the predetermined categories were the only possible choices. The object of discipline is to alter the soul by training the body: we learn to behave in a particular way even after the training has finished. Controlled activities discipline us: time-tables regulate our activities so that we use every minute to its fullest, and every activity is broken down into its smallest possible constituents to make sure that we perform it accurately. Through these constant, miniscule coercions—external impositions—disciplinary power “makes” individuals.⁶⁸ That is, the individual is not separate from the discipline she has been through; she is certainly not completely determined by it, but it is also a part of herself, of who she is. In Stalin’s Soviet Union, discipline was used to create a new type of human being, to mold the future supermen and superwomen of the emancipated communist society. Soviet citizens were trained to acquire certain habits of the heart—cleanliness, efficiency, punctuality—that would enable the building of socialism.

For a state that wanted to have control over its citizens, discipline offered advantages beyond the cultivation of beneficial behaviors: discipline also made the social realm more legible. Considering the sheer amount of knowledge it demanded about each person, the state needed to economize its information about the citizens.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 170. Also, Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98.

Categorization and bureaucratic knowledge of individuals replaced personal knowledge of them; “calculable man” replaced “memorable man.”⁶⁹ Categorization and isolation of a particular space for each individual made exhaustive knowledge of each individual possible. As far as the Party was concerned, the visual simplification represented by tables of discrete categories gave it complete legibility over the social body: the real persons could be found in the intersections of statistical matrices, not in personal biographies. Achieving total control over the population was merely a matter of collecting enough data.

Of course, discipline is not something that was unique to Stalinism; we are all disciplined to a certain extent by the institutions that surround us: schools train us to become citizens and employees, the military trains us to kill efficiently, the legal system trains us to accept the state’s monopoly on violence, and so on. The Bolsheviks used the very same institutions to train their citizens as Western states do, except with more coherence: whereas we confront multiple uncoordinated institutions’ attempts to shape us to their own purposes, Soviet institutions had, at least in principle, a clear, unified goal—to create the new socialist man. Stalinist discipline did not simply teach correct behavior; it meant to teach the correct way of thinking. This is why propaganda had such a prominent role in Soviet society.

In its simplest form, propaganda is information that has been interpreted from a particular ideological standpoint. In the Soviet Union, information was more or less monopolistically controlled by the Party, and all information distributed by the Party was ideologically colored. Newspapers contained only the official point of view, and the Party was, on the whole, quite successful in shaping the worldview of its

⁶⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 193.

citizens—in regard to both the outside world and Soviet society. More importantly, Soviet propaganda—in newspapers, radio, official speeches and pamphlets, and school textbooks—managed to influence the way in which its citizens thought on a very basic level—about, for example, civil liberties or the nature of history.⁷⁰ It could do this because the Party saw competing discourses as a form of rebellion; writing or distributing independent texts was considered treason.⁷¹ Without competing voices, the Party could eliminate plurality; and for a society with a monistic vision of social liberation, plurality can only be a threat. Propaganda, then, is a shield—its lies hiding reality from the masses and their leaders. It creates a picture of reality that is more consistent and comforting than reality itself, and since there are no competing voices to challenge this picture, the lies become self-reinforcing.⁷²

Propaganda was not only an attempt at thought control; it also fulfilled a powerful didactic function. The Bolsheviks took ideas extremely seriously, and as a result, they also took words extremely seriously—which is why Soviet censorship tried to stamp out not just words, but even thoughts that were ideologically incorrect. Words were dangerous, but they were also useful—which is why writers were both hated and revered by the Party.⁷³ Dissident writers could challenge its claim to power, but writers in its service could transmit correct consciousness to the masses. This was the role of middlebrow fiction: it could convey ideology on an emotional level, something which official speeches or indoctrination could not do. Stalinist fiction

⁷⁰ Alex Inkeles and Raymond A. Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 161, 178-79.

⁷¹ J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 20.

⁷² Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 353.

⁷³ Vera Sandomirsky Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 27-28.

showed the socialist hero as a man of tomorrow, living and toiling in the present but capable of seeing the future. Straddling both the realms of today's hardships and tomorrow's communist paradise, this ideal citizen illustrated the attitude that Soviet citizens should have—as opposed to the villains of Soviet fiction, who could not break free from the petty troubles of the present.⁷⁴

If middlebrow fiction was used to teach the masses how to think correctly, official language—the peculiar jargon of the Party—disciplined officials to think only in the categories allowed by that language. Although not as severe as Newspeak, Party jargon forced its users to approach the world from a Stalinist perspective.⁷⁵ The official language also functioned as a gateway through the Party hierarchy: only those who mastered its vocabulary and structure could advance to the higher levels of the bureaucracy. The language separated those who were ideologically advanced from the masses: Party jargon was all but indecipherable to outsiders—just as Newspeak is not meant for the proles. Like the man who cannot enter the Law in Kafka's parable of the gatekeeper, ordinary citizens stood outside the official language's world of meaning. And for the officials, using the official language was a matter of survival; if

⁷⁴ Ibid., 28-29. Valentin Kataev's novel *Time, Forward!* describes a struggle between the new man and the old world in the field of time management: the time-efficient hero Marguiles pushes his cement brigade to new records, while the villain Nalbandov wants to keep a more human pace, thereby betraying his inability to understand that socialist production is fundamentally different from bourgeois production. See Hanson, *Time and Revolution*, 155-62.

⁷⁵ "The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words." George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Plume, 1983), 246.

they did not conform to the Stalinist style of expression, they could soon find themselves branded as counter-revolutionaries.⁷⁶

Whether in fiction or bureaucratic jargon, totalitarian language is insulating: because it tries to teach a way of thinking that accepts no alternatives, it is bound to hide reality. Its clear-cut, discrete categories easily separates friends from enemies: anyone who opposed collectivization was a kulak and anyone who opposed Stalin's interpretation of Leninism was a Trotskyite.⁷⁷ Lenin's lie—that the dictatorship of the Party was in the interest of the proletariat—"fabricated a compulsory and fictitious language insulated from reality and leading inexorably to unity."⁷⁸ This manufactured unity silenced any competing voices and destroyed plurality; Stalinist language disciplined its users to think like Stalinists—abandoning independent thought for subservience to the idea of total freedom.

Stalinist discipline of the mind was not simply positive training, learning to think according to a few ready-made scripts; it also trained the mind to forget its own previous thoughts and memories—doublethink, if you will. To arrive at its desired future, the Party had to control the present, but to control the present, it also had to control the past.⁷⁹ This is why the Party tried to rewrite history and change human memory: "A totalitarian system cannot survive without constantly rewriting history, eliminating past events, personalities, and ideas and substituting false ones in their place. It was unthinkable in terms of Soviet ideology to say that a particular leader

⁷⁶ Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*, 23.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁸ François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 139.

⁷⁹ "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." Orwell, *1984*, 204.

who had fallen a victim to the purge had once been a true servant but had subsequently fallen from grace: anyone who was proclaimed a traitor in the end must have been one from the beginning.”⁸⁰ Actual historical facts and documents could not teach anything about the past—such details would only, to quote Stalin himself, interest “archive rats” and “hopeless bureaucrats.” The past was not fixed; it could (and should) be altered to serve ideological needs: “facts and documents must be interpreted from the point of view of the present moment.”⁸¹ Not only texts changed as history was rewritten; there was a small industry of cropping and airbrushing artists who had as their only job to falsify photographs—to erase even the visual memory of unpersons, denying their very existence. Milan Kundera opens *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* with an example of this: there is a famous photograph of the Czechoslovak leader Gottwald standing on a balcony in Prague, flanked by his comrades. One of these comrades was Clementis, who, since it was snowing, gave his fur hat to Gottwald to wear. A few years later, Clementis was convicted in a show trial and executed, and so he was erased from all official photographs, including this one: “Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald’s head.”⁸² To the disciplined mind, the rewriting of history was not a lie; it was repair, fixing a history that happened to be incorrect.⁸³ With enough discipline, one could actually change history—the past as it had really happened—simply by rewriting texts in the present.

⁸⁰ Kolakowski, *Main Currents* 3, 95.

⁸¹ Heller and Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, 267.

⁸² Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 4. There are many more examples of falsified photographs; see David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997).

⁸³ Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*, 104-05.

Space and loneliness

No one except the true believers would voluntarily accept the amount of discipline needed for doublethink; mass discipline had to go beyond indoctrination and propaganda. The Bolsheviks understood the connection between behavioral control and the configuration of space: they tried to create an environment that would by its very organization help shape the new man. To do so, they destroyed all autonomous spaces—spaces where one can be together, in the company of others, as well as be solitary, in the company of oneself. By design, there were no spaces to be oneself; the communal apartments and dining halls were spaces for people in the role of the new emancipated socialist man, not in the role of themselves.

By pressing people together in collective mass spaces—the spaces of crowds, not organic groups—the Bolsheviks isolated and atomized their subjects. These collective spaces were not public spaces, because they were strictly functional: they could not support a public life, only mass activities. The purpose of the identical superblocks and dining halls was to make their inhabitants more or less the same, not to give them a space to show the rest of the world who they were. In the collective spaces, there was no room for autonomous, spontaneous action, only for a range of behaviors prescribed by the Party. These were spaces in which freedom was impossible because there was no room to move.⁸⁴

This, of course, was a very conscious aim of the Bolsheviks; they needed subjects that could be molded to their specifications: “The object of a totalitarian system is to destroy all forms of communal life that are not imposed by the state and closely controlled by it, so that individuals are isolated from one another and become

⁸⁴ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 466.

mere instruments in the hands of the state.”⁸⁵ The new socialist man should have no relationships other than with the state; even family ties should be secondary to Party loyalty. Stalin wanted his Komsomol youths not to be well-trained in Marxist theory, but to be informants who would denounce even their parents if it served the Party’s goals.⁸⁶ Having eliminated all public spaces, the Bolsheviks had isolated each individual citizen—making her unable to act, because there was no one else to act with—but by destroying private relationships, they also made each citizen lonely—without a sense of human companionship.⁸⁷

This artificial loneliness was necessary because the Bolsheviks wanted to control not only public life, but also the very innermost thoughts of each of their citizens. In a situation of isolation, it is still possible to have a life independent of the state, but loneliness, the desperate experience of not belonging to the world at all, leaves open even the privacy of our own minds—because loneliness destroys common sense, the ability to make judgments that we learn from those around us.⁸⁸ Loneliness is a state of existential nothingness. Only the lonely individual can become the new type of human being, because only she is the *tabula rasa* on which the Party can inscribe its new consciousness.

The Great Terror

Molding a new man from the old one was not simply a matter of positive behavioral training: all discipline creates boundaries of prohibitions around the behaviors defined

⁸⁵ Kolakowski, *Main Currents* 3, 85.

⁸⁶ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 252-53.

⁸⁷ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 474.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 475.

as acceptable and normal, and transgression of those boundaries is punishable. Since the object of Stalinist disciplinary training was to transform human nature, and not simply train individuals for the specific needs of each institution, the Party took transgression very seriously. However, the totalistic nature of the transformation meant that it had to punish even the most minute and imperceptible transgressions. The Party wanted to create a new way of thinking—or rather, a new way of directing thought—and so anyone who could potentially think a dangerous thought—that is, everyone—was a possible criminal: “The category of the suspect thus embraces under totalitarian conditions the total population; every thought that deviates from the officially prescribed and permanently changing line is already suspect, no matter in which field of human activity it occurs. Simply because of their capacity to think, human beings are suspects by definition, and this suspicion cannot be diverted by exemplary behavior, for the human capacity to think is also a capacity to change one’s mind.”⁸⁹

Not only was everyone a suspect, but the constant presence of the secret police made sure that everyone *felt* like a suspect. In this society of isolated and lonely individuals, any social ties a person might have had were cut off because his friends, neighbors, and even his family were potential informers.⁹⁰ Since one could be denounced to the secret police for previously having failed to denounce someone later discovered to be an enemy of the people, everybody more or less had to spy on their

⁸⁹ Ibid., 430.

⁹⁰ Kolakowski, *Main Currents* 3, 91.

neighbors. The system of mutual surveillance was universal in the 1930s; every word was equivocal and could later be given a damning reinterpretation.⁹¹

The constant surveillance—or, at least, the perception of constant surveillance—was a powerful disciplinary tool of Party control. Discipline is useless unless those who are being disciplined believe that someone is watching them: “The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible.”⁹² Surveillance is a means of coercion which establishes a hold over the body without resorting to violence—or any other visible means of coercion. It is an economical power, with nothing but “a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself.”⁹³

Such interiorization requires that the individual is always potentially being watched; if the individual can know that she is not being watched, she does not have to act as if she were being observed. It is the uncertainty, the arbitrariness of surveillance that makes it powerful. In the collective spaces of the communal apartments and dining halls, there was no place to hide from the gaze of neighbors and strangers; one was always potentially being watched.

But being watched is not enough to discipline us: we have to be aware that there are consequences if we transgress the boundaries of normal behavior. Only then

⁹¹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 431.

⁹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 170-71.

⁹³ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 155.

will we interiorize the panoptic power of our neighbor's gaze.⁹⁴ In the late 1930s, the consequences of what the Party perceived as a transgression were extremely severe: one would be removed from society, either through execution or deportation to the labor camps.⁹⁵ The purges were a tool for making each citizen internalize the notion that she was a possible criminal against the Party; the constant surveillance and threat of arrest molded behavior in accordance with the Party line. If one did not behave correctly, one could expect to be arrested at any moment.⁹⁶

The great purges of 1937-38, starting in the Party and eventually spreading to all of society, were a form of discipline that established boundaries—very narrow boundaries—around each person's behavior. These boundaries allowed only behavior directly sanctioned by the Party. And even then, since it was perfectly possible to behave correctly and still think incorrectly—Winston Smith dutifully kept up his job

⁹⁴ The Panopticon is a prison design by Jeremy Bentham; in it, all cells open to a courtyard, where a central watchtower with darkened windows allows the guards to see into any given cell at any given moment without the prisoners' knowing whether or not they are being watched. The inmates are constantly aware of their visibility, and will act as if they are always being watched—even if they are not. The major effect of the Panopticon is "to arrange things [so] that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of this power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

⁹⁵ The principle of using purges to maintain the purity of the revolution goes back to the founding of the Third International: one of the necessary criteria for a communist party to belong to the Comintern was that it "must steadily and systematically *remove* from all responsible posts in the labor movement, in the party organization, editorial boards, trade unions, parliamentary fractions, cooperative societies, municipalities, etc., all reformists and followers of the 'center,' and have them replaced by communists, even at the cost of replacing, at the beginning, 'experienced' leaders by rank-and-file workingmen." Helmut Gruber, *International Communism in the Era of Lenin: A Documentary History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 288. (Italics in original.)

⁹⁶ These arrests were for all practical purposes invisible even though they took place in the open. Arrest procedures were unpredictable and the timing of arrests often unexpected—with the purpose of confusing the arrested, so that they would not resist arrest. However, precisely because the arrests were supposed to be invisible, the very act of making them visible turned the panoptic power on the police rather than the arrested; for example, a woman who screamed and clung to a streetlamp made her arresters so self-conscious that she escaped arrest—at least for a while. See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation. Volume I* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 10-16.

at the Ministry of Truth even as he began to question Big Brother—purges had to eradicate thoughtcrime as well. A person's actual guilt or innocence was not relevant to the Party: if one were suspected of being a socially dangerous element, that very suspicion implied that one was potentially dangerous, and if one were potentially dangerous, one was a socially dangerous element—Q.E.D. By the very fact that one was suspected of being a criminal—that is, a potential criminal—one had to be punished. This is why the Party could dictate verdicts to entire categories of cases and suspects before the specific cases had even been heard.⁹⁷

Rather than distribute punishments for individual transgressions, the Party sought to internalize the dangers of possible crime in the entire population at once: it established quotas calling for specific numbers of arrests and executions in entire regions and branches of industry.⁹⁸ Statistics came to substitute for reality; the visual simplicity of a quantifiable—and hence scientific—table of socially dangerous elements that should be cut out from the body of society created the illusion of progress towards the total freedom of communism. If all potential thoughtcriminals were removed—and the numbers seemed to indicate that they were—those who were left must have internalized the norms of the new man. The lessons of the indiscriminate and arbitrary nature of the purges—in which even the suspicion of an incorrect thought could mean death—were clear: do exactly what the Party tells you, accept everything the Party says as true, and above all, do not think for yourself.

⁹⁷ An NKVD order from 1937 instructs that anti-Soviet elements should be “subject to immediate arrest and, after consideration of their case by the troikas [special three-member tribunals], to be shot.” Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*, 475.

⁹⁸ For an example of an official list of quotas, see *Ibid.*, 475-76.

Because of the Party's position as the visible representation of the October Revolution and its promise of total freedom, it could not punish dissent simply by disciplinary reeducation or secret execution. For those who publicly committed the crime of having a mind independent of the Party—even if it was a mind dogmatically guided by Marxist ideology—the Party had to avenge spectacular justice. This was not the spectacle of public torture and execution, in which the body of the criminal was visibly violated as a retribution for his violating the laws; since the laws symbolized the equivalence of the king and the body politic, the criminal had implicitly violated the body of the king as well.⁹⁹ Rather, the spectacle had to be quite different. Since the criminal had violated not the body of the king but the mind of the Party, the Party publicly inscribed its power on the *mind*, rather than the body, of the criminal. In the place of public torture and execution, the Soviet Union had show trials.

Like the spectacular executions, the spectacle of the show trial was aimed primarily at the spectators, not the participants—instilling terror at the power of the Party.¹⁰⁰ The show trial was also a ritual of social purification: “By expelling Pharmakos—the scapegoat, the sin-bearer—the community cleansed itself symbolically of evil. ... Pharmakos-Trotsky is cast out into the wilderness, while the people and the government unite in a death-celebration.”¹⁰¹ Like rituals, the show trials were carefully scripted theater performances, where the accused—the actors—

⁹⁹ The violation of the body of the condemned demonstrated his guilt: “It was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime that he had committed. His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all.” Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

¹⁰¹ Philip Rahv, *Essays on Literature and Politics, 1932-1972* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 290.

tried to play their parts as convincingly as possible, without thought that the performance showed the corrupt morality of the regime.¹⁰² The show trials were instruments of popular mobilization, creating a carnival atmosphere in which the Party legitimated its rule by blaming the evil wreckers and saboteurs that now stood accused.¹⁰³

The most important component of the show trials was the confession. The defendants confessed to a series of outrageous crimes committed as part of a grand conspiracy to bring down the Soviet Union. These conspiracies were inevitably fictions to which bits of reality had been added; they were an alternative history in which everything hung together coherently and in which every action of the accused since childhood could be explained totally by a single explanation: anti-Soviet conspiracy.¹⁰⁴ The confessions were so central because the defendant, by admitting his own guilt, acknowledged the truth of the Party. He had violated the mind of the Party, but now he recognized that the Party was always right. “He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.”¹⁰⁵ That is, even if the Party were wrong about the particulars of one’s guilt—or, for that matter, about every single fact that it ever made a claim—the Party would still be right because it was the living representative of communist consciousness.

Before going on trial, interrogators often tried to convince the accused, if the latter were true believers, that their confession would be one last service to the

¹⁰² Eugen Loebel, *My Mind on Trial* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 183.

¹⁰³ Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartošek and Jean-Louis Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 192-93.

¹⁰⁴ Tucker, *Soviet Political Mind*, 49, 62-63.

¹⁰⁵ Orwell, *1984*, 245.

Party—as when the Bukharin-like Rubashov is persuaded to confess in *Darkness at Noon*: “You and your friends, Citizen Rubashov, have made a rent in the Party. If your repentance is real, then you must help us to heal this rent. I have told you, it is the last service the Party will ask of you.”¹⁰⁶ Although the vast majority of confessions were extracted through torture, the most prominent figures in the show trials seem to have cooperated to a large extent because of their conviction “that the party was the bearer of historical truth and that they had to sacrifice their own lives on the shrine of the party’s ultimate interests.”¹⁰⁷ Both interrogator and accused knew that the confession was a fiction, an invention, but both insisted on the truth of the fiction at the trials, as if loyalty to the Party really would help build a perfect world, even at the expense of truth and one’s own life.¹⁰⁸ Still, true believers are also human, and although the accused invariably played along during the show trials, they did not do so without resistance. Bukharin, for example, admitted his enormous guilt in general, but denied many of the particular accusations. Most likely, he tried to turn the trial into an anti-trial, putting Stalin on trial for having betrayed the revolution—so strong was his faith that even in the end, Bukharin had not learned the folly of dogmatic revolutionary dreaming, only the folly of Stalin’s murderous cult of personality.

Bukharin’s crime was to have allegiances to something other than the Party as embodied by Stalin. Because he was a criminal, he had to be entirely criminal—hence the need to concoct an elaborate conspiracy to explain his otherwise loyal behavior.

¹⁰⁶ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 193.

¹⁰⁷ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 42.

¹⁰⁸ Kolakowski, *Main Currents 3*, 87-88.

Bukharin was lucky, in a sense: we remember him because he was historically important enough not to disappear without a trace. Others were not so lucky; they have forever been swallowed up by the black hole of the gulag.

Concentration camp society

If the show trials were the visible component of social purification, the gulag, which reached a much larger proportion of the population, was the near-invisible removal of less prominent socially dangerous elements. The gulag was a “social protection measure”—any person suspected of being “socially dangerous” could be sent into exile, even if that person was not suspected of any particular crime.¹⁰⁹ These socially dangerous persons ranged from unsightly marginals like prostitutes and beggars to potential political oppositionists.¹¹⁰ Any behavior outside the limits of the normal, i.e., failing to live up to the unrealistic norm of *homo sovieticus*, was *de facto* criminal under Stalin. One could be sent to labor camps not only for one’s “objective” status, but for suggesting that the Soviet Union should build large submarines rather than small ones (a mistake which got Bogrov in *Darkness at Noon* executed), for pointing out that Lysenko’s ideas on genetics, no matter how convenient, would result in a famine if they were applied, for trying to feed one’s family after Lysenko’s ideas had been applied, for not meeting one’s production quota, or for being the first to stop applauding—after eleven minutes—at a Party conference.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ G. M. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 23; Conquest, *Great Terror*, 285.

¹¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 125-26; Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, 66.

¹¹¹ See Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, chapter 2.

The labor camps were the refuse stations of Soviet society; that was where those whom the Party deemed abnormal, those who did not conform to its standard of the new man, ended up. To the Party, the existence of the abnormal pointed to its failure to emancipate *all* of humankind—by all accounts, anyone living under the rule of the Party should be able to reach the stage of enhanced humanity of Marx’s communist society. The abnormal could not be redeemed in Stalin’s Soviet Union, because anyone who was not fundamentally, essentially flawed should, if not emancipated, at least be on her way to emancipation. The abnormal person was not a new socialist man, and to avoid criticism that the Party was not creating a new race of supermen and superwomen, anyone who was abnormal had to be made invisible. Since the abnormal was not supposed to exist, it was the function of the gulag to make it seem like it did not. The gulag and its administration “was a typical bureaucratic institution in form, but in essence it was a state within the state, a veritable colonial country of labor camps with its own laws, customs, moral standards, and social groups.”¹¹² Solzhenitsyn’s image of the gulag as an archipelago is apt: although physically located on the land of the Soviet Union, the labor camps were islands all unto themselves, not belonging to the nation.

Since the abnormal was not supposed to exist, the labor camps were invisible in public discourse; it was not discussed openly, and ordinary people avoided the subject even behind closed doors.¹¹³ This prohibition extended to Western fellow-travelers: Jean-Paul Sartre famously proposed that the gulags should not be

¹¹² Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, xxi.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

mentioned publicly, to avoid disillusioning the French working class.¹¹⁴ One could not mention the Gulag, but at the same time its existence had to be well known, as an incentive to remain within the boundaries of the normal.¹¹⁵

These boundaries had to be unambiguous. One could not be normal in one area and abnormal in another; one had to be completely abnormal—a delinquent. It was not merely one's actions that were criminal; it was one's whole being. This is why the crimes of the accused at the show trials were so fantastic: not just the particular crimes one committed, but all one's deeds and thoughts, one's entire person must be wrong. The Party, after all, was the embodiment of revolutionary truth, and it could not make mistakes. Once one was arrested for one crime, one was implicitly guilty of other crimes as well; since only counter-revolutionaries were arrested, all one's deeds had to become counter-revolutionary.

Since the prisoners in the labor camps were “objectively” unable to transform themselves into the socialist men of the future—otherwise, why were they there?—they could be treated accordingly. Pathetically obsolete human beings, they were really no more than objects. But as such, they could still be useful to the Party: camp inmates were slaves, human tools which could be used to serve the Party and help build socialism. They built roads, dams, canals, and even cities.¹¹⁶ And just like any tool, they could be thrown aside when they had stopped functioning: there was a complete lack of respect for human life in the gulag, and it was not unusual that prisoners who could no longer work were shot or sunk under the ice.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Conquest, *Great Terror*, 472.

¹¹⁵ Kolakowski, *Main Currents* 3, 96.

¹¹⁶ Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 79.

¹¹⁷ Conquest, *Great Terror*, 322.

In the labor camps, the aim was the total domination of the individual. Every aspect of life was controlled meticulously: the prisoners were shepherded from bed to meals to work according to a strict daily timetable; they were not allowed any personal possessions; any deviance from the innumerable camp rules that surrounded them and governed their behavior was punished with solitary confinement and lowered rations; and so on. There were even loudspeakers, mounted on poles, blasting propaganda all day to help the inmates think correctly.¹¹⁸ This discipline was not intended to transform the prisoners into the new Soviet man, but to eliminate individual differences. Ideally, the camps would destroy individuality completely, stripping the prisoners of their humanity: “Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. ... The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing ...”¹¹⁹

But for all the attempts at complete domination, the prisoners struggled to retain their individuality in the face of overwhelming repression. Ivan Denisovich, not a remarkable prisoner in any way, stays within the boundaries of accepted gulag behavior—but he is not extinguished. He is completely unfree, but by focusing on the

¹¹⁸ Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, 78.

¹¹⁹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

small rewards and joys of prison life, he makes his punishment bearable, and in the end, his day is “[almost] a happy one.”¹²⁰ Like Camus’s Sisyphus, who is happy in his punishment, Ivan Denisovich is, within the very limited range of behaviors available to him, master of his own fate.

Still, the model citizen in a concentration camp society is not Ivan Denisovich, but Winston Smith in Room 101. The aspiration of any society driven by a desire to implement total freedom is total domination of every individual subject—or rather, the complete elimination of the individual subject. In a perfect totalitarian system, individuals have become superfluous: “Pavlov’s dog, the human specimen reduced to the most elementary reactions, the bundle of reactions that can always be liquidated and replaced by other bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way, is the model ‘citizen’ of a totalitarian state; and such a citizen can be produced only imperfectly outside of the camps. ... Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity.”¹²¹ The ideal world of Stalinism is one in which everything, including human behavior, can be created and molded by the Party.

Conclusion

The danger of total freedom in practice is that, for the ordinary citizen, such a society, no matter how noble its final goal, will be a concentration camp society, where people are literally in chains in the name of their own freedom. Because total freedom is a utopian type of freedom, manically hoping for a perfect world, following the logic of

¹²⁰ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991), 181.

¹²¹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 456-57.

an idea to its absurd extreme becomes more important than reality; maintaining ideological purity overrides any human consequences. The infatuation with the idea allows one to extinguish everything else, even one's own personality.¹²² And so *any* sacrifice is necessary in the name of the idea; the wildly unrealistic plans of building socialism got their appeal and the disasters of total freedom in practice got their justification from the promise of an unprecedented new society.¹²³

This new society is only a vague idea in the heads of dreamers, and it is attractive primarily on a visceral level. No concrete plans for it exist, and so it is impossible to evaluate progress towards it other than intuitively. Since the final society of total freedom is above all symbolic, progress towards it will be measured by reaching symbolic, almost visually satisfying, goals. With such poor evaluative criteria, the appearance of progress and actual progress are easily confused. And so, since the total transformation of humankind needed for a leap to the kingdom of freedom also requires total control over those who are forced to leap, the very appearance of progress—the building of steel mills, no matter how unnecessary, or the collectivization of farms, no matter what the cost of human life—is more important than allowing individuals to control their own lives.

In a concentration camp society, we are not only deprived of our freedom of action; we are deprived of the things that allow us to live in the world. Thought disappears: total control eliminates independent expressions of thought. Under Stalin,

¹²² “Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction. The danger in exchanging the necessary insecurity of philosophical thought for the total explanation of an ideology and its *Weltanschauung*, is not even so much the risk of falling for some usually vulgar, always uncritical assumption as of exchanging the freedom inherent in man's capacity to think for the strait jacket of logic with which man can force himself almost as violently as he is forced by some outside power.” Ibid., 470.

¹²³ Furet, *Passing of an Illusion*, 144.

everyone wrote the same, expressing themselves in the same clichés—simply regurgitating Stalin’s *Short Course*.¹²⁴ Memory also disappears: not only is the past constantly in flux, but those who can remember episodes which the Party wants to be forgotten disappear as well.¹²⁵ Finally, time itself disappears—not in the sense of the infinitely compressed time of continually increasing production tempos, but as a meaningful measurement of the passing of events: the Party knows objectively where history is headed; it knows everything beforehand. And so nothing happens. “Public life ceases to be an arena where different, more or less autonomous agents square off, and becomes no more than the manifestation and fulfillment of the truth and the will of this single agent. In a world governed by this principle, there is no room for mystery; ownership of complete truth means that everything is known ahead of time.”¹²⁶ If everything is known beforehand, nothing can be spontaneous. If there is no spontaneity, only organized events, history is for all practical purposes meaningless: “As uniqueness disappears from the flow of events, so does continuity; everything merges into the single gray image of one and the same cycle and we say, ‘There is nothing happening.’ Here, too, a deadly order has been imposed: all activity is completely organized and so completely deadened.”¹²⁷ Numbness, the loss of a sense of time, replaces history; time enters a dream-state where one can no longer be sure if events which one remembers actually happened.

¹²⁴ Kolakowski, *Main Currents* 3, 99-100.

¹²⁵ In an ideal totalitarian society, the police would have a gigantic map showing every person’s relation to every other person. “If this map really did exist, not even memory would stand in the way of the totalitarian claim to domination; such a map might make it possible to obliterate people without any traces, as if they had never existed at all.” Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 434.

¹²⁶ Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 333.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

Most importantly, concentration camp society makes us lonely. “What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.”¹²⁸ Total freedom, which promises earthly salvation, cannot, in the end, make us free. All it can do, if the logic of its implementation is followed through in practice, is to obliterate us, to leave us completely and utterly alone.

¹²⁸ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 477.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PROMISE OF LIBERAL FREEDOM

Liberalism's promise is far more limited than Marxism's. It does not promise to reshape the world and create a perfect society; it is not transformative; it is not total; it does not operate on society as a whole. Liberal freedom promises merely to protect the individual from arbitrary interference. Liberalism shifts the focus away from grandiose social solutions and onto the individual.

The liberal individual is a private being; he is the autonomous ruler over his own private space of freedom. This freedom is quite limited; it allows for narrow public participation, and it does not protect the individual from being controlled at work. The liberal individual, furthermore, is a private self, not exactly isolated from her social context, but also capable of detaching herself from it, of being quite independent of it. The reason for liberalism's limited freedom and detached self is that liberalism promises to protect the autonomy of the individual within her private space of freedom, and to protect that autonomy, liberalism cannot allow the government—or any other power—to impose a conception of the good life on the individual. She must always retain her ability to find her own good in her own way.

What is liberal freedom?

Liberal freedom is typically defined by non-interference: I am free if no one interferes with my activity.¹ There is a spatial metaphor at the very heart of liberalism: to guarantee non-interference, I must have my own personal area which no one can violate. This enclosed space has a fence of laws, rights, and procedures which are meant to protect me from arbitrary political authority.² I am “naturally free from subjection to any government.”³ However, liberty is not license: I am not free to do anything I wish, only to manage my activities and property myself—within the fence of the laws. Freedom in this sense is freedom *from*—freedom from interference within the boundaries of my own enclosed space.⁴ Liberal freedom resembles property: it is a plot of land which I can dispose of as I wish, and which is surrounded by a fence keeping out trespassers.⁵

The purpose of this freedom is to guarantee the autonomy of the individual: “Every adult should be able to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult.”⁶ Liberalism does not prescribe a way of life, leaving, as much as possible, decisions of how to live up to the individual. This is why liberal freedom is

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1998), 194.

² “[A] frontier must be drawn between the area of private life and that of public authority.” Ibid., 196. Also George Klosko, *Democratic Procedures and Liberal Consensus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 98.

⁴ Ibid., 32; Berlin, *Proper Study of Mankind*, 199.

⁵ Locke sees land as the “chief matter” of property, and whatever land I put my labor into and can make use of is my property. See Locke, *Second Treatise*, 21.

⁶ Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear” in Nancy L. Rosenblum, Ed. *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

imagined as a blank space: the individual can do whatever she wants with her private space—as the ruler over her own space, she can also be the ruler over her own life.

But such rulership is not possible if the space of the individual is not secure, and that is the reason for the other aspect of liberalism’s spatial metaphor: the fences surrounding and protecting the individual’s space of freedom. Perhaps the most fundamental distinction in liberalism is between the private and the public; this distinction sets the boundary within which the individual is protected.⁷ This protection is extremely important, because public power is so much stronger than individual, private power. Hence Judith Shklar’s “liberalism of fear”: governments (and other sources of public authority) have abused their power, robbed individuals of their autonomy, and coerced them through fear. “We say ‘never again,’ but somewhere someone is being tortured right now, and acute fear has again become the most common form of social control.”⁸ The liberalism of fear tries to limit abuses of public power by restraining the power of governments over individuals. This is why the rule of law, civil rights, and fair procedures are important to liberals. Without restraints, governments could crush the individual: “it is in court that the citizen meets the might of the state, and it is not an equal contest. Without well-defined procedures, honest judges, opportunities for counsel and for appeals, no one has a chance.”⁹ This is not an argument against governments as such: liberals know that governments protect and serve the citizens, but they are also worried that governments will abuse their power. For Shklar, the liberalism of fear requires “a pluralist order with multiple

⁷ “The limits of coercion begin, though they do not end, with a prohibition upon invading the private realm...” Ibid., 24.

⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁹ Ibid., 37.

centers of power and institutionalized rights.”¹⁰ If power is dispersed, no single center can concentrate too much power, and the government’s abuses of power will be less severe.

Protection from abusive government is not the only reason for the protective fences around the individual’s space of freedom, however: those fences are also meant to protect the individual from the tyranny of the majority. In the normal course of a democratic process, some decisions or policies may reflect the prejudice of the majority, or perhaps unintentionally harm a minority group. Ronald Dworkin suggests that the members of this group should be able to resist these decisions or policies without necessarily challenging the legitimacy of the institutions making them. The way to accomplish this is with “a scheme of civil rights, whose effect will be to determine those political decisions that are antecedently likely to reflect strong external preferences, and to remove those decisions from majoritarian political institutions altogether.”¹¹ In this way, those who are weaker or outnumbered can protect themselves from being run over by the normal functioning of the apparatus of governance, which is meant to reflect the preferences of the majority.

It may seem suspicious to remove decisions “likely to reflect strong external preferences” from the political process, but that removal is necessitated by a basic premise of liberalism, namely, that the government should be neutral between conceptions of the good life.¹² This premise, in turn, flows from liberalism’s promise of autonomy: liberalism cannot at the same time allow the individual to decide for

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹ Ronald Dworkin, “Liberalism” in Stuart Hampshire, Ed. *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 134.

¹² *Ibid.*, 127.

herself the best way to live her life *and* allow the government to impose upon the individual its own idea of how its citizens should live. Any government, of course, has to limit the conduct of its citizens—but such limitations are legitimate only when they protect or secure the citizens’ rights, not when they prohibit supposedly unethical but otherwise harmless actions. The line between the two is blurry, however, and no regime, liberal or otherwise, can avoid imposing moral norms through its legislation. Every law carries a moral imperative, and Dworkin is aware of this: “Any political and economic scheme will make some kinds of lives more difficult or expensive to lead than they would be under other schemes.”¹³ The point, however, is that the law should, insofar as possible, not be used to impose a particular version of the good life. But this does not mean that we should stop arguing about the good life or trying to persuade others that our version of the good life is superior—it simply means that the law is not a legitimate weapon in that battle.¹⁴

The reason for this is that a liberal government must treat its citizens as equals; that is, it cannot favor some citizens over others when granting legal protection, rights, and so on. Doing so would privilege certain conceptions of the good life and also compromise the autonomy of the disfavored citizens. This is why Dworkin identifies equality as the fundamental liberal value, and it is also why he believes that a liberal regime would be a democracy (which gives each citizen equal voice in the process of governing) with an economic system that distributes material

¹³ Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 282.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

wealth fairly.¹⁵ Without adequate material resources, the individual would not be able to practice her autonomy.

The principles of neutrality and equality are also related to the principle of tolerance: liberalism tolerates all individuals' experiments in living, as long as they do not interfere with the freedom of other individuals to perform their own experiments in living. Liberalism must do this, because if it did not, it would not be neutral towards conceptions of the good life, and it would also not allow every individual autonomy over her own space of freedom. Tolerance does not necessarily mean blind acceptance, however: liberalism prohibits the government or its citizens from using public power to coerce individuals into a particular way of life, but it does not prohibit individuals from disagreeing with the chosen life of other individuals or from trying to persuade them of that fact. That is, liberalism is not the nihilistic relativism of "anything goes": it asks each individual to tolerate the eccentricities of those around her, but does not ask her to embrace or endorse those eccentricities. Liberal freedom is the freedom to be left alone so that one can live one's own life as one sees fit. As Jürgen Habermas puts it: "the legally guaranteed freedom of choice of private legal subjects creates the free space for pursuing a plan of life informed by one's own conception of the good."¹⁶

This freedom is essentially private; it can be enjoyed in isolation from other people. As long as no one interferes with my activity, the presence or absence of

¹⁵ See Dworkin in Hampshire, Ed. *Public and Private Morality*, section IV.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 100.

other people is largely irrelevant.¹⁷ Contrast this with a conception of freedom as non-domination: it is a protection from the capacity for arbitrary interference, not merely the absence of such interference. We can be dominated without interference—that is, we can be left without meaningful choices even though no one explicitly limits our choices.¹⁸ Non-interference means that choice as such is important—an infinity of bad options is preferable to a single good option—whereas non-domination is concerned with the quality of choices, however limited in number. Non-domination is a kind of power, a measure of control that I have over my own life: it is not merely a guarantee that I can escape into isolation when the world overwhelms me; it is a guarantee that I will not be dominated even in society.¹⁹

However we may think of liberal freedom—as non-interference or as non-domination—its goal is the same: to give every individual the autonomy to lead a life of her own choosing. This life may of course include a public dimension, but that public dimension is primarily a way to practice one’s private independence: “From this perspective the public autonomy of citizens who participate in the practice of political self-legislation is supposed to make possible the personal self-determination of private persons. While it may also have an intrinsic value for many people, public

¹⁷ Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 66-67.

¹⁸ Domination can be seen as “the fact that in some respect the power-bearer has the capacity to interfere arbitrarily, even if they [sic] are never going to do so. This fact means that the power-victim acts in the relevant area by the leave, explicit or implicit, of the power-bearer...” Ibid., 63. An example of this is eminent domain, which allows the state to appropriate privately owned land for the sake of the public good: even if the state never interferes and seizes my property, it dominates me by virtue of its capacity to do so. My land is not freely my own to dispose of if the state can take possession of it for its own purposes.

¹⁹ Ibid., 25, 67, 69.

autonomy appears in the first instance as a means for realizing private autonomy.”²⁰
The liberal citizen, then, is first and foremost a private individual.

Liberal citizenship

How does the liberal individual fare outside the private sphere? What does liberal citizenship look like? Inspired by the principle of neutrality towards conceptions of the good life, Dworkin thinks that “the collective life of a political community includes its official political acts: legislation, adjudication, enforcement, and the other executive functions of government. An integrated citizen will count his community’s success or failure in these formal political acts as resonating in his own life, as improving or diminishing it. On the liberal view, nothing more should be added.”²¹

This appears to be an inadequate understanding of communal life, but the point of restricting collective life to the formal, official acts of the government is to protect liberal tolerance and neutrality.²² Once communal life goes beyond the arena of official politics, it runs the risk of interfering with the autonomy of the private individual: liberal citizenship cannot privilege those who choose to integrate their personal lives with that of the community; to do so would be to privilege that conception of the good life.

The restriction of collective life to the formal acts of government is probably why liberal politics is often described as a competition over public resources. Habermas, for example, sees liberal politics as “a struggle for positions that grant

²⁰ Habermas, *Inclusion of the Other*, 100-01.

²¹ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 231.

²² *Ibid.*, 232.

access to administrative power.”²³ The liberal citizen, in this scheme, participates in collective life by casting ballots supporting those candidates she thinks best reflect her preferences. Liberalism does not ask its citizens to participate in public life with a view to some greater good (nor does it prohibit them from doing so); it fully expects the citizens to carry their private interests and preferences into public life: the government should reflect the aggregate of the citizens’ expressed preferences as closely as possible.

Liberal citizenship, then, does not carry the burden of thinking for society as a whole; the liberal citizen can remain a private individual. Moreover, the rights which define citizenship are those of the private individual—both the rights protecting the individual from the state and the rights allowing participation in public life. Habermas again:

According to the liberal view, the citizen’s status is determined primarily by the individual rights he or she has vis-à-vis the state and other citizens. As bearers of individual rights citizens enjoy the protection of the government as long as they pursue their private interests within the boundaries drawn by legal statutes—and this includes protection against state interventions that violate the legal prohibition on government interference. Individual rights are negative rights that guarantee a domain of freedom of choice within which legal persons are freed from external compulsion. Political rights have the same structure: they afford citizens the opportunity to assert their

²³ Habermas, *Inclusion of the Other*, 243.

private interests in such a way that, by means of elections, the composition of parliamentary bodies, and the formation of a government, these interests are finally aggregated into a political will that can affect the administration. In this way the citizens in their political role can determine whether governmental authority is exercised in the interest of the citizens as members of society.²⁴

Liberal citizenship is the exercise of making one's private interests and preferences publicly known. These interests and preferences may be selfish or they may be unselfish; liberalism is silent on the question of political motivations, because it aims to remain neutral about questions of the good life.

The primary political act in a liberal democracy is constitutive, creating a constitution; this constitution establishes the procedures by which political questions will be settled. By doing so, the constitution sets limits to politics—and thus to democracy; it “regulates the amount of democratic politics that is let in.”²⁵ The point of limiting politics in this way is, again, neutrality: liberalism does not want to let questions about foundational principles into everyday politics, because such questions not only disrupt the normal workings of governing institutions, but they cannot be answered within the framework of liberal democratic political processes, and more importantly, if they were ever acted on by the government, the government would become an instrument for imposing particular versions of the good life on the population.

²⁴ Ibid., 240-41.

²⁵ Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy” in *Constellations* (vol. 1, no. 1: April 1994), 14.

One may object that this puts too much emphasis on following procedural rules. Certainly, the decisions are made following the procedures established by the constitution, but that does not preclude heated debates about the issues. Although John Rawls's definition of participation puts the citizen in the passive public role of approving policies, the citizen is privately free to discuss the policies and to try to persuade others of the correctness of her opinion: "By presenting conceptions of the public good and policies designed to promote social ends, rival parties seek the citizen's approval in accordance with just procedural rules against a background of freedom of thought and assembly in which the fair value of political liberty is assured. The principle of participation compels those in authority to be responsive to the felt interests of the electorate." (Rawls 1971 227) Elected representatives carry a heavy burden in liberal democracy: they must be responsive to the electorate without being servile. Since the citizens are cut off from direct participation in government decisions, they must trust their representatives to speak for them.

Rousseau writes that the English think that they are free, but that they are free only when they elect their MPs; "[once] these are elected, the populace is enslaved, it is nothing."²⁶ One may wonder whether they are free even when they vote: an election is by necessity a statistical event—one counts the votes, and the person or party with the largest number of votes wins—but statistics, by definition, do not take individuals into account, other than as points of observation. It does not matter if my vote is the result of careful, informed deliberations or of a hasty drunken whim; all

²⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 198.

votes are counted equally. That is how it has to be in a representative democracy, and there is nothing wrong with it.

The larger point here is that in order to protect neutrality, liberal citizenship is narrowly defined. The liberal individual is welcome and has the right to be an active member of any number of groups in society, political or non-political; but that membership falls outside the definition of liberal citizenship. The rights of liberal individuals are not strictly negative, merely protections from arbitrary interference; liberal individuals also have positive rights, including ones which grant them access to the public realm and to the institutions of government—freedom of speech and assembly, the right to vote, and so on.²⁷

Since citizenship is so narrowly defined in liberalism, citizen participation in official public life is minimized.²⁸ This minimal participation shields the private liberal individual from the unpredictabilities of public life, which might otherwise threaten her autonomy; it is a guarantee of liberal freedom, of the integrity of the fence protecting the liberal individual from arbitrary interference. Representatives make participation their vocation, and the citizens can remain private, protected individuals.

Representative democracy is not about active participation, not about a directly self-governing *demos*. The dilemma of representatives is that if they are bound by the will or instructions of the people, they are just the empty mouthpieces of the people who do not participate in public affairs, but if they are understood to

²⁷ Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 209, 224.

²⁸ Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 14.

become the rulers of the people who elected them, representation requires the people to voluntarily give up their claim to self-governance, and the power of the people exists then only on election day. “In the first instance, government has degenerated into mere administration, the public realm has vanished; there is no space either for seeing or being seen in action ... or for discussion and decision, ... political matters are those that are dictated by necessity to be decided by experts, but not open to opinions and genuine choice. ... In the second instance, ... the age-old distinction between ruler and ruled” reappears; “once more, the people are not admitted to the public realm, once more the business of government has become the privilege of the few.”²⁹

The choices are not necessarily that stark, of course: liberal individuals, although they cannot participate in the official, formal actions of government, can still voice their opinions publicly in order to influence their representatives. Still, because liberal politics is limited, disallowing questions of foundational principles, the informal public discussions that liberal individuals can participate in can have an effect on liberal politics only if they are limited in the same way. Public discussion centers on distributive questions, not substantive questions about the larger organization of society.³⁰ Citizens, moreover, have no direct power to influence the limited political agenda, but participate by deposing representatives whose opinions and policies they dislike.

Liberal citizenship is anchored in the protection of the private individual’s space of freedom; the liberal individual chooses a representative (in the relatively

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 237.

³⁰ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 70.

private space of the voting booth) based on her private interests and preferences, and she is never forced to abandon her autonomy by having to participate in a more engaged public life. And even though she does have the right to participate more actively in public life, she will then not be protected from arbitrary interference. Liberalism can protect the private individual in her role as citizen because of its limited definition of citizenship, but once the liberal individual steps outside those limits, it can no longer protect her autonomy.

Work and leisure

Liberalism offers only limited protection to its citizens when they participate in public life, and it is similarly limited in the realm of work. Can I be free when I am at work? Since I am not free from interference, I am not free by the liberal definition. Work is not an enclosed space where no one else can touch me, and many liberal rights—freedom of speech, assembly, movement—apply only with serious restrictions. A liberal worker is confined; he is not autonomous.

Most fundamentally, the worker is confined by time, ruled by the temporal rhythms of work.³¹ Time at work is not our own; we do not dispose of it freely. Most of us do not set our own work schedules; we have to adapt to the demands of our work environment. This accommodation goes beyond the time we spend at work: we spend time going to and from work, and we wake up at a particular time in order not to be late for work. In terms of time, work is the privileged activity: our other activities are structured around the relatively inflexible time when we have to work—

³¹ Daniel Bell, *Work and Its Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), 5.

the need to work makes other activities secondary, pushing them to nights and weekends.

We are controlled when we are at work. This is in some measure unavoidable: whether we are directly laboring to gather food or working to create a great masterpiece, work is always, at least to some extent, driven by the need to survive. But work is also controlled externally: an industrial worker or a serf has more external constraints than a master craftsman. It is useless to speculate whether we are more controlled at work now than in the past, but it should be clear that the controls of industrial mass production or knowledge production are qualitatively different from those of feudal agriculture. An example which is striking more because of the severity of its control than because of its contemporary relevance is Taylorist production.

Frederick Taylor thought that labor could be managed scientifically, that only science, not rule of thumb, could discover the one best method for any given work process.³² The logic of Taylorism is that every operation can be standardized, taking exactly the same amount of time each time it is performed, irrespective of who performs it.³³ This goes beyond work itself: Taylor believed that every human activity could be systematized—reduced to a scientifically determined set of laws, rules, and principles.³⁴ Taylor's ideas are not liberal by any means, but they serve as an extreme illustration of how workers, liberal or otherwise, can be legitimately robbed of their autonomy when they are at work.

³² Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1916), 25.

³³ Bell, *Work and Its Discontents*, 7.

³⁴ Taylor, *Scientific Management*, 8.

Under Taylorism, the worker loses what little control he might have had over his labor.³⁵ Efficient production is more important than the welfare of the worker: “In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first.”³⁶ With Taylor, workers lose the ability to plan their own work: management takes over the definition and planning of the workers’ activities, so that each operation that every worker performs has been planned beforehand by management. Ideally, the workers will receive written instructions describing in every detail their work for the day—not only what to do, but how to do it and how long it will take.³⁷ Taylorist workers have no autonomy; they are reduced to following orders.

Taylorism changed the lives of industrial workers: as work was broken down into minute parts, unskilled workers could do the work only skilled workers had been able to do previously; with management scheduling and planning, workers lost control of their time, their tools, and even the movement of their bodies.³⁸ Taylor uses the story of Schmidt, a “mentally sluggish” pig iron handler, to illustrate the advantage of scientific management: once Taylor told Schmidt exactly what to do and when to rest, Schmidt could load pig iron almost four times faster than the normal rate. Without the guidance of management, Schmidt would have tired himself out by noon, but when someone stood over him and directed his work, he could work according to scientific principles. Schmidt, like all workers in Taylor’s world, resembled “in his mental make-up the ox [more] than any other type,” and obviously

³⁵ Andrea Gabor, *The Capitalist Philosophers: The Geniuses of Modern Business—Their Lives, Times, and Ideas* (New York: Times Books, 2000), 4.

³⁶ Taylor, *Scientific Management*, 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26, 39.

³⁸ Gabor, *Capitalist Philosophers*, 7.

could not by himself have discovered a work pace that would suit him.³⁹ Management supervision is meant to individualize workers, to increase their productivity by making them feel observed; Taylor wants to give each worker a separate individual task, and prohibits the anonymity of the labor gang.⁴⁰ Scientific management is purposefully disciplinary; it not only strips the workers of control over their labor, it also isolates and trains them.

Luckily, most of us do not work under a Taylorist regimen, but that does not mean that we are free at work. It is only a privileged few who are able to control their own work; the rest of us are more or less restricted, regardless of what our job is.⁴¹ We cannot, by and large, be spontaneous; we have to behave within the specified limits of what is acceptable; when we are at work, we are not quite our own persons. This lack of control is not meant as a normative argument: being controlled at work is inevitable. Even the freest worker still has to do some actual work; she is still controlled by the need to work. This is not particular to liberal societies, nor is it a function of them—but it does mean, however, that the liberal individual's autonomy is not protected when she is at work. There, she is not protected from arbitrary interference, because she is at least to some measure controlled.

Being controlled at work also leads to a segmentation of life: I am split into worker and private person—my activities are separated. I leave behind my private self when I go to work, and do not bring my work self home. I exist in separate,

³⁹ Taylor, *Scientific Management*, 46-47, 59.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

⁴¹ Even manufacturing is moving away from hierarchized, top-down management and becoming more “deliberative,” giving those who do the work more control over it. See, for example, Michael C. Dorf and Charles F. Sabel, “A Constitution of Democratic Experimentalism” in *Columbia Law Review*: March 1998), part II.

isolated spheres of activity. In some of those spheres of activity, I am my own person, and can make my own decisions, while in others, I do not belong to myself—I am controlled.

But if we are controlled at work, that means that liberal freedom has to operate in our vacant time. That vacant time is not necessarily leisure time: it is not time that is free *from* biological necessity and *for* the world and its activities; it is a hiatus from labor time. Leisure is time spent actively developing oneself or acting in the world; it thus implies a certain economic security; one has to have the means to use one's spare time as one wishes.⁴² Liberal freedom is found in vacant time, not in leisure: leisure implies an ought, an activity, whereas liberal freedom is not prescriptive and can be passive. If I want to do nothing in my *free* time, I can; liberalism does not impose a version of the good life on me. I can be a free liberal individual even though I spend my vacant time relaxing from and preparing for work.

One could make the argument that being controlled and worn out at work precludes the possibility of creative leisure: lack of spontaneity at work carries over to lack of spontaneity at home.⁴³ But that is too simple, and it gives us too little credit. Certainly, much of our free time is organized and managed—through television, hobbies, and clubs—but most of us still find ways to be spontaneous and creative outside of work. We often do spend a lot of our vacant time passively passing time, to be sure, but not all of it, and not all the time. There is an infinite variety of non-

⁴² Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 205; Ed Andrew, *Closing the Iron Cage: The Scientific Management of Work and Leisure* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1999), 33.

⁴³ “To have ‘free time’ one needs the zest of a challenging day, not the exhaustion of a blank one. If work is a daily turn round Ixion’s wheel, can the intervening play be anything more than a restless moment before the next turn of the wheel?” Bell, *Work and Its Discontents*, 38.

regulated leisure activities, and people from all walks of life participate in them. If we cannot live as we want at work, we do it when we leave work.

Nonetheless, liberal freedom is limited when we are at work. The liberal individual is free in her private life. She is by necessity a private individual, not an active member of society; and when she is at work, she is not autonomous. This, of course, is entirely in keeping with the liberal conception of freedom as an enclosed space in which the individual is protected from external interference. Liberalism's fences surround the private individual, not the worker or the participant in public life.

The liberal self

The liberal self is private. In liberalism, man is not a political animal, but a rational calculator of self-interest. The people in Locke's state of nature, for example, are not Hobbes's violent animals or Rousseau's noble savages; they are ruled by reason, which compels them not to get in each other's way.⁴⁴ Locke assumes that the liberal self is prior to society, that it exists in the state of nature. Similarly, the people in Rawls's original position are also rational—meaning that “[in] choosing between principles each tries as best he can to advance his interests.”⁴⁵ Rawls defines rationality, then, as self-interest. Now, self-interest can take many different forms; my self-interest is not the same as yours. Consequently, what I define as good will not be same as what you define as good; my good and your good may be irreconcilable,

⁴⁴ “The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind . . . that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: . . . there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses. . . .” Locke, *Second Treatise*, 9.

⁴⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 142.

even directly contrary, but, since rationality is self-interest, that does not preclude their both being rational.⁴⁶ For Rawls, if my plan of life is rational, my notion of the good is also rational.⁴⁷ A result of defining rationality as self-interest is that all activities will be done for some reward; I act because I have calculated that it will fetch me some good.

It is not surprising that liberalism privileges individualistic forms of life. The rational calculators in Rawls's original position use a rationality based on acquisitive self-interest to construct the foundational principles of society; when they are let back into the real world, they will quite naturally turn their attention—and their rationality—towards the pursuit of self-interest.⁴⁸ Rawls's state is set up to be neutral in allocating resources to individuals; it is not unexpected “that rules designed to be neutral between *individuals* in this way should have the consequence of making individualist forms of life easier to pursue, even though those rules do not proscribe non-individualist forms of life.”⁴⁹ Liberalism, after all, protects the private individual against public intrusions; it does not protect the rights of the community against selfish individuals.

Since liberalism protects the space of freedom of the private individual, Michael Sandel criticizes the liberal self imagined by Rawls as distant. According to Sandel, as a liberal individual I always stand at a distance from my situation. I am always an agent capable of choice, and no matter how heavily my surroundings weigh

⁴⁶ John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical” in J. Angelo Corlett, Ed. *Equality and Liberty: Analyzing Rawls and Nozick* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 164.

⁴⁷ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 408.

⁴⁸ James P. Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism: The Troubled Odyssey of the Liberal Idea* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 273.

⁴⁹ Peter Jones, “The Ideal of the Neutral State” in Robert E. Goodin and Andrew Reeve, Eds., *Liberal Neutrality* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 22-23. (Italics in original.)

on me, I can always make independent choices.⁵⁰ The liberal self, to Sandel, is antecedent: it comes before, stands at a distance from, and is unchanged by my experiences. A self which is completely separable from the particular situation in which it exists is nothing more than an abstract consciousness. If the self can always be detached from empirical reality, it is disembodied.⁵¹ The disembodied self is universal, a rational chooser detached from any locality or particular point of view, unencumbered by having to live in reality. It is, in other words, not really a person: “Where the self is unencumbered and essentially dispossessed, no person is left for *self*-reflection to reflect upon.”⁵²

One consequence of the antecedent self is that it is invulnerable; it cannot be changed by experience; its identity is irrevocably fixed. This self is unshakeable: “No commitment could grip me so deeply that I could not understand myself without it. No transformation of life purposes and plans could be so unsettling as to disrupt the contours of my identity. No project could be so essential that turning away from it would call into question the person I am.”⁵³ This means that my attachments are always choices—which can be *unchosen*—rather than constitutive elements of my self. My attachments must be the result of rational and deliberate choices, not of inheritance or socialization. I am a member of my nation or my family because I choose to be, not because of ties that bind more firmly than rationality ever could.

⁵⁰ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 10, 19, 22, 55.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 180. (*Italics in original.*)

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 62.

The antecedent self rules out a public life that challenges the identity, not just the interests, of the participants.⁵⁴

But Sandel's critique, according to Dworkin, goes too far: people "need a common culture and particularly a common language even to have personalities, and culture and language are social phenomena."⁵⁵ Dworkin claims that liberal individuals are *not* the radically disembodied entities Sandel makes them out to be, and the autonomy that they enjoy in their private space of freedom is not radical and total; it takes place within the larger context of social forces which shape and situate the individual self. As Dworkin puts it: "No doubt it is impossible for someone to detach himself from all associations and connections in considering what kind of life to lead. No one can think intelligently about that question while prescinding from every aspect of the context in which he lives. So no one can put everything about himself in question all at once. But it hardly follows that for each person there is some one connection or association so fundamental that it cannot be detached for inspection while holding others in place."⁵⁶ Questioning our fundamental attachments, Dworkin argues, does not mean that our personalities necessarily disintegrate.

In other words, the people behind the veil of ignorance in Rawls's original position are not the starting point for Rawls's theory of the self; rather, Rawls derives the behavior of the individuals in the original position from the moral intuitions of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁵ Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 219.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 220.

modern liberal democratic society.⁵⁷ Foundational assumptions, then, are, as Habermas points out, not entirely divorced from presuppositions: even the people behind the veil of ignorance carry with them assumptions about the nature of the political sphere.⁵⁸ Rawls, however, in the interest of neutrality towards conceptions of the good life, tries to limit particular perspectives in the original position. The problem Habermas has with this is not the abstraction of the self, but that it takes foundational questions off the table outside the original position:

From the perspective of the theory of justice, the act of founding the democratic constitution cannot be repeated under the institutional conditions of an already constituted just society, and the process of realizing the system of basic rights cannot be assured on an ongoing basis. It is not possible for the citizens to experience this process as open and incomplete, as the shifting historical circumstances nonetheless demand. They cannot reignite the radical democratic embers of the original position in the civic life of their society, for from their perspective all of the *essential* discourses of legitimation have already taken place within the theory; and they find the results of the theory already sedimented in the constitution. Because the citizens cannot conceive of the constitution as a *project*, the public use of reason does not automatically have the significance of a present

⁵⁷ Chandran Kukathas and Philip Pettit, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and Its Critics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 107.

⁵⁸ Habermas, *Inclusion of the Other*, 89-90.

exercise of political autonomy but merely promotes the nonviolent *preservation of political stability*.⁵⁹

Once the fundamental structure of a liberal society has been set, constitutive questions are removed from the political process; founding the body politic is not continual, but the competition over the allocation of public resources is. That is, the liberal self directs itself most fruitfully to questions related to influencing the normal workings of official institutions, not to foundational questions.

In her interactions with the public sphere, the liberal individual reflects her essentially private nature. She is not radically disembodied, but she certainly is most comfortable in her own private space of freedom. The liberal individual is not an inherently isolated atomistic self.⁶⁰ For example, Mill's individuals learn from experience, and their unique characters are reflective of their attachments and history; and Locke's individuals after the secular fall, after the invention of money corrupts the innocence of the state of nature, develop artificial desires, and reason becomes complicated and unreliable.⁶¹ It is not, then, that the liberal individual is atomized, but rather that she is independent: given the social and historical context in which she finds herself, she is autonomous within her own protected space of freedom.⁶² Still, as a private individual, she stands outside the public sphere, and she is capable of seeing even her own attachments to the world outside her private space of freedom at a distance. She is not necessarily isolated, but she is, to a certain extent, detached.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 69-70. (Italics in original.)

⁶⁰ This is how Benjamin Barber views the liberal individual: "We are born into the world solitary strangers, live our lives as wary aliens, and die in fearful isolation." Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 68.

⁶¹ Ronald Terchek, *Republican Paradoxes and Liberal Anxieties: Retrieving Neglected Fragments of Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 124, 156.

⁶² Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 194.

Conclusion

Liberalism promises to create a space in which no one will interfere, in which we can be ourselves—however we choose to be. It does not promise to deliver us from misery or to create a brand new world of total freedom; it promises only to let us discover our own good.

This is a very limited promise; liberalism does not guarantee public freedom or freedom at work, only a protected space in which we can be autonomous private individuals. These limits are quite natural given liberalism's premises: the public realm is a site of potential coercion of the individual by a far mightier power, and the workplace is not a site to practice one's personal autonomy. The field of liberal freedom, then, is private self-determination, just as the field of Marxist freedom is creative production.

But the emphasis on the freedom of the private individual leaves that individual vulnerable, not only when she inevitably has to go out into the public, but also in her private life. The problem with the liberal conception of freedom is not that its ideal of the autonomous individual capable of being the author of her own life is not desirable—it is—but that the protected space of the liberal individual does not fully protect that individual and cannot guarantee her freedom.

CHAPTER FIVE: LIBERAL VULNERABILITIES

Liberalism promises autonomy for the individual, but that autonomy is vulnerable. The individual is purposefully left without moral guidance, but is still surrounded by forms of power which liberalism cannot always protect against. These powers threaten to invade the individual's private space of freedom, and although liberalism tries to safeguard that space, it is not inviolable. Without a moral anchor outside the private space of freedom, the individual is weak compared to the powers which push on her. But since liberal freedom does not want to interfere with the individual's private space, it can leave the individual vulnerable.

The ambivalence of neutrality

Liberalism's neutrality towards conceptions of the good life is one of its greatest strengths, but it is also a vulnerability. Envisioning freedom as non-interference, as a blank space surrounded by protective barriers, leaves liberal individuals without a moral compass; without the guidance that liberalism, out of respect for the individual's autonomy, refuses to give, individuals are free to drift aimlessly through life. For liberals like Mill and Tocqueville, the protected space of liberal freedom also has a moral dimension: that space is needed to give individuals room to develop in their own way. But to do that, they need standards beyond those that society supplies. Those alternative standards require plurality; it is not enough just having a single,

private fortress which defends against the state and society. Mill thinks that we need to leave our private spaces and act together with other people if we are to be free.¹

For Tocqueville, aristocracy had separate spheres of activities and a plurality of perspectives, something which democracy is in danger of losing. The hierarchy of groups was maintained in an aristocracy because groups were seen as natural and legitimate.² The group was the source of authority; because each group was stable, one derived one's identity from the group. Moreover, each group had its own set of mores and standards, so that there were multiple locations of authority and identity within society. This also meant that one did not derive one's mores and standards from the larger community itself; the group to which one belonged supplied the standards to judge the larger community. So, while people were "almost literally vegetables," without capacity for greatness, they at least could judge the larger community by a standard separate from it.³

This is now lost: Tocqueville thinks that the link between opinion and tastes has been broken, that the harmony between emotions and ideas has been destroyed, and with it "one might suppose that all the laws of moral analogy had been abolished."⁴ That is, the traditional standards have been lost, and with the loss of tradition, we might lose the way we have always looked at the past. This can be

¹ Ronald Terchek, *Republican Paradoxes and Liberal Anxieties: Retrieving Neglected Fragments of Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 158.

² "Because it never entered the noble's head that anyone wanted to snatch away privileges which he regarded as legitimate, and since the serf considered his inferiority as an effect of the immutable order of nature, one can see that a sort of goodwill could be established between these two classes so differently favored by fortune. At that time one found inequality and wretchedness in society, but men's souls were not degraded thereby." Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: HarperTrade, 1988), 14.

³ Peter Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 16.

⁴ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 16.

positive, allowing an “unexpected freshness” of viewing the past, but it can also be devastating: “We are in danger of forgetting, and an oblivion—quite apart from the contents themselves that could be lost—would mean that, humanly speaking, we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth of human existence.”⁵

This dimension of depth is maintained by the public realm, which links us to the world outside the household. Tocqueville’s notion of a township is an attempt to do just that: it makes us overlook our private needs and desires, involving us in an activity—public life—which takes us beyond our own singular experience. At the same time that the public life of the township calls citizens away from the household, it does not call them too far—the township is small enough that its members know and care about each other, and its public realm is not so large that those who enter it are lost and overwhelmed.⁶

Modern democracy subverts the almost pastoral public realm of Tocqueville’s townships, replacing it with the apparatus of representative elections. With democracy, Tocqueville thinks, traditional groups disappear—including their mores and standards. Instead of multiple standards, we find a single set, a universal standard provided by democratic society.⁷ This standard is unchallenged; without competing voices, it is not obvious that there could be some other standard by which to judge society. The problem for Tocqueville is that the traditional standards were external to

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 94.

⁶ Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 215.

⁷ This conception of democracy is very similar to Mill’s “good despot,” namely, “the state that defines and delivers the good.” For Mill, “[a] state does the most harm when it attempts to instill a single pattern of the good in its subjects, and it is at its best when it promotes the conditions that take citizens further on their progressive path.” Tercek, *Republican Paradoxes*, 160-61.

society—they were based on tradition, religion, group mores, and so on—whereas the new, universal, democratic standard is derived from society itself—it is based on the opinion of the majority. We cannot freely judge society if the standard by which we are supposed to do so is derived from society itself. Paradoxically, “the spread of democracy in the modern age can coincide with the decline of the public realm.”⁸

Tocqueville believes that having a single standard, particularly to judge itself, is a threat to human freedom. Since democracy does not supply us with multiple standards, Tocqueville’s habits of the heart—ways to make citizens discipline themselves to act for the greater good even though they may not be aware of it—are supposed to provide the alternative standards. By practicing these habits of the heart—Tocqueville uses associational life and religion as his two primary examples—we train our judgment, we learn to see from a perspective other than our own. The habits of the heart fulfill the same function as the public realm, and without either, citizens would be little more than “a flock of sheep innocently nibbling the grass side by side.”⁹

If people stop practicing the habits of the heart, either through associations or through religion, they will lose the independent standards by which they can judge society. If they lose those standards, they lose the ability to judge, and if they lose the ability to judge, they might as well stop thinking altogether—because any thoughts they may have are simply regurgitations of thoughts already accepted and recommended by society. Tocqueville believes that to give up thinking is to give up

⁸ Dana Richard Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 151.

⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 151.

living, at least a fully human living, so to stop thinking about “the greatest problems of human destiny,” whatever they may be, is to give up one’s humanity—which is why Tocqueville is so concerned about the dangers of not having multiple standards of judgment.¹⁰

The single standard produced by democracy is, strangely enough, a threat to democracy: with access only to a single standard, our worldview becomes non-falsifiable, and we will be unable to see the world from any perspective other than our own. Of course, there are other standards even in a democracy, but these standards will also make a claim for singularity, and not be content with being one of several standards. And so the very foundation of democracy—discussion and persuasion—disappears in a shouting match between opponents who quite literally cannot imagine how anyone could view an issue differently than they themselves do. Rather than listen and try to understand, one classifies the opponent as abnormal, as a degenerate to whom one does not have to listen precisely because he or she is not normal. Instead of overlapping sets of parallel standards, we get isolated bubbles of exclusive standards. And unlike the multiple standards of aristocracy, the singular standards of democracy makes it possible to live one’s entire life inside a single, unchallenged standard of judgment. The volatile combination of democratic openness and a preference for singular standards of judgment, however, means that the number of institutions that want us to subscribe to their singular standard could be infinite.

An “anxious” liberal like Mill thinks that free individuals are as likely to be morally corrupt as they are to be morally decent—especially if they do not have independent standards which help them evade society’s temptations. I am responsible

¹⁰ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 444.

for my decisions, and those decisions give me a moral identity. In a free society, I can flourish, and become better—but also fail, and become worse: “the members of a liberal society can become morally autonomous or they can succumb to the temptations housed in organized society.”¹¹

Liberals are rightfully wary of privileging any particular conception of the good life, since doing so would be a form of tyranny over people’s moral sense. But at the same time, liberals are also aware that leaving individuals without a moral compass makes them vulnerable: liberal individuals live within the context of their own society, and if that society provides only a single standard of judgment, there is very little that liberals can do to prevent people from adopting that standard. They cannot steer individuals towards discovering other conceptions of the good—that would violate liberal neutrality—nor can they force individuals to participate in activities that would expose them to multiple standards of judgment—that would interfere with the individuals’ autonomy. Rather, since liberalism does not try to impose a notion of the good, but instead leaves the choice of the good up to the individual, it needs to protect the autonomy of the individual.

One way it does this is by creating procedures, in the form of laws and rights, which surround the individual’s space of freedom and safeguard it from arbitrary interference. Other procedures protect the liberal individual as citizen, allowing her to vote, to speak her mind, and to go where she wants, to mention just a few. With ever more sophisticated and fair procedures, the individual’s freedom will be better protected from arbitrary interference; within this protected space, we will be better

¹¹ Terchek, *Republican Paradoxes*, 123, 125-26.

able to pursue “our own good in our own way.”¹² The procedural fences guarantee that we rule our own protected space, but also that our spaces are roughly equal and that we all have the same protections. My freedom does not encroach on yours, nor do I enjoy liberties that you do not; that would undermine the fairness of the procedures, which in turn would undermine the idea that liberalism does not favor any particular conception of the good. If my individual space of freedom is larger and better protected than yours, then my notion of the good is also privileged, because I am better capable of exercising it. Without fair procedures, liberal freedom could not be protected, and we would be vulnerable to arbitrary interference. This is precisely Locke’s objection to the otherwise bountiful state of nature: there are no procedures to protect property.¹³ The individual’s space can be conquered with impunity.

Procedures allow the individual’s space of freedom to be protected without at the same time imposing a particular notion of the good on the individual. Since liberalism does not tell the individual how to live or what to believe, the fences should not do so either. Procedures, then, focus on the means, not the content, of making decisions.¹⁴ They ensure that the process which arrives at an outcome is fair, not that the outcome is good. If we follow the rules, we are certain not to impose on anyone else’s freedom, and since the rules make sure that we use our reason to arrive at what we perceive to be a good outcome, that outcome will be a rational good. Fair procedures also create stability: with procedures that everyone accepts as fair, there

¹² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 12.

¹³ First, there is no “established, settled, known law” by which controversies can be settled. Second, there is no “known and indifferent judge” who has the authority to settle disputes according to the law. Third, there is no power to execute the correct sentence. See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 66.

¹⁴ George Klosko, *Democratic Procedures and Liberal Consensus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 148.

will be no conflicts over how decisions are made, since the process is transparent to and approved by all.¹⁵ Procedures organize discourse, making discussions ordered and rational, facilitating consensus, and preserving the fabric of society by eliminating the possibility of violent, unreasoned, irreconcilable disagreements. Proceduralism is not meant to restrict the possibilities of our choices; it is only meant to provide us a means by which to make those choices.

Rules and procedures limit our freedom, but those limits can be enabling just as much as they are disabling.¹⁶ While they keep us from doing whatever falls us in, they also allow us to do things that would otherwise be impossible. Hobbes's state of nature is absolutely unbounded, but it is paralyzing; it is only when we live among the rules of the commonwealth that we can cultivate the land, build towns, or create art. Any expression of power has mixed effects: on the one hand, rules restrict our freedom, but on the other hand, they enable previously unimaginable actions. Traffic laws do not allow me to drive on the left side of the road, but they enable me to drive at full speed with other cars on the road—I know that they will also keep right, and so I do not need to slow down every time I meet a car. To Locke, the ability to create procedures—that is, legislation—is the supreme power, and it is given to government.¹⁷ Government, that is, is defined as the creator of the rules which govern us; its very nature is procedural. This is necessary because, in order to govern effectively, a government must have legitimacy, and that legitimacy derives from

¹⁵ Tom R. Tyler, Robert J. Boeckmann, Yuen J. Huo and Heather J. Smith, *Social Justice in a Diverse Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 99.

¹⁶ For example: "Constitutions do not merely limit power; they can create and organize power as well as give it direction." Stephen Holmes, *Passions and Constraints: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 163-64.

¹⁷ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 78.

making law, not personal morality, the standard of conduct in society. Individual morality may correspond to the law, but it also may not, in which case individuals might challenge the authority of the law—there should be procedures to provide for such challenges. Law, however, requires that individuals follow the procedures and dictates of the government regardless of personal objections.¹⁸ Proceduralism allows the legitimate functioning of government, and it allows us to enjoy the protections provided by that government.

Rawls thinks that the “just constitution would be a just procedure arranged to insure a just outcome.”¹⁹ The formal public life would be governed by procedures, and since the procedures have to be just and fair, official politics is primarily about creating just and fair institutions to implement the procedures. These institutions will distribute rights and duties, and they will have a major impact on the life-prospects of the citizens, determining how both the burdens and the benefits of the current social organization will be divided.²⁰ The institutions themselves are also governed by rules and procedures; in fact, Rawls imagines an institution as “a public system of rules which defines offices and positions with their rights and duties, powers and immunities, and the like.”²¹ The point of all these procedures is to guarantee that citizens will be treated fairly and equally by their government. If this does not happen, the citizens have the right to try to change the procedures using their legal rights and liberties, and Rawls even gives his citizens the right to correct unjust

¹⁸ Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 25-26.

¹⁹ Rawls continues: “The procedure would be the political process governed by the constitution, the outcome the body of enacted legislation, while the principles of justice would define an independent criterion for both procedure and outcome.” John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 197.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7, 54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

procedures through the extralegal means of civil disobedience should normal, legal methods fail.²²

Procedures, then, are necessary and desirable; without them, we are vulnerable to being ruled arbitrarily. But procedures are not without their problems, and at the same time as they protect us from arbitrary interference, they leave us vulnerable to other dangers. Procedures, although they strive for neutrality, themselves carry norms, which means that they cannot help but push us towards particular conceptions of the good life. This is inevitable, of course; no method of governing, by the simple fact of defining restrictions and permissions, can avoid imposing norms for how to live, but not all methods of governing aspire to neutrality.

Procedures aim to be fair and neutral. They do not specify a given outcome, only the means for reaching an outcome. Since procedures do not privilege particular outcomes, they appear to be neutral between outcomes. Also, procedures are the opposite of the arbitrary whims of an absolute ruler: they are knowable, predictable, repeatable. They eliminate the notoriously capricious human element as far as possible, replacing it with a rational, standardized process. Rules, since they apply the same to everyone and do not prefer particular outcomes, give the appearance of neutrality.

But rules are not as neutral as they seem; accepting rules, laws, and procedures as the means for deciding social action is itself an act of power. We do not

²² “Indeed, civil disobedience (and conscientious refusal as well) is one of the stabilizing devices of a constitutional system, although by definition an illegal one. Along with such things as free and regular election and an independent judiciary empowered to interpret the constitution (not necessarily written), civil disobedience used with due restraint and sound judgment helps to maintain and strengthen just institutions. By resisting injustice within the limits of fidelity to law, it serves to inhibit departures from justice and to correct them when they occur.” *Ibid.*, 383.

have to accept that impersonal, rationalized processes are superior to human judgment, but we do—and that is power.²³ Rules prescribe behavior even when they do not specify outcomes; obedience to the law can, of course, be enabling rather than disabling—but the very restriction of action to approved forms of behavior means that the rules are not neutral. Some perspectives, some modes of discourse, some experiments in living are excluded by the existence of rules. Some, or all, of these may be harmful or undesirable, but their exclusion is still an exercise of power.

That a decision is made using a procedure which we deem to be fair does not mean that the decision itself is fair or justified: just procedures can have unjust outcomes.²⁴ The very fact that procedures are used to make a decision means that some other method to arrive at the decision, one which might favor those less skilled in negotiating procedures, is not being used. Again, this other method will also contain hidden or explicit biases; it, too, will not be neutral. Claiming that procedures are neutral masks the face of power: there is power not only in choosing which procedures to use, but in the decision to use procedures in the first place.

Procedures reflect distinct conceptions of fairness—varying from absolute equality to unregulated competition—and our choice of procedures reveals which conception we prefer.²⁵ Since procedures always have underlying assumptions, they cannot be neutral—they are meant to institute the version of fairness that we used when choosing procedures. In the case of Rawls’s just society, what is fair is an equal

²³ “[There] is domination by virtue of ‘legality,’ by virtue of the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional ‘competence’ based on rationally created *rules*.” Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 79. (Italics in original.)

²⁴ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 30.

²⁵ Jennifer L. Hochschild, *What’s Fair? America’s Beliefs about Distributive Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 75-80.

distribution of rights and liberties, as well as a distribution of resources that is equitable to the least advantaged. Procedural rules “cannot be extricated from the substantive interests and values with which they interact without being disembodied of their essential meaning.”²⁶ Procedures do not operate in a vacuum; by design or accidentally, they facilitate some organizations of power while impeding others.

Procedures might not dictate outcomes, but they do deny some outcomes; proceduralism only allows outcomes that can be reached through procedures. Outcomes which are the product of, for example, violence or non-procedural deliberation are denied. But as much as proceduralism tries to remove the unpredictable, unstandardized, potentially irrational element from the political process, it cannot escape it altogether. One cannot use procedures to arrive at which the best procedures to use are; at some point, we have to deliberate about which procedures to use.²⁷ This is the deliberation that takes place in Rawls’s original position, or at a constitutional convention. And that act of deliberation is not neutral; it is highly political. It is also, because it creates the institutional framework of society, an act of immense power.

Liberals do not deny this: Dworkin, as we saw in the previous chapter, is well aware that any configuration of society will privilege some and disadvantage others. The point here is not that procedures are malicious instruments to keep the weak in place or that neutrality is a sham; far from it. Rather, the point is that although procedures are necessary and desirable, and we should aim for them to be as neutral as possible, we must remember that they are not innocent: the definition and

²⁶ Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 1967), 53.

²⁷ Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 32.

application of procedures carries power, and neutrality is not absolute. This means that a liberalism which relies on procedures is vulnerable to imposing a conception of the good life, however broadly, on its citizens without actually intending to do so. To ensure that its proceduralism does not become unjust, a liberal society must not dismiss extraprocedural grievances as automatically illegitimate.²⁸

Liberal discourse

Liberalism claims to be neutral among conceptions of the good; this implies that it should promote an open society in which anything can be said. But even liberal regimes are not infinitely permissive: certain discourses which are not explicitly prohibited simply do not appear in the public realm. To some extent, this is the nature of discourse: if every possible discourse appeared in public, the public realm would become an unbearable cacophony of voices. However, the principle of openness—that every discourse is permitted—makes it seem as if the discourses which do not appear in the public realm do not exist at all. In a society in which everything is in the open and everything is permitted, nothing can be hidden.

In liberal societies, as in any society, only certain discourses are legitimate; for example, liberalism tries to steer clear of constitutive questions, since their institutionalization would violate liberal neutrality. Stephen Holmes talks about “gag rules,” taking some questions off the political agenda in order to ensure the stability of the polity: “To establish a public conception of justice, acceptable to all members of a good society, we must abstain from questions which elicit radical

²⁸ This, obviously, is precisely the point of Rawls’s discussion on civil disobedience.

disagreement.”²⁹ What Holmes is after here is not to deny the validity of certain questions—he uses the example of religion—but to shift them from the official realm of politics and legislation to the unofficial realm of society or the private sphere. At the same time, Holmes acknowledges that excluding irresolvable disputes may drain the political process of substance; also, gag rules are not neutral, but privilege some agendas over others.³⁰

Just as certain questions are excluded from the public realm, so are certain modes of expression. To have an “intelligent and profitable discussion,” Rawls thinks that it is necessary to have “reasonable procedures of inquiry and debate.”³¹ The reason for this is to ensure that discussions will be fair and equal—insisting on discursive procedures, Rawls argues, does not restrict the content of our speech, but it guarantees that no speaker can monopolize the discussion or that the discussion will degenerate into anarchy. Thus, only discourses which can be made to follow rules are allowed. Dissent is not prohibited *per se*, but it has to play by the language rules of liberal discourse. We should be aware, however, that making non-liberal dissent follow liberal discursive procedures may very well negate its purpose and rob it of its power—it makes an attack on the status quo appear as grievance that can be resolved within the current system. Seyla Benhabib thinks that a “public life conducted according to the principle of liberal dialogic neutrality would ... restrict the scope of public conversation in a way that would inimical to the interests of oppressed groups. All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had

²⁹ Holmes, *Passions and Constraints*, 203.

³⁰ See *Ibid.*, 207, 232. At other times, Holmes seems to indicate that only intraliberal disputes are legitimate, and that voices outside liberalism either do not exist or do not deserve to be heard. See *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³¹ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 203.

previously been considered private, nonpublic, and nonpolitical issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power that need discursive legitimation.”³² The exclusion of, for example, foundational questions from official political discussions obviously does not mean that such questions cannot be discussed—but it does mean that such discussions will be toothless, since they can have no place on the political agenda.

Much of liberal discourse uses the language of rights—but that is an impoverished dialect. It tends to be absolutist, individualistic, and uncompromising—promoting mere assertion over persuasion: it closes off routes of discussion, either making differences irreconcilable or excluding them altogether.³³ These exclusions create clear boundaries around the liberal, open society—boundaries which are necessary, because without them, society become ungovernable. But they are also necessary because without the excluded, without the anti-liberals whom liberalism protects us from, there would be no justification for liberal institutions.³⁴ Excluding voices and creating boundaries is not unique to liberalism—no society could exist without exclusions and boundaries—but liberalism makes a special claim to be inclusive and open. This is why it must be especially sensitive to its hidden assumptions—for example, that any discourse is permissible as long as one follows the rules of discourse. What is left unsaid is that those rules deny the possibility of

³² Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas” in Craig Calhoun, Ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 84.

³³ Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of American Political Discourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 14-15.

³⁴ For example, although the police is not an institution specific to liberal societies, the existence of criminals justifies its presence even in liberal societies. “If we accept the presence in our midst of these uniformed men, who have the exclusive right to carry arms, who demand our papers, who come and prowl on our doorsteps, how would any of this be possible if there were no criminals?” Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 47.

certain discourses, certain actions, even certain plans of life. Claiming that liberalism is open to all reasonable discourses masks power: if all reasonable discourses are permitted, there is power in defining which discourses are reasonable and which are unreasonable.

Liberal tolerance also masks power: liberals, while not endorsing any particular version of the good life, will allow a wide variety of experiments in living—but some ways of life cannot be tolerated in a liberal society.³⁵ No society can tolerate all possible ways of life, of course, but the definition of which ones to include and which to exclude still carries power. Wendy Brown critiques liberal tolerance from a different perspective; to her, tolerance implies not an all-inclusive community, but an absence of prohibition of something marginal, alien, undesirable. It essentializes differences, reducing those who are tolerated to the categories in which they differ: being black or gay or socialist exhausts my personality; my differentiating attributes are innate, the very stuff of which my essential self is constructed. Tolerance, in this view, normalizes: those who are normal do not have to be tolerated, only those who deviate from the norm. When we learn to be tolerant, we cast off our local, partial, particular perspective for a universal, disembodied one—that is, for a supposedly liberal one: “[The] idea is not to arrive at equality or solidarity with others, but rather to learn how to put up with others by weakening one’s own connections to community and claims of identity.”³⁶ Only by rejecting our

³⁵ Joseph Raz thinks that a liberal society should “not protect morally repugnant activities or forms of life.” See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 425. However, for someone like Dworkin, such a liberalism would be insufficiently neutral between conceptions of the good life.

³⁶ Wendy Brown, “Reflections on Tolerance in the Age of Identity” in Aryeh Botwinick and William Connolly, Eds., *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 114.

particular selves and becoming more universal can we live in a liberal society. The liberal response to this critique is that liberal tolerance does not prescribe any particular norm, and to distinguish between tolerance and acceptance: if the alternative to tolerating, and thus co-existing with, those whose version of the good life I disapprove of is to share a community only with those whose version of the good life I can approve of (or to force others to share my version of the good life), then liberal tolerance is far more inclusive than the alternative.³⁷

Just as there is power in the definition of tolerance, there is power in the definition of rationality. Liberalism aims for rationality in discourse, but one should keep in mind that its version of rationality is a product of the particular epistemology from which it sprung—an epistemology of order rather than of resemblance: knowledge is gained by discrimination between discrete objects and creating a classificatory scheme, not by discovering links and resemblances.³⁸ This is a world that can be known by ordering it, by arranging it in tables—which may be why liberal freedom looks like a table, with each individual in a separate, isolated cell with clearly marked boundaries. The point is not that this is an inherently flawed epistemology, but that no epistemology is neutral; there are always alternative explanations, alternative rationalities.³⁹ Even if these are false, determining which knowledge claims are legitimate and can be heard is always an act of power.

³⁷ See Stephen Guest, *Ronald Dworkin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 236-37.

³⁸ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 47.

³⁹ “[On] every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons. Even in natural philosophy, there is always some other explanation possible of the same facts; some geocentric theory instead of a heliocentric, some phlogiston instead of oxygen...” Mill, *On Liberty*, 35.

Habermas critiques the liberal version of rationality as grounded in “subject-centered” reason, which he finds isolating. Instead, he proposes an epistemology of “communicative” reason, which conceives of knowledge as something “communicatively mediated,” and consequently assesses rationality “in terms of the capacity of responsible participants in interaction to orient themselves in relation to validity claims geared to intersubjective recognition.”⁴⁰ Communicative reason, Habermas believes, allows the participants noncoercively to overcome their subjectively biased differences for a rationally informed mutual understanding. Arriving at this mutual understanding permits the participants to coordinate their plans of action.⁴¹ The advantage of communicative reason, for Habermas, is that it does not exclude foundational questions from the political process, but allows questions of how to constitute the body politic, even at the most basic level, to form part of the public discourse. That is, it allows the procedures which guide the political process to be an ongoing project, subject to fundamental revisions as the historical context changes, rather than a static system permitting only superficial changes. If a politics based on communicative reason is properly instituted, it can bridge the gap between foundational discussions and normal politics: “‘Dialogical’ and ‘instrumental’ politics can *interpenetrate* in the medium of deliberation if the corresponding forms of communication are sufficiently institutionalized. Everything depends on the conditions of communication and the procedures that lend the

⁴⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 314.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 296, 315.

institutionalized opinion- and will-formation their legitimating force.”⁴² Liberal discourse, then, is too narrow for Habermas; without abandoning its commitment to procedurally ordered discussions, it should still have room for a more diverse set of discourses.

The administered life

Liberalism is vulnerable to excluding discourses which cannot play by its rules; some of these discourses may be needed to improve the society in which they occur. Coupled with the deliberate lack of guidance regarding the good life, this exclusion exposes another liberal vulnerability: a liberal regime which does not provide a moral compass and which also excludes challenges to its foundational principles—perhaps even its legitimacy—is vulnerable to falling into the democratically despotic administered life that Tocqueville fears.

What Habermas calls subject-centered reason is not dangerous in itself, but it tends to exclude other perspectives; it pushes us to use a single standard. Everything is filtered through that standard—whether it be law, materialism, or socialism. Any standard that becomes a single, unchallengeable standard by necessity sets strict boundaries around acceptable discourse, excluding what would be legitimate grievances from a different perspective (as well as including grievances that would be illegitimate from that other perspective). Whenever a single standard rules uncontested, human plurality is threatened. This is why Mill expects us to participate in local discourses: that participation will allow us to better judge the national politics

⁴² Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 245.

to which only representatives have access. If nothing else, we will realize that economic success is not enough for a moral life, and “that being left out of political life is a cost, not a benefit.”⁴³ If we do not exercise our moral muscles in local public life, we open ourselves to the tyranny of the majority.

This tyranny—society’s regulation of individual behavior—is more difficult to escape than political tyranny, because it touches every detail of our lives, shaping even our souls.⁴⁴ This is Tocqueville’s problem with democracy: the single standard of democratic society means that we all have the same values, all give ourselves over to practical concerns—primarily the accumulation of money—and all resist challenges to society’s norms.⁴⁵ He is worried that conformity to society, to the opinion of the majority, will lead to the unstoppable tyranny of that majority.⁴⁶ Tocqueville does not oppose majority rule; he is, however, concerned that the majority will impose its will even on those who do not belong to it, and so become the standard by which everyone judges society, i.e., the actions of the majority. To Tocqueville, a majority is nothing more than a type of individual, an individual that has opinions and interests directly contrary to the opinions and interests of the individual that is the minority. And just as an individual can abuse his power, so can the majority.⁴⁷ The tyranny of the majority is not a political tyranny: it is a tyranny

⁴³ Tercek, *Republican Paradoxes*, 158.

⁴⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 4.

⁴⁵ Wolin, *Tocqueville*, 308.

⁴⁶ The “majority in the United States has an immense actual power and a power of opinion which is almost as great. When once its mind is made up on any question, there are, so to say, no obstacles which can retard, much less halt, its progress and give it time to hear the wails of those it crushes as it passes.” de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 248.

⁴⁷ “Now, if you admit that a man vested with omnipotence can abuse it against his adversaries, why not admit the same concerning a majority? Have men, by joining together, changed their character? By becoming stronger, have they become more patient of obstacles? For my part, I cannot believe that, and I will never grant to several that power to do everything which I refuse to a single man.” *Ibid.*, 251.

over thought itself. Even the worst absolute monarch cannot control all of the forces of society, but a majority, because it *is* society (or at least, by definition, most of it), can. It is not illegal to think differently in Tocqueville's America, it is just pointless to do so; either one will be ignored, or one will be attacked by the majority—and no one can fight a majority alone. The power of the majority to silence dissenting voices, to define the limits of discourse, is illegitimate: it does not matter that it is a social norm rather than a law that makes me hold my tongue—I cannot share my opinion with the world in either case.⁴⁸ If a political tyranny destroys public life with force, the tyranny of the majority withers it just as effectively with conformity.

One possible way that individuals may react to the tyranny of the majority, and one that Tocqueville finds wholly counterproductive, is individualism. “Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.”⁴⁹ Individualism does not fill the void, however; all it does is leave the citizen more vulnerable to public opinion. The individual does not withdraw from the world to think, to make sense of the world—he tries to withdraw from the world altogether. But this withdrawal is a trap: even though I withdraw from the world, the world will not leave me alone. I cannot stand alone against the world, because I cannot achieve the kind of autonomy that a withdrawal from the world requires.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ “If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had that power, would be justified in silencing mankind.” Mill, *On Liberty*, 16.

⁴⁹ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 506.

⁵⁰ “The kind of autonomy presumed by withdrawal is a disastrous fiction, a denial of the elaborate and potentially dangerous structures and relations within which individuals are inevitably enmeshed. As a result, the privatized subject produced by individualism is in jeopardy of falling under the worst forms

Democracy may, as Tocqueville claims, bring families closer together while separating citizens, but the retreat into the private sphere, into a complete preoccupation with matters of the household, is an illusory retreat: “Far from supposing that the members of our new societies will ultimately come to live in public, I am more afraid that they will in the end only form very small coteries.”⁵¹ Household needs inevitably call us back *from* the public, but there is nothing calling us back *to* the public again. The illusion is this: if we withdraw from the world, we do not escape the power of the majority as we had hoped—we have only managed to make ourselves even less important to it. But this is not enough: an entirely private life is not strictly human, in the sense that one does not live in the common human world, the world in which our realities are assured by our being seen and heard by others, by sharing a world of objects with everyone else. Withdrawing from the world to avoid being lost in the crowd does more than make one lost to the crowd; it makes one lost, period.

Individualism is a reaction to the merciless equality of democracy; when everyone is equal, it is difficult to stand out, especially if public opinion tells one to conform—it is much easier to stand out in the small crowd of one’s private circle. Equality is a double-edged sword, which Tocqueville recognizes. He does not think that people in a democracy always see this, though: they will always choose equality over freedom.⁵² If equality tends to suppress the individual, and if equality is more

of tyranny.” Mark Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 45.

⁵¹ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 604.

⁵² “I think that democratic peoples have a natural taste for liberty; left to themselves, they will seek it, cherish it, and be sad if it is taken from them. But their passion for equality is ardent, insatiable, eternal, and invincible. They want equality in freedom, and if they cannot have that, they still want equality in slavery.” *Ibid.*, 506.

important than liberty, we are in trouble: “As conditions become more equal, each individual becomes more like his fellows, weaker, and smaller, and the habit grows of ceasing to think about the citizens and considering only the people. Individuals are forgotten, and the species alone counts.”⁵³ This is equality as sameness, because we are equal not only as citizens—now little more than extensions of our private persons into society—but also in the private sphere: we are equal as consumers, because our needs are the same. My clothes may be different from yours, and as such may express my personality—externally defined by whichever fashion trend I happen to adopt—but they still perform the same function of protecting me from the elements. This equality—this conformity—robs us of our freedom and of our individual judgment, but it is dishonest: at the same time as it takes our freedom and judgment, it tells us that our lives are better and happier than ever before.⁵⁴

In democracy, Tocqueville thinks, equality is the highest good—but equality also promotes conformity, and since people withdraw from the world into “very small coteries” to escape politics and the opinion of the majority, they allow the centralized state to enforce this conformity. There *is* a contradiction here: people do not want to be bothered by the majority, so they withdraw to where they believe it cannot reach them—the household—but they also want equality, so they conform to what the centralized state tells them to do in the name of equality—but the centralized state follows the direction that the majority tells it to go. By letting the state into our everyday lives, we make ourselves dependent on it.⁵⁵ The centralized state will

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 451.

⁵⁴ Terchek, *Republican Paradoxes*, 162.

⁵⁵ The democratic citizen “is full of confidence and pride in his independence among his equals, but from time to time his weakness makes him feel the need for some outside help which he cannot expect

naturally try to make its citizens uniform—“uniformity saves it the trouble of inquiring into infinite details, which would be necessary if the rules were made to suit men instead of subjecting all men indiscriminately to the same rule.”⁵⁶ The problem is that the citizens can no longer think independently; because they no longer have any independent standards by which to judge society, but instead use the standard supplied by society itself—by the majority—they cannot accurately judge society. As Arendt makes clear, this is what happened to Eichmann; it was not that he did not have a conscience, but that his conscience used the standards of Nazi Germany: he did not have an independent standard by which to judge the society around him.⁵⁷

The example is not as farfetched as it may seem; Tocqueville’s dystopia is the type of democratic despotism practiced by Nazi Germany over its own citizens. There, as in Tocqueville’s democratic despotism, “the state stages a kind of phantom national politics, giving the regime a semblance of legitimacy while giving the people a semblance of power. Despite their carefully engineered ‘consent’ and their ritualized forms of participation, the citizens do not take part in the most important of political decisions.”⁵⁸

But the state does not even have to be that foresighted for Tocqueville; all it has to do is capitalize on people’s tendency to escape into their own private circles.

from any of his fellows, for they are both impotent and cold. In this extremity he naturally turns his eyes toward that huge entity which alone stands out above the universal level of abasement. His needs, and even more his longings, continually put him in mind of that entity, and he ends by regarding it as the sole and necessary support of his individual weakness.” de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 672.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 673.

⁵⁷ “His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which ‘good society’ everywhere reacted as he did. He did not need to ‘close his ears to the voice of conscience,’ as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a ‘respectable voice,’ with the voice of respectable society around him.” Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 126.

⁵⁸ Reinhardt, *Art of Being Free*, 52.

The state, while democratically elected, becomes a despotism of banal pleasures; it keeps its citizens isolated and preoccupied with pursuing their own, private interests—which of course are exactly what the state tells them their interests are. Like Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, the state removes its people’s liberty in the name of their private welfare, making them believe that the choice between Coke and Pepsi is what freedom is all about. “It likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment. It gladly works for their happiness but wants to be the sole agent and judge of it. ... Why should it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living?”⁵⁹ The state creates an administered life for its citizens, one centered around the fulfillment of pleasure. This pleasure is an escape, not from reality as such, but from thinking.

For the individual, this administered life is attractive: there are no uncertainties, no difficult questions, no discomforts. If my judgment tells me that the administered life is the good life, I have no reason to think otherwise. And if the administered life is comfortable, there is no reason why I should insist on being independent or self-sufficient.

The state becomes like a parent or a schoolteacher; it is no longer traditional despotism, where one knows that one is oppressed. Rather, it

is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and gentle. ... It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and the most vigorous temperament cannot force

⁵⁹ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 692.

their heads above the crowd. It does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd.⁶⁰

This is a Janus-faced despotism: one face is the state as provider, caretaker, and entertainer, while the other face is the cold, impenetrable stone wall of an Orwellian bureaucracy. The state conditions its people to be content, in fact to desire, to be put into categories—ironically, this will make the people feel more like individuals: each person is measured on ever-more sophisticated scales of classification, making him more capable of distinguishing himself from those with different values on those scales. But at the same time, everyone becomes similar, because everyone relies increasingly on the norms implied by the classificatory scales for his self-definition. Language promotes this similarity; Tocqueville notes that democracy changes language, making it more instrumental. Democratic language is not philosophical; it is technical—leaving citizens with a diminished vocabulary to question the world around them.⁶¹

At the same time that the subjects are disciplined, individualized, they are also brought tighter together. “The dream of despotism is of a world in which all ties are those of the state or of ‘privacy,’ and in which all decisions can be reached through

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 692.

⁶¹ Wolin, *Tocqueville*, 312. If language were to become purely instrumental (which of course it would not), the citizens would find themselves in the same situation as the speakers of Newspeak: unable to speak critically, their minds capable only of technical busywork.

appeals to technique and code.”⁶² Rules replace human initiative and imagination to make sure that we are all as equal as possible. Spontaneity becomes suspicious; it is a rebellious action without value, merely getting in the way of the smooth implementation of the rules.⁶³ But rules, in their seeming neutrality, are not equalizers, nor are they neutral: Eichmann always acted within the law, and in Tocqueville’s America, it is legal to eradicate the original inhabitants—a legality which helps explain why the rest of the world can ignore that eradication. Rules only work if we are not among the excluded, among those not part of “the people,” and then they work only if we follow certain habits of the heart, namely the ones society tells us to follow. But even so, rules do not work, not to Tocqueville’s liking in any case—because they still relieve us “from the trouble of thinking.” And this trouble is crucial to Tocqueville; without it, there is no point in calling oneself human.⁶⁴

Non-thinking, then, is not without its dangers, apart from simply predisposing us not to resist despotism. Arendt makes the same observation as Tocqueville: she thinks that those who do not think are incapable of seriously examining the world around them, and will therefore be unable to imagine alternatives to whatever the rules of accepted and condoned behavior may be in their particular society. The existence of rules is more important than the content of the rules.⁶⁵ Thinking—my internal dialogue with myself—is not always present; if I never started that dialogue, I

⁶² Reinhardt, *Art of Being Free*, 53.

⁶³ Mill, *On Liberty*, 54.

⁶⁴ “It does little good to summon those very citizens who have been so dependent on the central power to choose the representatives of that power from time to time. However important, this brief and occasional exercise of free will will not prevent them from gradually losing the faculty of thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves, so that they will slowly fall below the level of humanity.” de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 694.

⁶⁵ “What people then get used to is less the content of the rules, a close examination of which would always lead them into perplexity, than the *possession* of rules under which to subsume particulars.” Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1981), 177.

have never withdrawn into myself to examine things. As Socrates noted, it is better to have the multitudes disagree with me than that I disagree with myself—meaning, I do not want to contradict myself in my internal dialogue. All one has to do is to “never start the soundless dialogue we call ‘thinking,’ never go home and examine things. This is not a matter of wickedness or goodness, as it is not a matter of intelligence or stupidity. A person who does not know that silent intercourse (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment.”⁶⁶

Rather than think, we bind ourselves to habits. Following habit means staying on a familiar, easy path; it means not trying new things. Habits do not eliminate the thought process, but they direct it, steering it down well-accustomed channels. Instrumental reason requires thought—but it is a specialized kind of thought; it is thought in the service of an external end. It is ordered, utilitarian thought.

But thinking is always “out of order,” as Arendt puts it; whenever we think, we *stop* and think. Thinking is always a withdrawal from the world—thinking is examining what we say and what we do, which cannot be done while we are saying or doing. But it is a withdrawal that is fundamentally different from Tocqueville’s individualism; when we think, we think about the world, trying to give meaning to it so that we can better engage it when we are done thinking. Thinking always aims to return to the world. Tocqueville’s individualism is the exact opposite—it is a withdrawal from the world to escape the world, not to have to think about it ever

⁶⁶ Ibid., 190-91.

again. This is done once, and then the world is off our minds until we return to it. Thinking, by contrast, must constantly be renewed; “the need to think can never be stilled by allegedly definite insights of ‘wise men’; it can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I want and am able to think them anew.”⁶⁷ Like Tocqueville’s voting but not-quite-human administered citizens, Arendt thinks a life without thinking is not completely human: to her, thinking is part of the life process, and since life is a process, what is important about thinking is not so much the results as the thinking process itself. “A life without thinking is quite possible; it then fails to develop its own essence—it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive.”⁶⁸ Without thought, it does not matter if we live in a democracy or a tyranny, or if we have infinite choices of how to live our lives, because our lives are pointless. And that is what Tocqueville fears: when we give up our freedom for security and equality, we may also be giving up our humanness—and this is a danger that he thinks is particular to democracy; an aristocracy can be politically oppressive, but because it does not insist on a single standard of judgment, it will not take away one’s humanity.

Conclusion

In Tocqueville’s democratic despotism, all of the institutions of democracy are in place, but the democracy itself is meaningless, because the citizens are thoughtless and conform to the tyranny of the majority. They do not have the possibility to disturb the status quo; they are caught up in an administrative labyrinth which leaves them

⁶⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 191.

without a public space in which to be disturbing. Much like Stalin's Soviet Union, there is no public life, only public rituals, and the only space in which the citizens are left to themselves is the private space of the household.

Clearly, this is not liberal society, nor is it meant to be. It is merely Tocqueville's fear of a debased version of it, and it serves as a cautionary tale: the very respect for the individual's autonomy that makes liberalism protect her private space of freedom and remain neutral regarding her choice of how to live also makes it vulnerable to leaving the individual without any form of moral guidance, free to get sucked along by, for example, the tyranny of the majority. That is not a very likely prospect, by and large; liberal societies tend to be hotbeds of opposing voices which assure that no single voice or single standard can become dominant. Still, we should recognize liberalism's vulnerabilities, and we should be aware that a large share of the responsibility for keeping liberalism on its feet is carried by citizens who leave their own private spaces of freedom and disturb their neighbors. Without those disturbances, liberal democracy is in danger of stagnating.

It is difficult to have a meaningful democracy when the picture of reality one is asked to accept does not contain any disturbing elements, and it is even more difficult when one is deprived of the possibility of being disturbing. But if we want to live in a democracy, we must be willing to listen to opinions that disturb us and make us uncomfortable. Isolating ourselves in exclusive spaces where outside opinions cannot challenge our ideology may enrich our private lives, but it makes for bad democratic practice. It is not enough simply to rely on the procedural apparatus of representative elections; democracy needs spaces in which we are disturbed. One

cannot be disturbing in a shopping mall or a theme park—the only public spaces to which an increasing number of us now have access. If the local, spontaneously created public spaces in which everyday citizens can come together just as citizens, rather than as consumers or private individuals, are discouraged—or even taken away—because they interfere with the smooth functioning of the democratic process (or because they are converted into corporate spaces), then democracy itself is threatened.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ESCAPE FROM PUBLIC SPACE

Liberalism's individual is private, but a public life independent of the formal political process exists in all liberal democracies—in Tocqueville's townships and associations, in grassroots organizations, in social movements, and in clubs, to name just a few. Yet, despite all this activity, public life in liberal societies is often described as anemic and lackluster. Although liberalism, in order to preserve its neutrality towards conceptions of the good life, does not provide very strong protections for informal public life, it is certainly not to blame for that informal public life being less than vibrant. Liberalism cannot specifically encourage unofficial public participation—that would violate liberal neutrality—but it clearly cannot prohibit it either. However, because of that insistence on neutrality and also because it conceives of freedom as something realized in the private sphere, liberalism is vulnerable to threats to informal public life—threats which may also end up being threats to private life. These threats are not by any means caused by liberalism, but they form part of the context in which liberal societies must function. If liberalism is about the individual's ability to choose her own life, liberalism should be sensitive not only to direct interference, but also to more subtle threats to the individual's capacity to be the autonomous author of her life. This chapter is an attempt to describe one such threat: how the configuration of public spaces helps push us into an increasingly private existence.

In the public realm, we have impersonal relationships with strangers; we neither can nor want to have intimate relationships outside the circles of family and friends. The public realm allows us to go beyond ourselves: we encounter many different experiments in living and experience a plurality of perspectives. By leaving my intimate self in the private realm, I am rewarded with worldliness: in the public realm, life as such is irrelevant; what brings us together in the public realm is the fabric of past and present words and actions that forms our common human world. What matters is not who I am, but what I say and do. If the public realm becomes intimate, it loses its worldliness, and is merely a collection of singular experiences innumerably multiplied.

In an intimate society, the public realm is made private, which means that its concerns also become private—primarily materialism and consumption. When the public realm also focuses on materialism and consumption, we will enter it only briefly, to fulfill private errands, before retreating back into the private realm. But private life is singular, and a strictly private life is vulnerable to the pressures of conformity; without competing perspectives, custom can rule supreme. In contemporary life, we face pressures from all sides to retreat into the private: both the state and corporations emphasize our private well-being over our public life. But even the spatial patterns of modern life push us into private life: suburbanization is a move away from public life and into insulated and segregated homogeneous enclaves of privacy, a space where family life is safe from the ravages of the outside world.

The configuration of space can encourage or discourage public life, and public space is increasingly configured for isolated, private individuals merely to pass

through.¹ For example, space which is constructed for a single function prohibits the complex overlay of functions which is necessary for public life; such a space is instrumental, denying the possibility of spontaneous action. When public spaces are transformed into instrumental or commercial spaces, there can be no public realm, because we enter these spaces only as private individuals or consumers.

But a life in such spaces is fragmented: there is nothing holding the various isolated spaces together other than the satisfaction of my momentary need. I move between non-places, isolated commercial or instrumental spaces devoid of context, existing only for the fulfillment of a singular function. In a non-place, I am only the function I am there to fulfill; a passenger or consumer rather than an individual. Being only my need, I am interchangeable. With the loss of the public realm and the escape into non-place, we lose not only the worldliness of the public realm; we also lose the uniqueness of the private realm.

The public realm

The public realm is impersonal, because the people we meet there are strangers. We see and are seen by strangers, and the relationships we have with these strangers are not intimate, as they are with the family and friends that constitute our private realm. If we were intimate with the strangers, they would no longer be strangers. Even if we

¹ It is useful to distinguish between space and place. *Space* is abstract, a continuous expanse which extends without limit in three dimensions. *Place* is a specific location with its own history and a context which mediates the human interactions which take place in it; a place, because of this history and context, is always unique. If it does not contain a place, space is not memorable; there is nothing to do there but wander through it—quite literally: *space* comes from the Latin *spatiari*, meaning to wander. *Public spaces* are non-private spaces outside the household; often, they will be places, like squares or streets, but they can also just be empty spaces which do not invite public life—which is why I use this term rather than the more specific *public places*. (To complicate things, many authors use *public space* both literally, referring to physical space, and metaphorically, referring to the theoretical arena of public life; if I use it in the latter sense, that should be clear from the context.)

do not know them, these strangers are important to us: they form the public realm that allows us to have an existence beyond the merely private. In the most ordinary public realm, the streets and squares around our home, we have public relationships with strangers: they are not intimate friends, but we know who they are and they know who we are. We have contact with people who are not like us, who are not family or friends; the familiar and unfamiliar strangers around us create a world.

This world, the public realm, exists when we have natural, everyday contact with strangers. The medieval and renaissance market squares are examples of places which allowed that type of contact; there, a rich variety of functions and activities overlapped in a single space. This multiplicity of functions disappeared when, in the 17th century, the old squares were demolished and rebuilt as monuments (Paris) or gardens (London), and without it, the new squares could not be natural gathering places for public life. As a street or a square changes from a living, multi-functional place which allows spontaneous contacts into the dead, empty space of, for example, a monument or a garden, it loses its public character, and the stranger we encounter there is merely an unknown.² When there is no natural public life, we either become intimate with our neighbors, sharing more of ourselves than we would in public, or we retreat from the public altogether.³ In both the expansion of the sphere of intimacy and the withdrawal into the private, the boundary between public and private has been breached; in both cases, the public realm has been lost.

² Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 54-56.

³ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 62-63. To put it another way: by becoming intimate with our neighbors, we replace *Gesellschaft* with *Gemeinschaft*.

Richard Sennett argues that in the public realm, there is a separation between one's public role and one's intimate self. The public realm is a human creation, a realm of artificiality; we enter it to be with others, not to fulfill the needs of our bodies. Since the people we meet there are strangers, we do not burden them with our intimate person, but show them instead something like a mask, an artificial role that we play in public. Playing a role allows us to have meaningful contacts with strangers; when we play a role, we can act and speak at a distance from our intimate self.⁴ Because the public realm is a space of appearance, the mask is important: without it, we would stand naked in the harsh light of the public. The intimate self is vulnerable, encumbered by biological necessity and personal insecurities. The mask presents a face to the world, showing us as we want to appear—it is literally our *persona*.

In the 18th century, according to Sennett, one's public appearance would all but obliterate one's private self: although one's clothes at home were comfortable and designed for the needs of the body, one's public clothes were like a costume, displaying a character—one which did not necessarily have anything to do with one's intimate or professional self. Even one's face was a display: both men and women painted their faces, and some wore actual masks, all in an attempt to hide one's person and show only a public face.⁵

When the public realm is occupied by public roles rather than intimate selves, what is interesting is not the person as such, but what he says and does. In 18th century coffeehouses, the fictional suspension of social rank allowed anyone to

⁴ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 87, 98, 264.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-68, 70.

engage anyone else in conversation. In the clubs which started appearing in the mid-18th century, however, one could not talk freely: they were exclusive environments in which one controlled with whom one was talking. Unlike in the coffeehouses, what was interesting was not what was being said, but who was talking. In the clubs, speech was private, restricted to one's peers; this reduced one's exposure to the world outside the club, just as the free talk in the coffeehouses expanded one's knowledge of the world outside one's immediate circle.⁶ If one's *persona* is not the same as one's personality, one's actions do not inevitably determine one's inner self. By changing one's behavior, one's public role changes; this obviously allows for a larger diversity in the potential roles one can play in public. One does not have to show only oneself, but can experiment with different masks and opinions.⁷

Habermas tells a similar, if slightly different story about the rise of the public sphere. The public sphere, which is the realm in which private people come together and engage each other in critical communication, was formed in the coffee-houses and *salons* of Great Britain and France in the 18th century; these places were centers of criticism, both literary and political.⁸ Habermas thinks that it is in the public sphere that public opinion can be formed, and that the public sphere is a mediator between society and the state, allowing the citizens to express their criticisms of the official political process.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 81-82, 84.

⁷ Ibid., 109. Cf. Foucault's discussion on delinquency: the criminal changes from someone who commits bad acts to someone whose entire personality is criminal, and so one punishes not the crime but the person. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 251-54.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 32.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article" in Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner, Eds., *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 137.

This critical public sphere was in principle open to everyone, but in reality, it was based on an equivalence between human beings and property owners. This fiction was necessary if the public sphere was to remain *public*: a public sphere which does not include everyone is not really a public sphere. In practice, Habermas argues, there were two criteria for admission to the public sphere: education and property ownership. Only property owners had private interests—the protection of their property—that could translate into a reasonable legislative agenda; they did not have to “leave their private existence behind to exercise their public role. For the private person, there was no break between *homme* and *citoyen*, as long as the *homme* was simultaneously an owner of private property who as *citoyen* was to protect the stability of the property order as a private one. Class interest was the basis of public opinion.”¹⁰ This is why, in Habermas’s account, early constitutions reflected the liberal public sphere: they protected the autonomy of the private sphere and circumscribed public power.¹¹

But constitutions also formalized the public sphere, making its functions explicit in the law. A result of this was that the state became the principal focus of public life; the organization and procedures of the state’s institutions now became what was seen as public.¹² In the long run, public authorities have come to act more in the private sphere, and social powers have come to act in the official political public sphere; the private and public spheres have become interpenetrated, and the public

¹⁰ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 87, also 56, 85.

¹¹ Habermas in Bronner and Kellner, Eds., *Critical Theory and Society*, 139.

¹² Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 83.

sphere has lost its function of critical publicity.¹³ The private sphere has also been altered, according to Habermas: the intimate sphere used to be at the center of the private sphere, but it has now been pushed to the side and become more and more hidden from the world. At the same time, work, which used to be more private, has become more public.¹⁴ Habermas writes:

The shrinking of the private sphere into the inner areas of a conjugal family largely relieved of function and weakened in authority—the quiet bliss of homeyness—provided only the illusion of a perfectly private personal sphere; for to the extent that private people withdrew from their socially controlled roles as property owners into the purely “personal” ones of their noncommittal use of leisure time, they came directly under the influence of semipublic authorities, without the protection of an institutionally protected domestic domain. ... What today, as the domain of leisure, is set off from an occupational sphere that has become autonomous, has the tendency to take the place of that kind of public sphere in the world of letters that at one time was the point of reference for a subjectivity shaped in the bourgeois family’s intimate sphere.¹⁵

The intimate self is singular: it cannot be other than it is; the public role, on the other hand, can be plural, drawing from many different spheres of activities for its inspiration. Mill worries that everyday, private life focuses our attention only on petty

¹³ Habermas in Bronner and Kellner, Eds., *Critical Theory and Society*, 141; Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 140.

¹⁴ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 152, 154.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

routines; we do not see beyond ourselves: “Every thought or feeling, either of interest or of duty, is absorbed in the individual and in the family.” The remedy, for Mill, is to do something for the public; now the citizen will be “called upon ... to weigh interests not his own; to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities...”¹⁶ As private individuals, we see primarily from one perspective—our own—while as citizens in the public realm we gain the ability to see from a plurality of perspectives. This is why Tocqueville insists on our practicing habits of the heart: without habits of the heart, we risk losing our independent standards of judgment and succumbing to the mindlessness of an administered life.

However, the expansion of the private realm into the public, creating an intimate society, also puts us at risk of losing the public realm’s plurality of perspectives. Sennett echoes Habermas’s description that in “the 19th Century the family came to appear less and less the center of a particular, nonpublic region, more an idealized refuge, a world all its own, with a higher moral value than the public realm. ... As the family became a refuge from the terrors of society, it gradually became also a moral yardstick with which to measure the public realm...”¹⁷ This new emphasis on the sanctity of home and the family is also reflected in the arrangement of rooms in private houses: individuals had their own personal rooms, and different activities—eating, sleeping, relaxing—were assigned to their own, separate rooms.¹⁸ In this way, “[the] line between private and public sphere extended right through the home. The privatized individuals stepped out of the intimacy of their living rooms

¹⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 150.

¹⁷ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 20.

¹⁸ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 47-48.

into the public sphere of the *salon*...”¹⁹ Intimacy expanded into the public realm: the private individual’s defense against the strangers of the public realm was not to put on a mask, but to insist on his privacy—strangers had no right to speak to each other. To protect himself in the visibility of the public realm, intimate man shielded himself, isolating himself in his own private sphere even as he ventured out in public.²⁰ In an intimate society, there is no public life as such; there are only private strangers isolating themselves from each other.

With an intimate society also comes a change in how appearance is perceived. In the 18th century, Sennett argues, one’s clothes told a story about one’s social standing; at the end of the 19th century, one’s clothes showed one’s inner self—they reflected one’s personality. One’s appearance was “no longer at a distance from the self,” but was rather an expression of the self: it was possible to know someone intimately by observing his appearance carefully.²¹ In a society where any public appearance threatens to reveal one’s intimate secrets, it is not surprising that people prefer the safety of the private realm.

The problem with an intimate society is not that people retreat into privacy in order to avoid being intimate with strangers: we all need a hiding place from the public realm, and the private realm is the best place to hide. We cannot live our lives entirely in public; such a life would lack depth and direction—it would be shallow.²² If an entirely private life is too singular, lacking connection with the outside world, an

¹⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 45.

²⁰ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147, 153. In other words, Sherlock Holmes’s dazzling displays of induction would not have been possible 150 years earlier; the public realm of masks did not allow anyone, no matter how skilled, to know a person’s intimate being simply by meticulously observing his dress.

²² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 71.

entirely public life would also be deficient: someone who lived his whole life in public would, strictly speaking, not be his own person—he would be a collection of roles and masks.

The danger with an intimate society, rather, is that when private intimacy is brought out into public, public life declines.²³ There is no longer a boundary around the world of intimate feeling.²⁴ Consequently, we use private, intimate standards—how does this make me feel?—to judge issues which should more properly be judged with a public standard. Also, when there is no barrier between the intimate self and the public role, one is constantly at risk of disclosing one’s inner self in public; the logical response is to shield oneself from public exposure.²⁵ In a full-blown intimate society, one cannot have a proper public relationships: one either has too much contact—intimacy with strangers—or no contact at all.²⁶

Intimacy demands that we all behave as if we were all members of the same family; it demands conformity. The intimate society does not allow me to act in public; I have to behave true to my inner self. It normalizes, requiring consistency and excluding spontaneous action.²⁷ It is a prison of personality—I can never escape who I am. The impersonal, plural public realm cannot exist in an intimate society: intimacy is a tyranny of a single standard of judgment.²⁸

²³ Dana Richard Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 150.

²⁴ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 159-60, 167.

²⁶ “If mere contact with your neighbors threatens to entangle you in their private lives, or entangle them in yours, and if you cannot be so careful who your neighbors are as self-selected upper-middle-class people can be, the logical solution is absolutely to avoid friendliness or casual offers of help. Better to stay thoroughly distant.” Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 65.

²⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 40.

²⁸ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 338.

Retreating into the private

The intimate society blurs the boundary between the public and private realms. The public realm is made intimate. Enlarging the private to encompass society does not make it public—the happiness of “small things” is still private, even if a whole people share it. Exporting private concerns into the public realm on a mass scale means that the public realm has receded.²⁹

Without a public realm, we retreat into the private realm; Mill argues that when there is no public life, we focus almost entirely on material interests, momentary amusements, and banal pleasures.³⁰ This is so because the private realm is the sphere of biological necessity; its activities are defined by constant consumption to maintain the body. For Mill, economic success in commercial society is nothing more than glorified housekeeping—a sophisticated version of fulfilling biological needs. It is not an adequate standard of the good, because it is exclusively inner-regarding, concerned with personal needs and desires.³¹

The danger with a strictly private life is that our attention is never drawn beyond ourselves, that we are never exposed to competing standards of judgment. We give up our independent judgment and allow ourselves to be defined entirely by the external standards of economic society.³² Mill wants us to have internalized standards

²⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52.

³⁰ Mill, *Representative Government*, 138.

³¹ Ronald Terchek, *Republican Paradoxes and Liberal Anxieties: Retrieving Neglected Fragments of Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 152.

³² *Ibid.*, 148. Mill writes: “In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, everyone lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves, what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? I do not mean that they

to challenge the external ones of economic society—that money and happiness are inextricably linked. If we do not, we will be completely ruled by society; we will not be our own persons. Ruled by unexamined standards, we lose control over our lives.³³

Mill sees us willingly give up that control for the incentives of materialism and consumption, and for the conformity of economic society. We expend all our energy on instrumental skills rather than risk nonconforming.³⁴ With conformity comes a pervasive sameness: life becomes more or less the same for everyone.³⁵ That also means that we do not want anyone else to nonconform; we want our neighbors to be passive, we do not want to be challenged.³⁶ But for Mill, conformity to society's customs, simply because they are customs, is not a fully human existence: "He who lets the world, or his portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation."³⁷ To Mill, an entirely private life, with its focus on materialism and consumption, is meaningless because, without a public component, one cannot develop as an autonomous *individual*.

This is the danger of Tocqueville's tutelary state: it deprives the citizens of a public life, forcing them into a constant mindless happiness in which all their material and spiritual needs are provided by the state. They are not individuals, strictly

choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of..." John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 58.

³³ Tercek, *Republican Paradoxes*, 151-52.

³⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 67.

³⁵ "The circumstances which surround different classes and individuals, and shape their characters, are daily becoming more assimilated. Formerly, different ranks, different neighborhoods, different trades and professions lived in what might be called different worlds; at present, to a great degree in the same. Comparatively speaking, they now read the same things, listen to the same things, see the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights and liberties, and the same means of asserting them." *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁶ Mill, *Representative Government*, 145.

³⁷ Mill, *On Liberty*, 56.

speaking, because the state inhibits any unsanctioned actions, prohibiting independent personal development and keeping the citizens in a state of permanent infancy. Thankfully, this is much too bleak a picture of the power of the state: we are not mindless sheep with false consciousness, fooled by the state into believing that we are happy in our slavery.

We *are*, however, increasingly pushed to retreat into an exclusively private life, but now it is not primarily the state that pushes us; it is a whole host of other social institutions, perhaps the best example of which is corporations. Corporations promote certain habits of the heart, but unlike those Tocqueville endorses, these habits of the heart are not intended to provide independent standards, standards that will allow democratic citizens to judge for themselves. Rather, corporate habits of the heart are habits which encourage surrender to the corporation's presentation of how the world is and should be; they are habits which encourage conformity to the status quo; they are habits which discourage thinking. However, it would be wrong to claim that corporations cultivate these habits of the heart in order to undermine democracy and general intelligence; corporate habits of the heart are very calculated, there can be no doubt about that, but they are above all intended to create loyal customers.

Ideally, the corporate habits of the heart would create an entire, hermetically sealed world within which the consumer can live his whole life. In this world, one's citizenship is defined by how dedicated a consumer of a corporation's products one is. But as a consumer, one is a private person, not a citizen: my living completely within a world provided by a corporation is possible only because of the singularity of the private realm, where, if properly insulated, I can escape competing standards. In

this externally imposed world, “[consumerism], corporatism, and technological progress become the central principles for constructing who we are and how we act. Democratic identities are replaced by consuming patterns, and the good life is constructed in terms of what we buy.”³⁸

A corporation’s habits of the heart constitute an ideology, making it possible to live one’s entire life inside the world defined by the corporation. There *is*, for example, a Disney ideology, just as there is a Microsoft ideology, a General Motors ideology, a Ben and Jerry’s ideology, or an REI ideology. Regardless of how moral a corporation claims its practices and goals are, it is still in business to make us buy its products, and to make us do that, it both appeals to pre-existing values held by its target consumers and presents those consumers with an ideology, a pre-packaged set of values which its customers should fulfill or at least strive towards. This, by the way, is not unique for corporations: the realities which the NRA and the Sierra Club present to their members are not just about guns or the environment—they are complete philosophies of life. In selling their products or services, these corporations (and other organizations) give consumers a complete picture of reality, making it unnecessary to engage reality on one’s own.

Of course, things are not that simple: we are surrounded by conflicting corporate messages, and most of us are quite skilled at cutting through the false rhetoric. But it is difficult to escape the pressure of these messages altogether: even though few people are willing to live their lives entirely inside a corporate brand such as Nike or Gap or Starbucks, the brands are continually expanding their domain to

³⁸ Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 24.

cover a wider range of our supposed needs. A brand is no longer simply a product; it is “a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea.”³⁹ Even if we do not swallow Nike’s philosophy, we are likely to believe that we cannot be cool unless we have a new pair of sneakers, just as we have to “abdicate our right to call ourselves parents” if we never take our children to Disney World at least once.⁴⁰

Corporate habits of the heart glorify private life, urging us to withdraw from the public into the intimate; but we also retreat into the private by our own volition. As the organization of space in cities prompts us to abandon the public domain as meaningless, we voluntarily seek out the privacy of suburban life.⁴¹ Suburbanization is a spatial reconfiguration of life to escape the commotion of the public realm.

In a suburb, the focus of life is not on the street or the neighborhood, but inwards, on the house. Since suburbs are more spread out than cities, one needs a car to get around, and a car is insulated from its environment in a way that a pedestrian is not—hence the possibility of chance sidewalk encounters decreases. Another side effect of the car is that the garage, an empty buffer space, has come to replace the quasi-public porch as the house’s connection to the street. Instead of being directed towards the street, in the front yard, the life of the house is now directed towards the private space of the back yard. The suburban house is its own, private island—a place to escape from the visibility of the public.⁴² In cities, Habermas argues, the configuration of urban space “does not afford a spatially protected private sphere, nor

³⁹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 2000), 23.

⁴⁰ Stephen M. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 10.

⁴¹ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 12.

⁴² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 279-80. See also Drummond Buckley, “A Garage in the House” in Martin Wachs and Margaret Crawford, Eds., *The Car and the City: The Automobile, the Built Environment, and Daily Urban Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 137.

does it create free space for public contacts and communications that could bring private people together to form a public.”⁴³ Presumably, suburban space also does not help bring private people together into a public.

Suburbia detaches us from our neighbors not only in space—which it does by distributing the fragments of a city over an entire region, each fragment accessible only by car—but also in spirit: life in suburbia is encapsulated, spent at home or in the car, and only rarely in the company of strangers. Since there is no street life to speak of in a car suburb, there is also very little room for spontaneous encounters or for exposure to a plurality of perspectives.⁴⁴

It is important to keep in mind that suburbanization was not forced upon an unwilling population, nor was it simply the result of a mass desire to escape the public realm: life in a suburb can be very good, safe, and comfortable. It is not unreasonable to want to live well if it is a feasible alternative. Suburbanization was fueled not simply by a desire for a better life, however; it was also the result of very concrete policies and social changes. The rise of the automobile, with its unfettered mobility, allowed new developments to spread wherever land was available, as well as allowing lower residential density.⁴⁵ Also, legislation after World War II provided tax incentives for detached-home ownership, and supported the building of new highways.⁴⁶ Suburbs developed because people wanted to live in suburbs, but they also developed because people were encouraged to live in suburbs. Whatever the

⁴³ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 158.

⁴⁴ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961), 507, 512-13. Mumford writes: “Suburbia offers poor facilities for meeting, conversation, collective debate, and common action—it favors silent conformity, not rebellion or counter-attack.”

⁴⁵ “In fact, the residential density of a neighborhood today is largely a function of the type of transportation system that accompanied its early development.” Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 185.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

reason, the move to the suburbs was, because of the spatial pattern of the suburbs, a retreat into an increasingly private life.

But suburbanization is not a simple, voluntary movement of all social classes to a quiet, safe residential life: it is coupled with the rise of public housing projects in the inner cities. While those who could afford it moved out to the suburbs, those who could not had to stay in the cities, often in public housing projects. “The result, if not the intent, of the public housing program of the United States was to segregate the races, to concentrate the disadvantaged in inner cities, and to reinforce the image of suburbia as a place of refuge for the problems of race, crime, and poverty.”⁴⁷ Suburban municipalities could refuse to create public housing agencies or apply for federal funding; consequently, public housing was not built in affluent suburbs, and different social classes became spatially separated.⁴⁸ The effect of the twin movements of suburbanization and public housing was a segregation of the population into isolated, homogeneous enclaves, thus destroying the effective plurality of the public realm. If I am surrounded in public by strangers who are just like me, the public realm is little more than an extended private realm.

The retreat into the private realm that begun in the 19th century is not merely a withdrawal from public life. As the example of suburbanization shows, this retreat is accompanied by a fundamental transformation of public space.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 219.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 225.

The transformation of public space

The configuration of space influences human relationships. Depending on its configuration, a space can encourage solitary movement or collective hanging around. “Space does not direct events, but it does shape possibility.”⁴⁹ Each configuration allows some types of interactions and precludes others; space pushes us to act or behave in certain ways, which means that space carries power, even ideology.⁵⁰ Geography is an instrument of political power.

Primarily because of its effect on movement, the configuration of space tends to define how individuals using a space, either for passing through or for living in, are collectively present in it—and therefore also tends to define the awareness they have of each other in it. If space is improperly designed, there will be no natural patterns of being collectively present, and “[in] such circumstances, space is at best empty, at worst abused and a source of fear.”⁵¹ A typical example is individual offices placed side by side in a long corridor: the corridor is an empty space, meant only to be passed through. In this configuration, if I want to see someone, I have to go to that person’s office. If the offices had all opened up to a central, communal area, there would be a meeting space other than the private spaces of individual offices; the latter configuration encourages togetherness, the former isolation.⁵² We all know, quite naturally, how to “read” spatial configurations, and so we have expectations of the

⁴⁹ Bill Hillier, *Space Is the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 206.

⁵⁰ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), 6.

⁵¹ Hillier, *Space Is the Machine*, 187-88.

⁵² However, although the corridor does not promote communal togetherness, it can promote collegiality, since, as one walks through the corridor to one’s office, one will see who else is in, and perhaps stop for a brief chat.

type of interactions possible in particular spaces; we tend to adjust our behavior to the environment, that is, the spatial configuration.⁵³

Space can push us towards publicity (shopping at an open-air market square rather than a supermarket) or towards privacy (car suburbs). Public space, which should bring us together, can, if so configured, isolate us. For example, a small plaza set apart from the street and surrounded by office buildings is dead space; it does not permit a multiplicity of functions, and is merely space to be passed through. Or, glass walls in the lobby of a building both make the activities in the building visible from the street and act as hermetic walls isolating the building.⁵⁴ Public space which has a barrier—a glass wall, a fence, a hedge, or even just that it is not visible from the street—is effectively private, because it does not invite us. Rather, it projects an image of exclusion. But it is not really private either, because one is not shielded from the eyes of strangers when one is in it. In this space which is neither public nor private, we can have neither public nor private relationships, and so we are left lonely even though we are surrounded by others.

On a larger scale, the public space of an entire city can be dead. Administrative capitals, either bureaucratic or religious, tend to be planned with more attention to geometry than to social needs; their spaces are mostly symbolic, and not for living. The public space in these cities isolates those who use it, because the space is not designed to generate encounters; it is designed to convey the symbolic importance of certain buildings or locations—that is, it is designed to display power.⁵⁵ These types of towns, which tend to be highly planned, are easily understood from

⁵³ Hillier, *Space Is the Machine*, 190.

⁵⁴ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 12-13.

⁵⁵ Hillier, *Space Is the Machine*, 232, 238.

above, through a simple geometrical or relational plan, while real, functioning towns tend to appear disordered. But on the ground, walking through the city, highly ordered towns tend to be confusing, while real towns have a different type of order—for everyday use, for living and moving through. The order of a highly planned town can be grasped all at once, because its order is imposed all at once; real towns can be understood only through experience. We *can* understand the façades of buildings all at once, which is why they can be highly ordered without being confusing. Space, on the other hand, cannot be grasped all at once, at least from the ground, where we live; this is why geometrically ordered space is not a space for living.⁵⁶

Visual order may appear to be more rational than the jumbled spaces of an ordinary city; however, planning a city based primarily on appearance, not on function, is looking for trouble.⁵⁷ Under the apparent (visual) disorder of a city is complex order, one of movement of change. It is the order of an intricate, improvised sidewalk ballet, in which each dancer invents his own choreography.⁵⁸ Trying to make sense of a crowded street is impossible; it appears to be completely random. But each sidewalk dancer's movement is not random—it is directed, purposeful, perfectly ordered. Order and visual simplicity are not the same: "To see complex systems of functional order as order, and not as chaos, takes understanding. The leaves dropping from the trees in the autumn, the interior of an airplane engine, the entrails of a dissected rabbit, the city desk of a newspaper, all appear to be chaos if

⁵⁶ Ibid., 234-36. Hillier distinguishes between "order" and "structure." *Order* is the type of highly regular, often repetitive pattern that "can be grasped all at once because it is imposed all at once." *Structure* cannot be grasped all at once, because it is not imposed all at once; its logic can be understood only through experience—in the case of a town, by living in and moving through it. Small parcels of space, such as buildings, can be ordered, but any successful public space has to be structured—if not, it simply becomes dead and empty, because it makes no sense to us.

⁵⁷ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 14-15.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 50.

they are seen without comprehension, Once they are understood as systems of order, they actually *look* different.”⁵⁹

Visual order—that is, sameness—is actually disorder. It conveys no direction, because all directions look the same. We cannot find our way around visually ordered space, because there are no distinguishing spatial marker. In Brasília, for example, there are very few landmarks, and one has to give directions in reference to the total shape of the city rather as a path between memorable reference points. Visual order of this kind is not rational; it is a form of chaos.⁶⁰

Another kind of rationalization of space, trying to simplify the spaces in which we live, is functional separation. Space is functionally separated when each place (or, more appropriately, space) has only *one* function—unlike a street or a square, which have many functions. A shopping mall is a typical functionally separated space: it is a space dedicated entirely to shopping, and it discourages the types of spontaneous encounters that one would expect on a street or in a market. Functional separation eliminates the complexity of experiences, because it eliminates the multiplicity of functions in a single space.⁶¹ Since this space is singular and mono-functional, it disallows the plurality of activities and allegiances that Tocqueville thinks is necessary to avoid despotism.

Functional separation is not new; as mentioned earlier, public squares were rebuilt in Paris and London in the 17th century to eliminate their diversity of functions—replacing the old squares with monumental squares and gardens,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 376. (Italics in original.)

⁶⁰ Ibid., 223-24; James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 149.

⁶¹ Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 297.

respectively. Today we see functional separation in the zoning for separate residential and commercial districts, effectively separating in space the private sphere of the household from all public spaces. Functional separation also segregates residential areas, so that the middle class out in the suburbs will not have to share space with the poor in the inner city. This, also, has a historical precedent: when Hausmann reshaped Paris in the mid-19th century, he isolated the different social classes in different parts of the city, creating homogeneous, class-based neighborhoods whose inhabitants lost functional contact with other social classes.⁶²

Cities are reshaped, with more isolated private spaces and public spaces transformed into instrumental spaces. But public space cannot be instrumental; it does not have a single function or purpose.⁶³ The moment a public space is made instrumental, it ceases to be public and becomes instead an extension of the private realm. It is difficult to reclaim a public space that has been rebuilt as an instrumental one, because the configuration of the space has changed. When a city planner imposes a vision of how the city should look, altering our spaces, we have to adjust our daily practices.⁶⁴

One of the most dramatic transformations of public space is the segregation of neighborhoods in cities brought on by urban renewal. The justification for urban renewal was economic revitalization—seemingly the only criterion for what the public good is.⁶⁵ The urban renewal program destroyed low-income housing and

⁶² Ibid., 134-35.

⁶³ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 138.

⁶⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 204.

⁶⁵ “Who could object to a program that raised the economic productivity of the area without adding to its public expenses?” Paul E. Peterson, *City Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 144.

replaced it with mostly middle- and high-income housing; the result was to provide more housing for those who already had a choice, and reducing the housing options for the poor.⁶⁶ Urban renewal was supposed to eliminate slums, but succeeded only in moving slums around, and often also aggravating existing slums. Most of those evicted had to move to as bad or worse neighborhoods, paying higher rents.⁶⁷

With urban renewal, it was possible, by replacing low-income residents with high-income ones, to create new neighborhoods of a completely different character than the old neighborhoods.⁶⁸ These new, high-income neighborhoods were isolated from the low- and middle-income neighborhoods that surrounded them, with “visible redoubts and unmistakable boundaries, [enclosed] interior villages, and ... blank exterior walls.”⁶⁹ Rather than integrate the new housing developments into the existing urban context, these new neighborhoods segregated and isolated their residents from the rest of the city. Urban renewal created insulated fortresses of high-rent housing while, at the same time, relocating the poor into equally insulated slums; just as in Hausmann’s Paris, different social groups lost whatever functional contact in public they might have had.

The rebuilding of inner cities is not the only transformation of public space: the radical change in transportation patterns brought on by automobiles have also assisted the increased segregation of neighborhoods, in two ways. First, the middle class has moved out to the suburbs and commute by car into the city, while the poor, who cannot afford cars, are trapped in the cities and have to rely on public

⁶⁶ Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 6-7, 67.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-9, 60.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁹ Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 296.

transportation.⁷⁰ Not just living separately, different social groups also travel differently, further reducing their opportunities for public contacts. Second, highways have often been built right through existing neighborhoods, displacing the residents and creating blight along the corridor of the highway. For example, the stable but low-income neighborhood of East Tremont turned into a dangerous wasteland once Robert Moses had built his Cross-Bronx Expressway right through it.⁷¹

Highways and cars create an illusion of unlimited mobility, that I can live anywhere and still travel anywhere else almost instantly.⁷² The car is a powerful symbol of freedom: in my car, I have control over my life—I can go wherever I want, but I do not have to be disturbed by others, because the car is a shell protecting us from the outside world. The car is a private space that I can bring with me, so that I can remain in private even when I venture out into the public realm.

But it is not just that cars are mobile private spheres: the spatial pattern of an automobile city is radically different from that of a walking city or a transit city. In a walking city, virtually all transportation is pedestrian, since everything has to be within walking distance. The walking city has high residential densities and a lot of mixed land use. The same is true of the transit city, in which walking-scale subcenters have developed along rail corridors: people can take the train into the city, but they still have to walk everywhere around their homes. In the automobile city, on the other hand, each home is isolated, accessible by car only; rich and poor neighborhoods tend

⁷⁰ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 900-01.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19-20, 893.

⁷² As it turns out, when people can travel faster, they just spread out more. See Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy, *Sustainability and Cities: Overcoming Automobile Dependence* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999), 59.

to be far more segregated than in walking or transit cities; and residential and commercial areas are functionally separated and completely isolated from each other.⁷³ Any errand outside the house requires a car, which means that “[streets] are no longer places to promenade and to meet, but passageways for high-powered machines.”⁷⁴ Cities built after the 1920s tend to be built not for the needs of people, but for the needs of cars.⁷⁵ They are built to cancel the city itself—to allow private steel bubbles to drop off passengers at their desired destinations, so they will not have to interact with the city as such. With a car, I am supposedly free to be only where I want to be, to meet only those I want to meet: it is the freedom of the exclusively private person. But this person is not free, because he cannot, for example, walk if he wants to walk: in the automobile city, using a car is “not so much a choice but a necessity...”⁷⁶ Is it freedom to trade dependence on other people for dependence on a machine? The freedom of private man to do what he wants, where he wants, is also limited by the automobile city, because it is a transportational monoculture: building cities to accommodate the imaginary unlimited mobility of the car has eliminated all other transportation choices, even when they might be more appropriate.⁷⁷ In the automobile city, my car is more important than I am—a strange kind of freedom, indeed.

If cars insulate us from the outside world when we move from one destination to the next, the destinations themselves are not necessarily any less insulated. In a

⁷³ Ibid., 27-32.

⁷⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 281.

⁷⁵ Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997), 192.

⁷⁶ Newman and Kenworthy, *Sustainability and Cities*, 31.

⁷⁷ Lewis Mumford, *The Highway and the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1963), 247-48.

shopping mall, for example, we have no contact with the world outside; we shop, and that is it. Malls, the contemporary replacement for the market square or the downtown commercial district, gives the appearance of being a public space, because it is crowded with people. But malls are not public spaces; the entire mall is privately owned, making it “an inhospitable place for the free circulation of ideas, to say nothing of social action.”⁷⁸ Separated from all neighborhoods, the mall reflects suspicion of the street as a place for public life; the street is only a transportation link in a landscape of functional separation. Often surrounded on all sides by parking lots or garages, the mall is an enclosed, climate-controlled space which has no perceptual connection to the local surroundings.⁷⁹ The mall collects private individuals so that they can buy goods and services, and it insulates them from seeing, hearing, or coming across anything that might disturb their mood. It is a conformist, non-controversial, predictable, and comfortable space; I encounter nothing apart from uniform blandness, nothing threatening, nothing other than myself.⁸⁰ This is the opposite of public space.

That we share a space with a crowd of strangers does not make that space public; commercial space is not public space. For example, a theme park, like a mall, appears to be a public space, but it is a public space that one has to pay to get in to, and it has a single function: making money.⁸¹ It is not a space for spontaneous action, but rather for passive entertainment. Without something like playgrounds which I can

⁷⁸ Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 1991), 100.

⁷⁹ Margaret Crawford, “The World in a Shopping Mall” in Michael Sorkin, Ed. *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992), 21.

⁸⁰ Schiller, *Culture, Inc.*, 101.

⁸¹ Margaret Crawford, “The Fifth Ecology: Fantasy, the Automobile, and Los Angeles” in Wachs and Crawford, Eds., *Car and the City*, 224.

explore on my own, only rides where I am strapped in some vehicle, my enjoyment is controlled and calculated. I am not supposed to use my own imagination; I should stop thinking and revel in the imagination of the theme park designers.⁸² Once I have accepted, for example, Disney's control over my imagination, I will not ask critical questions; I will simply accept at face value what I see and am told. And I am told even how to react and how to feel; ride voiceovers and guidebooks describe everything in painstaking detail. "We are ordered about by language that is constantly performative and directive. We are drained of interpretive autonomy."⁸³

Corporations control the spaces they own, making them private even when they appear to be public. This is true also of actual public spaces that are sponsored by corporations; the money for, say, a cultural festival does not come without strings attached. In the sponsored public space, as in the mall or the theme park, the corporation does not want any disturbing elements.⁸⁴ The result is that as soon as a public space has a corporate sponsor, it ceases being public, because we enter it as private individuals and consumers, not as citizens.

Public space has been transformed into a space for instrumental or commercial concerns. The definition of the public has been reversed: it is "a territory where private affairs and exclusive possessions are put on display..."⁸⁵ Even previously existing public spaces become transformed even if they are not rebuilt, because they become destinations, or because trips there have to be planned—they are no longer spontaneous, multi-functional spaces. Without spaces which allow

⁸² Alan Bryman, *Disney and His Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995), 103.

⁸³ Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 13.

⁸⁴ Klein, *No Logo*, 185.

⁸⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 64.

public action, as opposed to private behavior, there can be no public life. All that is left is private, commercial concerns. But commercial concerns lead us to Tocqueville's gentle despotism: when only materialism matters, we lose all plurality of experience, and with it the multiplicity of standards of judgment.

So what does any of this have to do with liberalism? No liberal theorist argues that abandoning the public realm is desirable or gives any justification for the reconfiguration of public space. Clearly, the transformation of public space and the retreat into the private that it promotes is not caused or inspired by liberal theory. However, as an independent phenomenon, it is one which liberalism is poorly equipped to deal with, although it has ramifications for the possibility of realizing liberal freedom. Liberalism is neutral regarding conceptions of the good life, but the configuration of space is not—it opens some paths and blocks others. And liberalism cannot involve itself in the reconfiguration of space without appearing to privilege some conceptions of the good life over others. Also, since the liberal individual does not realize her freedom in public space (perhaps other than as a way to realize her own, private freedom), the loss of public spaces does not seem to threaten the field of liberal freedom. But the transformation of public space not only pushes us to retreat into the private, allowing us to be free there: private life is transformed as well, in a way that may leave us more vulnerable to arbitrary interference and with less autonomy.

Life in fragments

Contemporary life tends to be fragmented: we are constantly in motion from one private errand to the next, all of which take place in isolated, controlled environments. Even what once were public spaces are transformed into private spaces, shielded from intrusion of the real world outside: networks of tunnels and pedestrian bridges in the central business districts of several American cities ensure that I can stay in a socially homogeneous, safe space, and never have to enter the unpredictable public life of the street.⁸⁶ My movement between these shielded spaces also takes place in isolation, in the privacy of my own car. But in a car, watching the city pass by through the windshield, the space between destinations becomes neutral filler: the city becomes discontinuous, fragmented.⁸⁷ I do not engage the city, and it does not engage me.

We live our lives increasingly in non-places—instrumental spaces which are completely insulated from the historical, geographical, and cultural context of their location. Non-places are interchangeable transit points for isolated consumers; what defines my relations in and with a non-place is not an organic public life, but a “solitary contractuality.”⁸⁸ These spaces are inherently narcissistic: as a user of non-place, all messages within it are directed at me—it is a space with a single function, and so a single message can personally address all users equally. There is no plurality of messages creating a sense that other ways of life can co-exist in the same space. Before freeways bypassed towns, the main roads ran right through the center of most towns; trespassing on the everyday life of a strange town, travelers would find

⁸⁶ See Trevor Boddy, “Underground and Overhead: Building the Analogous City” in Sorokin, Ed. *Variations on a Theme Park*, 124-25.

⁸⁷ Crawford in Wachs and Crawford, Eds., *Car and the City*, 227.

⁸⁸ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 1995), 94.

themselves in a place where most signs and most activities were not addressed directly to them.⁸⁹ On a freeway, all signs address the driver, and the surrounding infrastructure—rest stops, fast-food restaurants, motels—exists solely to serve his needs. As a user of non-place, only my own needs are important, and only my own reality has any credence. Even language changes to accommodate the self-absorption of non-place: “Thus we can contrast the realities of *transit* ... with those of residence or dwelling; the *interchange* (where nobody crosses anyone else’s path) with the *crossroads* (where people meet); the *passenger* (defined by his *destination*) with the *traveller* (who strolls along his *route*...), ... [and] *communication* (with its codes, images and strategies) with *language* (which is spoken).”⁹⁰

Non-place is instrumental; it comes with an instruction manual, a text which tells us to behave.⁹¹ What non-places as dissimilar as malls, airports, suburbs, freeways, and theme parks have in common is that they are all built spaces which are insulated from the unpredictability and plurality of the surrounding world. They are homogeneous, visually pleasing, safe spaces: these are the virtues of the private realm applied to the public realm. A typical example of this is the architecture of nostalgia: we build replicas of walking cities, but these spaces are strictly for consumption, and can only be reached by car—they are isolated from the street and surrounded by parking lots.⁹² These spaces do not stand out in any way—they are attractions,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 98-99.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 107-08. (Italics in original.)

⁹¹ These texts “may be prescriptive (‘Take right-hand lane’), prohibitive (‘No smoking’) or informative (‘You are now entering the Beaujolais region’).” Ibid., 96.

⁹² Kay, *Asphalt Nation*, 73-74. In these refashioned urban centers, “the messy vitality of the metropolitan condition, with its unpredictable intermingling of classes, races, and social and cultural forms is rejected, to be replaced by a filtered, prettified, homogeneous substitute.” Boddy in Sorkin, Ed. *Variations on a Theme Park*, 126.

destinations, and are completely streamlined and standardized. That is, they are spaces which follow the imperatives of consumption, not of public life.

In non-place, we not only are not public persons; we are not even private persons—we appear only as whatever our function in the particular non-place happens to be. We are passengers or consumers, not individuals or actors.⁹³ This is different from the role that we play at a distance from the self in public space: in non-place, everyone plays the same role—or to be more precise, everyone *is* the same function. We do not have the liberty to define our own persona, because in non-place we enter into a solitary contract with the larger entity that controls the space.⁹⁴ Although non-places are filled with people, there is no public life as such, because non-place negates the plurality of experiences: my persona (the public realm) or my individual self (the intimate society) are irrelevant; I am interesting only insofar as I perform my duties as a passenger or consumer.

When public space becomes instrumental, so does public life: regardless of the meeting place—whether in place or non-place—associations tend toward a single function. The association of the fragmented life is not a Tocquevillian association, which is greater than the sum of its parts, teaching us the virtues of public life. Rather, “[it] does little more than bring together, within ear-and-eye reach of each other, a number of lonely ‘problem-solvers’ who shed nothing of their loneliness by being brought together. If anything, they emerge from their meetings with the awareness of their loneliness reinforced; even more convinced than before that whatever troubles them is of their own making and whatever can be improved in their

⁹³ Augé, *Non-Places*, 103.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101-02.

sorry plight can only be accomplished by them alone.”⁹⁵ Habermas suggests that “noncommittal group activities” have come to replace public critical discussions.⁹⁶ This kind of association does not turn my attention outwards, towards the world; it turns it inwards, towards myself.

Lacking a public realm, we appear in the commercial space of non-place. But commercial space is highly controlled, prohibiting even the suggestion of alternate realities. Just as Tocqueville’s centralized state gently dissuades its citizens from dissent, so do corporations almost imperceptibly close off all avenues of spontaneous action and nonconformity in the spaces they control. In corporate non-place, to paraphrase Tocqueville, corporations stage a kind of phantom politics, in which the citizens appear to have a public life but do not take part in the most important of political decisions. We appear in non-place together, but we are all the same—because, to paraphrase Tocqueville again, uniformity saves a corporation the trouble of inquiring into infinite details, into what we want rather than what it tells us that we want. Individualists and nonconformers are not welcome in non-places, because they distract the attention of those who just want to shop or who are just passing through; they are inconvenient elements disturbing the fantasy of a uniform, innocent, clean, safe space.

In Tocqueville’s democratic despotism, the centralized state actively encourages its citizens to withdraw from the world, but it also checks those who do not want to do so. It “covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules,” inhibits action, and “hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and

⁹⁵ Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, 47.

⁹⁶ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 163.

stultifies...”⁹⁷ It removes governance from direct, local control and makes it centralized, so that everyday citizens lose the power to participate in important political decisions. The same is true for corporate governance: for example, Disney’s theme parks are not run by its employees, just as the citizens of the Disney-owned town Celebration do not have control over many aspects of their own immediate community: it is the Disney Corporation that decides how both places should be run, thereby effectively removing governance from the locality. When the localities themselves lose the power to make the decisions that concern them, the public spaces which Tocqueville thought would save a democracy from the tyranny of the majority will cease to exist, replaced by “useful,” or private, or commercial spaces. And in the actual spaces that are left, the spaces controlled by, for example, corporations, there will be no room for dissent. Corporations “will not tolerate citizens (even if citizenship is understood in terms less exacting than Tocqueville’s); they demand subjects. They therefore work to isolate individuals, to prevent the development of the practices of self-government and to destroy these practices where they exist... Ever ‘thoughtful of detail,’ they proliferate rules, manage ‘enjoyment,’ produce norms, mold subjectivities, engage in surveillance in the name of ‘security.’”⁹⁸ Citizens of Celebration are governed by a “network of petty, complicated rules,” and employees at Disney’s theme parks have freedom of speech as long as they do not deviate from their scripts. Everything is controlled from above, everything is formalized to eliminate human initiative—there are rules that govern even the most minute details of behavior.

⁹⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: HarperTrade, 1988), 692.

⁹⁸ Mark Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 54.

Non-place is a monocultural corporate space which discourages us from engaging with the world. But commercial space cannot single-handedly constitute a world, because there is no continuity with either past or future: only the present exists in non-place, because consumption is done only in the present. If history does exist in a non-place, it is as a spectacle, creating an illusory connection between the consumer and some product.⁹⁹

There is nothing in non-place to indicate that human lives are continuous and lived in contexts: each non-place is a self-contained island, a fragment of the world with a single function. And it imposes a life in fragments on its occupants—“[the] space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.”¹⁰⁰ The texts and messages directed at the users of non-place fabricate each of us individually as an average, strictly private person.¹⁰¹ But privacy is deficient: we do not appear in the world if we only appear as consumers, because as consumers, we are all the same—insofar as the individual is a consumer, she is not an individual. And if we are all the same, my presence or absence does not matter in the slightest; my existence or non-existence matters not one whit to the world. In non-place, without either a world—the public realm—or a home—the private realm—we are isolated and lonely.¹⁰²

Life in non-place destroys not simply the public realm, but it threatens the private realm as well. In the public realm, we are exposed to all sorts of experiments

⁹⁹ Augé, *Non-Places*, 103-04.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰² “The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned, private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist. Whatever he does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people.” Arendt, *Human Condition*, 58.

in living; this knowledge of the world changes us, if only a little, and when we return to the private realm, we come back with a broader, more unique personality. In non-place, we are all exposed to the same things, and insofar as the experience changes us, it is towards conformity to prevailing customs; so when we return to the private realm, we do so less unique, not more. Making the public realm a space for private concerns flattens the private realm, robbing it of its eccentricity.

In non-places—when they come to substitute for the public realm—we become mass man, which is a lonely existence. Deprived of both our persona and our individuality, we are interchangeable, since only our function as a consumer matters, and we all consume the same things. But reducing people to a statistical existence is a dangerous fiction: “Real people are unique, they invest years of their lives in significant relationships with other unique people, and are not interchangeable in the least. Severed from their relationships, they are destroyed as effective social beings—sometimes for a little while, sometimes forever.”¹⁰³ This is what happens in non-place: my life is severed—from friends, family, and strangers, from history, from geography—and replaced with momentary distractions; I spend my time in or between functionally separated spaces, not quite in public but not quite in private either. It is a life divided and subdivided, each piece isolated from the others, with no continuity or overall coherence. It is a life in fragments.

Conclusion

No society, of course, consists entirely of non-places; more or less extensive spaces remain private or public. And no space is “pure”: a non-place may have private

¹⁰³ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 136.

and/or public qualities, and a public or private place may have some of the qualities of non-place. But the flattening of public experience in non-place is all the same a threat to the individual's capacity to realize the liberal conception of freedom: if the individual is left with a diminished capacity to author her own life, her autonomy has been interfered with. And the reconfiguration of space can very well leave us with a diminished capacity to author our own lives—most obviously in our options for our public lives, but also in our private lives, by making some forms of private existence easier than others. To some extent, this is unavoidable: no spatial configuration can be neutral regarding ways of life—even empty space privileges some ways of life over others.

And so liberalism must be aware that even though it is neutral towards conceptions of the good life, the context in which it operates is not: power, in all sorts of guises, pushes individuals to live their lives—public as well as private—in particular ways. Since liberalism does not privilege any version of the good life, it cannot intervene directly by providing its own way to live; what it can do—and does—is to minimize the influence of interfering powers. But absolute protection is not possible—nor is it particularly desirable: total protection from outside interference would completely isolate the individual from the world.

So, while liberalism does not cause, or even necessarily encourage, the retreat into the private sphere promoted by the reconfiguration of space, it is vulnerable to its effects. The reconfiguration of space is—must be—permissible in a liberal society, but at the same time it can push individuals into an existence that leaves them with less autonomy over their lives. Liberalism, because its freedom operates in the private

space of the individual, and because it wants to remain neutral between conceptions of the good life, does not provide individuals with the tools to fight the kind of arbitrary interference with their autonomy that is permissible under liberalism. Insofar as individuals fight back and find the tools to do so, they do it first and foremost of their own accord.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ARENDTIAN FREEDOM

The Marxist and liberal conceptions of freedom cannot fulfill their promises: we cannot become emancipated, totally in control over our lives, nor can we rid ourselves of outside interference by retreating into a private space protected by procedural fences. Such a freedom may be private or maybe social, but it is not political—it does not bind us to the world. It leaves us vulnerable to external coercion, and it threatens to eliminate plurality and leave us with only a single, prescribed standard of judgment.

However, there are alternative conceptions of freedom, ones which afford us more control over our lives or better protect our autonomy. If we think of freedom as something that should be empowering, it will also be linked to self-government. But that is not enough, because self-government is possible in isolation: a hermit is nothing if not self-governing. Without a public dimension, freedom is in danger of being reduced to merely the material abundance which allows one to control one's private life. Thinking of freedom as action, as participating in the world in word and deed, gives freedom such a public dimension; action is also self-governing, because it allows me to distinguish myself, to reveal who I am rather than adopt a personality enforced and regulated by the state or other social institutions. This action requires a public space in which it can appear. One such public space is provided by the council system which Arendt discusses in *On Revolution*; although the councils are not

without their problems, they supply a place in which everyday people can practice their freedom.

As different as the Marxist and liberal notions of freedom are—the former an earthly redemption of unlimited creative production and the latter a space in which the individual is protected from outside interference—the types of societies that they inspire, justify, and enable have some similarities. For example, both Marxism and liberalism tend to disconnect individuals, but they do so for different reasons: Marxism’s total freedom demands total control by the state over each individual at all times, while liberalism’s freedom is primarily for private individuals in their own, protected space. Neither Marxism nor liberalism has a strong public dimension of freedom: Marxism’s freedom is an emancipation of production, an activity which can be communal but not public, and liberalism’s freedom is non-interference, that is, a freedom from the burden of constantly and actively participating in public life. In both cases, individuals are left with the private realm in which to create their lives.

Without spaces in which to act publicly, and without meaningful forms of participation in public life, citizens shift their attention to the private sphere; the public realm becomes a place for private errands or to pass through from one enclave of privacy to another. And so we tend to associate freedom with an escape from the public realm; we see it as the isolated space in which we are beyond the reach of social institutions and at liberty to do what we wish.¹ In this light, we can see

¹ “We are inclined to believe that freedom begins where politics ends, because we have seen that freedom has disappeared when so-called political considerations overruled everything else. Was not the liberal credo, ‘The less politics the more freedom,’ right after all? Is it not true that the smaller the space occupied by the political, the larger the domain left to freedom? Indeed, do we not rightly measure the extent of freedom in any given community by the free scope it grants to apparently nonpolitical activities, free economic enterprise or freedom of teaching, of religion, of cultural and intellectual activities? Is it not true, as we all somehow believe, that politics is compatible with

Arendt's *The Human Condition* as a mirror of her *Origins of Totalitarianism* turned against the liberal democracies in the West: both the concentration camp society described in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the laborers' society described in *The Human Condition* leave individuals isolated and lonely. If that isolation and loneliness is a result of total domination in totalitarian societies, it is the result of reducing all activities to functions of the life process in labor societies. The people in the laborers' society are perhaps not turned into objects like the subjects of totalitarian dictatorships, but they exist socially only as consumers, as lives to be upheld and administered. Contemporary political society, Camus writes, "is a mechanism for driving men to despair."²

It is obvious how totalitarianism drives men to despair, but liberal democracy is also not without problems. Liberal democracy is not Arendt's labor society, but it is still a double-edged sword: it guarantees civil liberty and accountability, but also has a propensity for rigidity and bureaucratization; it has equality before the law, but does little to alleviate social or economic inequality; it has a complicated apparatus to represent the will of the people, but no means for the people to actually participate in their own governing. It also excludes the possibility of alternative political forms by presenting itself as the only practically viable option; normal democratic discourse "ignores nonliberal traditions of thinking about democracy, and marginalizes the contemporary forms of democratic association and insurgency that stand outside the

freedom only because and insofar as it guarantees a possible freedom *from* politics?" Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 149.

² Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Random House Incorporated, 1995), 83.

normal working of liberal democratic politics and afford what are perhaps more authentic forms of democratic participation.”³

Arendtian freedom

Freedom is a political concept, not a personal feeling. Freedom cannot be separated from politics and action; without freedom, neither of them would be possible, only an administered life. This is not the inner freedom—feeling free—which, as personally meaningful as it may be, is politically irrelevant; inner freedom is a retreat from the world, in which one limits oneself to a sphere which one can control.⁴ Unlike inner freedom or the freedom lodged in administrative institutions, political freedom is not final or self-contained.⁵ It exists only when it is practiced, when we act in the public realm.

Why should freedom be tied to action? Because Marxism and liberalism’s notions of freedom are inadequate: I could be formally free, but live a strictly private life only for the sake of life itself, without power and without meaning. Action takes me beyond the needs of the body, because it is the words and deeds that directly link me to other human beings. To practice one’s freedom is to perform actions in the company of others—not simply to behave, to follow orders or perform utilitarian calculations. This practice, to Arendt, is what makes us distinctly human.⁶ This is not a freedom to choose between options that are given in advance; it is the freedom to

³ Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 5, also 24.

⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 146.

⁵ “There is no ideal freedom that will someday be given us all at once, as a pension comes at the end of one’s life.” Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 93.

⁶ Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 113.

give birth to something brand new, something which never existed before. But this freedom is different from Marx's creative freedom, which is a freedom of creative production: although Marx's creative freedom also is not tied to structures of governance, it is still a freedom fulfilled in isolation. Creative production is not public; it is the final product, the manufactured object, which appears in the world and can inspire action, not the process of fabrication. Arendt's freedom is performative, not productive, and this is why freedom is political: politics requires action to exist; unlike an object, which has an independent existence, politics perishes when it is not performed. As Arendt puts it: "Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same."⁷

Action distinguishes: it is only by acting and speaking that we show ourselves as singular human beings rather than mere physical objects. Action reveals the agent; it discloses who I am, not just what I am. This disclosure is in some ways involuntary, because I can prevent revealing myself only by hiding from the world.⁸ Action is revelatory only when we are *with* other people, not when we are for or against them—that is, only when we are willing to listen to and judge them based on what they actually say or do, only when we have not judged them beforehand. When this happens, when we are for or against people no matter what—Arendt uses the example of modern warfare—action becomes strictly functional: it is a means to achieve

⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152-54. Italics in original.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 176, 179. Camus also thinks that we know others through their actions: "It is probably true that a man remains forever unknown to us and that there is in him something irreducible that escapes us. But *practically* I know men and recognize them by their behavior, by the totality of their deeds, by the consequences caused in life by their presence." Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 11.

certain objectives, speech is just talk, and the disclosure of the agent in speech and deed is lost. In this type of speech—the language of advertising, political propaganda, or bureaucratic jargon—words reveal nothing, and action no longer is specific to the actor.⁹

All action seeks to accomplish a goal, but narrowly instrumentalist action cannot transcend that goal; it cannot have meaning in itself as an action with unexpected consequences which also sets new action into motion. It is an attempt to escape the unpredictability of action: we are always responsible for the consequences of our actions, even though those consequences can never be calculated in advance—so we must act carefully but with commitment. This unpredictability is why political thinkers such as Plato, Rousseau, and Marx turned away from action and called for political orders in which action was replaced by some activity that we can control completely—Rousseau wanted enforced behavior, and Marx made production the highest activity.¹⁰ Arendt thinks that removing action from human life will not give us more control over our lives, but less, because rather than ruling and being ruled by our equals in a public realm, when there is no action we are ruled only as private individuals by an oppressive, controlling state. Without action, we are literally powerless and unfree.

Since action is unpredictable, it takes courage to act, and this is the reason Arendt defines a hero simply as someone who acts in his own story. To be a hero, one does not have to have heroic qualities; it is enough to be someone about whom a story can be told. Achilles is a hero not because he is a great warrior, but because he speaks

⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 180; Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 117.

¹⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 220, 233-34; Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 128.

great words and does great deeds.¹¹ It takes courage to act not only because action is unpredictable, but also because it is inconclusive. Each action is interweaved with other actions, sometimes helped by them in unexpected directions, sometimes defused by them. No action is ever complete: it reverberates throughout history, starting processes, changing processes, but never stopping.

Because of action's unpredictable and inconclusive nature, freedom can never be achieved absolutely; it exists only in localized pockets and can be realized only partially, within limits. Because we cannot control the world, because we inhabit "islands of freedom," there can be no absolute human dignity.¹² Arendt sees the French resistance during World War II as such an island of freedom: as opposed to the Vichy puppet regime, the resistance created a public space in which it was possible to act politically. This action did not necessarily solve any problems, but it allowed its participants to live in dignity.¹³

Action inserts us into the world, where we show our singularity. It "corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. ... Action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behavior, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing. Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way

¹¹ "The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own." Arendt, *Human Condition*, 186.

¹² Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 85.

¹³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 3-4, 8-9.

that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”¹⁴ Arendt rejects Kant’s universal subject, whose every action could become a universal law of conduct, because such a subject negates human plurality. To rid oneself of all one’s specific attachments is to rob oneself of all that makes one human; if all human activity follows universal laws, there is no action and no plurality—and by extension, no freedom—only the predictability of behavior.¹⁵ Instead, action, like each individual human life, is a new beginning; each action is unprecedented—it is, in a sense, a miracle. But action does not occur in a vacuum; each action takes place within the context of previous actions, whose consequences influence the possibilities of every new action. Action, then, can never happen in isolation, just as no person can be self-sufficient; we always have to fit ourselves and our actions into a preexisting environment.¹⁶

Arendt calls this environment the “web of human relationships,” and all our actions must find a place within this web. Since we are forever and hopelessly entangled in the web of human relationships, our actions can never be final, and the very real empowerment our actions afford us is always partial and limited. Politics and its practice of freedom is distinguished by plurality: we share the world with others who are radically different from us, and whose actions have radically different, often competing, goals. This plurality frustrates our actions, transforming them into something unexpected and beyond our control; but it also allows action to be more

¹⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7-8.

¹⁵ Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 80.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 169-70; Arendt, *Human Condition*, 234.

than simple goal-oriented behavior.¹⁷ Behavior is controllable, administrable, while the consequences of our actions always slip through our fingers like sand. But we can only be sure of the reality of the world if we are entangled in the web of human relationships, if we appear in public. Action, appearing in word and deed in the public realm, guarantees our reality.¹⁸

The danger with democracy, in Arendt's reading of the Founding Fathers, is that its tendency to succumb to a tyranny of public opinion threatens to drown out all dissenting voices and opinions—that is, it threatens to eliminate plurality, to make everyone the same. This sameness is different from equality, which is a condition of freedom—it is the artificial equality of the political sphere, where naturally and socially unequal men and women confront each other as equal citizens. Inequality eliminates freedom, because when one person rules over another, neither of them are free: the tyrant who rules by his own caprice—and thus abolishes the need for politics—has no more freedom than his subjects who have been ejected from the public realm.¹⁹ In privacy, there is no equality and no freedom; there may be license to behave as one wants, but that is a license that is won from the domination over others.²⁰ We cannot be free as private individuals, because we are isolated from the

¹⁷ “It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it ‘produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things.” Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184.

¹⁸ “For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality.” *Ibid.*, 50. Without the web of human relationships to assure our reality, we only have three options, all equally depressing: first, narcissism, the belief that one's own reality is the only valid reality; second, and related to narcissism, paranoia, the belief that nothing in the world is as it seems; and third, nihilism, the belief that the world doesn't matter and can be destroyed without any consequences. It is to avoid these options that Arendt insists that the survival of the public realm is vital to our own survival.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 30-31, 225-26.

²⁰ “Every ethic based on solitude implies the exercise of power.” Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 36.

world, and what we think—or have been told—is our freedom may be nothing more than an illusion, a figment of our imagination or a façade we have put up to conceal our powerlessness.

To escape the unreality of privacy, we must practice representative thinking, in which we represent the positions of others in our own minds. This is not a simple matter of empathy or counting heads, but of avoiding becoming a prisoner to our private wants: if I can put myself in several different places, making myself a representative of everyone else, my opinion will be more impartial, less of a hostage to my own private interests.²¹ As with all thinking, representative thinking is a temporary retreat from the world in order to engage it better.²² But with representative thinking, I am not alone with myself; I imagine myself inhabiting the places of other people, and in this sense I preserve my interdependence with the world.²³ Everyone hears and sees from a different location—this is the meaning of plurality—and representative thinking is the mental equivalent of the experience of public life, in which we are exposed to the multiplicity of perspectives which confirms our reality. Private life, no matter how full, can offer only the multiplication of one's own point of view.²⁴ Representative thinking, on the other hand, allows one to see the world without being blinded by self-interest or ideology: surrendering to a single point of

²¹ The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion." Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 241.

²² Camus writes: "In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion; in order to serve men better, one has to hold them at a distance for a time." Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 157. See also the end of the section on the administered life in chapter five.

²³ "Of course," Arendt writes, "I can refuse to do this and form an opinion that takes only my own interests, or the interests of the group to which I belong, into account; nothing, indeed, is more common, even among highly sophisticated people, than the blind obstinacy that becomes manifest in lack of imagination and failure to judge." Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 242.

²⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57.

view is always an act of intellectual prostitution, and no matter how loudly one screams one's opinion in the town square, one is still captive in one's privacy, because one has denied the possibility of dialogue and the legitimacy of opposing opinions. Ideological blinders are also moral blinders. Denouncing, for example, Soviet concentration camps does not mean that one can forget the Nazi concentration camps or the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "despite the commiseration of our political leaders, all this together must be denounced at one and the same time."²⁵

In contemporary society, Arendt thinks, we have become exclusively private individuals, and even the public realm is dominated by private concerns. Both Marxism and liberalism allow a withdrawal from public life into the private sphere. But if we only live in private, we cannot engage in representative thinking, because we are not aware that other perspectives exist. This is why the public realm, once it has been taken over by private individuals, no longer relates and separates us—it no longer brings us together while at the same time allowing us to distinguish ourselves.²⁶ It collects us, but we are all on private, instrumental missions. By reducing our public roles to being administered or to calculations of self-interest—that is, to private matters—contemporary society has broken down the boundaries around the public realm. And that is why Camus's concept of rebellion is critical here: rebellion is not the reckless transgression of boundaries, but the affirmation of limits; the rebel draws a borderline whose violation he cannot accept. Rebellion, then, is not a demand for absolute freedom, but rather a cry that freedom has limits wherever a human being is found. It is a cry against unlimited independence, which

²⁵ Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 79.

²⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52-53.

moves anywhere and has no conscience. Rebellion is a profoundly public act: the rebel demands that his voice be heard, that he should be treated as an equal, and in rebelling, he goes beyond himself, drawing a limit that should *never* be crossed. The rebel transcends his own personal interests and establishes a solidarity with everyone whose limits could be violated, regardless of position.²⁷ For both Arendt and Camus, conflict is a crucial part of political life; without conflict, differences—and therefore also plurality—are eradicated. And without differences, there can be no politics, no meaningful action—since everyone would be the same—and hence no freedom. Thus a good politics is characterized by discord and disharmony; freedom, if it is to exist, requires rebellion. And Marxism and liberalism are not rebellious: the former is revolutionary, stubbornly trying to mold the world to its own insulated idea of the good, while the latter is settled, eschewing both revolution and rebellion for private liberty.²⁸

Marxism and liberalism also both underestimate the importance of the public spaces in which rebellious politics can take place. Freedom as action exists only in the presence of others, when others can see, talk about, and remember the action. Therefore, freedom needs not only a place where people can come together, but also a place where they can act—a common space which allows only for behavior is not really public.²⁹ This place is always spatially limited; that is, it is a *place*, an actual location with all its barriers, boundaries, and peculiarities. One cannot appear in a

²⁷ “Man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity. . . . In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself—a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist.” Camus, *Rebel*, 22, also 13-14, 17, 284.

²⁸ Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 125, 144.

²⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 31.

limitless space: such a space is disorienting and even slightly threatening. Monumental public spaces can sustain behavior such as mass rallies, but they cannot sustain actual political action: if I try to distinguish myself in word and deed, I blend into the background of either the crowd or the vanishing horizon. Without spatial limits, I cannot stand out, and if I cannot stand out, action is impossible. Action cannot exist without public spaces—and Arendt thinks that a “life without speech and without action ... is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”³⁰ This is why freedom needs public spaces—bounded places where we can act and appear to others: private freedom is simply *unreal*. And since these public spaces are always localized pockets, freedom too is fragmented, discontinuous, limited: Arendt thinks of these spaces of freedom, which together constitute the public realm, “as islands in a sea or as oases in a desert.”³¹

This freedom is not redemptive; it does not make one a better person or transform the world into a perfect paradise. It can—but does not have to—make each locality a better place to live, but it cannot change the world as a whole. Freedom is inefficient; it does not help the state rule efficiently and effectively—quite the contrary. The political is not a space for concerns with efficiency—the place for that is the private realm, which provides for survival, not meaning. Freedom does not help us progress; freedom is the public action that creates meaning in our transient earthly lives. Since it is fleeting, this meaning is arbitrary, to be sure, even absurd: rarely does an action outlive its author’s lifespan, and in the long run, all action will be

³⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176.

³¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 275.

irrevocably forgotten.³² Still, that is precisely why it is *freedom*: as human beings, we are free to create our own meaning; we are not bound to the meaninglessness of life for the sake of life, or to being assigned a meaning and place in the universe by divine revelation. Freedom is not useful: it is pointless from the point of view of any utilitarian calculations; it does not feed the hungry, build roads, or even resolve disputes. Insofar as freedom is useful, that is completely incidental. Freedom does not exist beyond its practice; it “is not a gift received from a State or a leader but a possession to be won every day by the effort of each and the union of all.”³³

Why should we choose freedom, then? Would we not be better off simply with civil liberties and private well-being? One reason for freedom is perhaps preventive: Marxism and liberalism’s notions of freedom, because they remove moral agency from the individual and place it with the state, allow oppression and even murder of the people who are supposed to be made free. But a notion of freedom located in the local, spontaneous public action of everyday individuals will not mistake freedom for liberation, and will not allow the state to relieve individuals of responsibility. This obviously does not mean that the practice of freedom is inevitably enlightened: local political spaces are not necessarily tolerant or inclusive, but each local public space is intolerant and exclusive in its own way—the intolerance and exclusion is not as homogeneous or wide-reaching as that prescribed by a state. Also, representative thinking, which is possible in a local public space but not in an administrative state, mellows prejudice, because it forces us to think from a variety of perspectives. Another reason to insist on freedom is efficacy: participation in the

³² “From the point of view of Sirius, Goethe’s works in ten thousand years will be dust and his name forgotten.” Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 78.

³³ Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 97.

public realm is empowering, because even though one may have no formal power, one at the very least is not a passive receptacle for the state's manipulation. Freedom allows self-government, not simply representation—which is little more than elected oligarchy. Most importantly, however, the practice of freedom allows human life to have a meaning beyond the simple upholding of life. When the concerns of life are the highest good—that is, with the administration of material well-being—each of us is isolated in his own needs and desires, and that isolation can at best be broken by a collective fulfillment of needs and desires. But when we leave the private realm and enter the public realm, we are related and separated, we go beyond our lives as members of a species and confront each other as *human* beings, in all our bewildering plurality.

The lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition

Because she is concerned with plurality, insisting that human activities comprise more than bodily maintenance, Arendt rejects mass politics. To her, mass democracy is oligarchical: the political parties limit the power of the people by limiting citizen participation to rejecting or ratifying a choice which the citizens had no hand in formulating. Citizens become consumers of politics, buying the policies of whichever party's sales pitch they like best. When the public spirit of the American Revolution, seeing politics as a source of happiness rather than as a burden, had faded, all that remained "were civil liberties, the individual welfare of the greatest number, and public opinion as the greatest force ruling an egalitarian, democratic society."³⁴ A government protecting civil liberties and private welfare is simply a limited

³⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 221. See also Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 103.

government; it does not have to be a democracy, nor does it have to be free. Its liberties are all negative: they do not grant power to the citizens, but merely protect them from its abuses. And they do not allow the citizens to share in their government; they simply shield them from government. Arendt describes representative government as being in crisis, because it no longer has any institutions which allow actual citizen participation, and also because the bureaucratized party machines represent no one but themselves.³⁵

Mass participation is not meaningful to Arendt; it is a form of behavior, not of action. Participation, if it is to be meaningful and empowering, must take place in limited, accessible political spaces. Arendt thinks that the institutions of liberal democracy—both public and private—suppress freedom, because they push us into the conformity of the administered life. Freedom *is* possible within the institutions of liberal democracy, just as freedom was possible in the French Resistance or amidst the oppression of totalitarian communism, but this freedom will take place *against* these institutions, not *through* them.³⁶ The civil liberties guaranteed by liberal democracy can provide the spaces in which freedom is possible even in ordinary times, but these civil liberties are in themselves not a guarantee that freedom will exist. For Arendt as well as for Camus, freedom is possible only with participation in the public dialogue which reveals our plurality and which defines us as human beings. When we are denied such participation—like in the bureaucratic structures of both totalitarian and liberal democratic society—we are left unprotected, stripped of our

³⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 143; Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 89.

³⁶ Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 106-07.

dignity, not fully human.³⁷ This is why Arendt wants an alternative form of political organization, and she finds it in the council system she discusses at the end of *On Revolution*.³⁸

Self-governing councils appear regularly in revolutions, not as part of a coherent tradition or informed by a common theory, but quite spontaneously.³⁹ In the French Revolution, clubs and societies dedicated to the discussion of public issues appeared side by side with the representative municipal bodies which sent delegates to the National Assembly; these councils constituted a parallel public space. There was a wide variety of councils: some tried to put pressure on the revolutionary government to legislate happiness, while others explicitly refused to influence the National Assembly in any way. Common to all these councils was a hunger for debate and exchange of opinion; they were places for open, public discussion, and when they were turned into transmission belts for party decrees, people simply abandoned them. The councils were never meant to be temporary, but attempted to make themselves a permanent element of the structure of governance. In the Hungarian Revolution, councils were organized by neighborhoods, by professions, by

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 81; Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 125.

³⁸ In response to what she perceives as the crisis of representative government, Arendt wants to find a principle of organization “which begins from below, continues upward, and finally leads to a parliament.” She goes on: “The councils say: We want to participate, we want to debate, we want to make our voices heard in public, and we want to have a possibility to determine the political course of our country. Since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it. The booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one. The parties are completely unsuitable; there we are, most of us, nothing but the manipulated electorate.” Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 232-33.

³⁹ Arendt makes a list of when councils have appeared—in the French Revolution, in the Paris Commune of 1870-71, in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, in Germany after the defeat in World War I, and in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—and then notes that both Marx, who witnessed the rise of the Paris commune in 1871, and Lenin, who saw the spontaneous appearance of soviets during the 1905 revolution, were unprepared for these councils, which contradicted their theories and their thought on the nature of power and violence, and so they dismissed them as temporary organs of the revolution. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 256-57, 261-62.

revolutionary goals—in each of these cases, the “formation of a council ... turned a more or less accidental proximity into a political institution.”⁴⁰ These revolutionary councils always arise as spontaneous spaces for freedom, created by ordinary citizens.

They are places to create freedom regardless of party affiliation. Because they are self-governing, they are a threat to the power of the centralized state. This is why both Robespierre and Saint-Just, after initially hailing the councils as embodying the revolutionary spirit, condemned the councils once they were in power, claiming instead that freedom belonged only in the private sphere. In all revolutions, the councils have been crushed or co-opted because the centralized state sees them as competitors for public power.⁴¹

But while councils are attempts to create a new public space outside of institutionalized politics, they are not necessarily opposed to normal politics. Councils are not incompatible with administrative structures of governance, because they exist outside those structures. Where councils clash with the modern state, however, is in their conception of freedom: the very structure of council politics makes it mutually exclusive with teleological systems, with ideas about absolutes, with single solutions; councils are created precisely to accommodate the near-infinite flora of human experience, not to encapsulate it in one grand idea. This is what interests Arendt about the councils; she is not so interested in the details of council politics as she is in its spirit, which counters the isolation and rootlessness precipitated by the impersonal power of modern society.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid., 266-67, also 239-40, 242-43, 246, 264.

⁴¹ Ibid., 240-41, 243-47.

⁴² Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 96.

Councils are a new political form, embodying the revolutionary spirit, with no claim on normal politics, only a desire to be a space for discussion of public issues, for freedom for all citizens. This freedom is not the freedom of a constrained government, but the freedom of participating in one's own governance. Whereas parties are organs to build support for policies to be carried out by the government—which implicitly means that in party politics action is the exclusive right of the state—councils are organs for the people to establish whatever political order they desire without the mediation of the state. This is the politics Arendt prefers: she argues “for open, revisable, contestable political associations and communities, for a flourishing of praxis, the human ability to intervene creatively, to disturb the normal flow of events, to create new forms of solidarity and new ways of being.”⁴³

Arendt does not want a complete overthrow of representative democracy: her councils are not so much a vision for a brand new society as they are a way to pluralize political space. She prefers a multiplicity of forms of public participation to the single act of voting, and the councils are attractive to her precisely because they are plural, decentralized, and spontaneous—in a word, because they are alternatives to the institutions of representative democracy. The councils are new public spaces, and as such, a place in which to practice public freedom: freedom needs a physical space in which to appear, and this space must be public, because it must be visible to all.⁴⁴

The councils and their public spaces are spontaneously created and organized to ensure the direct participation of all citizens in public affairs. Arendt comments

⁴³ Ibid., 71. See also Arendt, *On Revolution*, 271.

⁴⁴ Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 108; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 124.

that the councils are remarkably flexible, and need no special condition to be established other than a number of people coming together and acting together. This helps explain why the councils which appeared in Hungary in 1956 were so varied, and also why party membership played so small a role: the councils had nothing to do with party politics, and it was as if ideology had simply disintegrated when people came together to fight for their freedom. In the Hungarian Revolution, the councils were spontaneously organizing themselves into higher, representative councils, which eventually would have formed a counterpart to the communist government.⁴⁵ Because they are self-organizing and self-ordering, Arendt sees the councils as a true alternative to the party system. The councils are democratic, but not in the usual sense—the election of party functionaries as representatives to a parliament with formal and standardized rules of operation. Instead, the councils are open to all—the only political organ for those who belong to no party—and unlike parties, they have no political program. A political program is a ready-made formula, requiring execution rather than action; it assumes that the party ideologues know best and that ordinary citizens' actions can be discounted. The world is known in advance through theory, and nothing can be learned from the kind of political practice which prevails in the councils: practice is simply carrying out orders from the party leadership. As Arendt puts it: “Wherever knowing and doing have parted company, the space of freedom is lost.”⁴⁶

When the party system prevails, the councils disappear, because the citizen disappears. At best, the party system has given the ruled some control over their

⁴⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 262-63, 267; Hannah Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution” in *The Journal of Politics* (vol. 20, no. 1: February 1958), 27, 31-32.

⁴⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 263-64. See also Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism”, 29-30.

rulers, but it has not in any meaningful sense allowed the citizens to be participants in public affairs. The citizens may be represented, but it is their interests and welfare that are represented, not their actions or opinions, because actions and opinions cannot be represented. An opinion can be formed—and conveyed—only through debate and discussion; it cannot be ascertained through a ballot box, which captures only interest, that is, the private concern for one's material well-being. Parties, which restrict internal participation to members of the party, are not popular in any real sense; rather, they control and curtail the power of the people. Arendt thinks that representative government is oligarchic, "though not in the classical sense of rule by the few in the interest of the few; what we today call democracy is a form of government where the few rule, at least supposedly, in the interest of the many. This government is democratic in that popular welfare and private happiness are its chief goals; but it can be called oligarchic in the sense that public happiness and public freedom have again become the privilege of the few."⁴⁷ When the political realm is given over exclusively to the party system, public happiness and public freedom are in fact inconceivable, because the party system can be justified only on the premise that politics and public life is a burden from which ordinary citizens should be spared. The party as an institution presupposes that citizens will be satisfied with representation, that their participation in public life is not necessary, and that what we call political questions are really administrative ones which should be managed by experts.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 268-69.

⁴⁸ Arendt notes that since administrative questions are not only non-political but also essentially nonpartisan, if politics is really just administration, *both* councils and parties will be superfluous. *Ibid.*, 269, 272.

The councils challenge these notions, and by doing so challenge the party system as such. They counteract the conformist tendencies of mass society, reducing it to smaller, more accessible components. Arendt does not argue that the councils should replace representative democracy, merely that we should stop treating its institutions “as the essence of politics, the apotheosis of democracy...”⁴⁹ She wants a political space that is open to many different political forms, not simply the rather mundane act of voting to replace one’s rulers. Although the council system may have been a viable alternative to the party system in the age of revolutions, Arendt realizes that representative democracy is now so entrenched that the council system cannot, and should not, replace it. However, that does not mean that the type of politics practiced in the councils cannot, and does not, appear: a vast, teeming ocean of voluntary, participatory political forms exist outside the party system, but we tend to ignore their political significance and dismiss them as simply fulfilling some psychological or social function. Since the formal public realm is closed to them, people create their own public realms in which to practice their freedom—even if their actions there are not considered political by the standards of party politics. Still, “[these] more participatory forms of democratic citizenship are not alternatives to mass democratic citizenship. They are complements to it.”⁵⁰ Representative democracy is empty and shallow without public spaces in which everyday citizens can act and form opinions; in a sense, the party system without the council system is like electrification without soviets.

⁴⁹ Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 109. See also Arendt, *On Revolution*, 265.

⁵⁰ Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 120.

Since the council system is based on local, voluntary, spontaneous, and more or less temporary associations, it is not immediately obvious how it should be institutionalized. The institutions of representative democracy do not provide the public space in which councils can appear, and the councils themselves lack the permanence to guarantee that space, at least individually.⁵¹ In fact, a permanent, protected institution runs counter to the very spontaneity and unpredictability which is the hallmark of the councils. But at the same time, the councils cannot appear if there is no public space available to everyday citizens, or if that public space is configured or controlled in a way that makes actions not sanctioned by the authorities impossible. One of the dangers of both Marxism and liberalism is that they have a faulty understanding of the importance of public spaces, and tend either to shape them for their own purposes or to abandon them to the control of commercial enterprises or other administrative institutions. However, public spaces *can* be protected; it is fully within the reach of representative democracy to guarantee, through laws and other safeguards, the inviolability of the places which constitute the everyday public realm. It is not so easy to protect the activities which take place there: once councils become bound by rules of conduct, they cease to be a complementary public realm. Spontaneity cannot be legislated, and councils cannot be institutionalized without also losing their purpose. Hence, the council system is “not a blueprint but a model, one that might stimulate and inspire us to consider new, more flexible and pluralistic institutional forms.”⁵²

⁵¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 232. See also Hanna Fenichel Pitken, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 218-19.

⁵² Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 155.

The councils, then, are not important *per se*: the idea of self-government and participation in public affairs is. The councils are important because they are examples, albeit ignored ones, of a political form which does not reduce citizens to private individuals concerned only with necessity, but which allows them to have a vibrant public life as well. The council system does not create a better, more virtuous community than does representative democracy—it might, but that is beside the point—but it does create spaces in which everyday citizens participate meaningfully in public life and in their own governance, that is, in which they can be free. This connection between freedom and self-government does exist in both Marxism and liberalism, but is a largely ignored tradition. I will discuss two examples here: Pannekoek's council communism and Jefferson's ward republics.

Pannekoek and workers' councils

Whereas Lenin rose to fame and power with his version of Marxism inspired by Marx's total freedom, the Dutch astronomer and Marxist theorist Anton Pannekoek's interpretation of Marxism, which is closer to Marx's creative freedom, has been all but forgotten. Pannekoek argues that the communist revolution will take place when the workers themselves, spontaneously and without being led by vanguard intellectuals, seize control over bourgeois society. For Pannekoek, it is imperative that the workers govern themselves, that they are the agents of their own freedom. Just as Marx's creative freedom is still centered on the emancipation of production, so is Pannekoek's council communism. Pannekoek thinks that we, in our practice, are workers, not citizens; we realize our existence through our activities. He assumes that

a new organization of labor will transform the nature of work from labor to overcome necessity into truly creative work allowing genuine self-expression.⁵³

This new organization is the councils, which will be based not on sharing the same space, but on the more natural groupings of workers in their factories: Pannekoek thinks that representation by geographical district is false, because the people who live in the same district have different interests and opinions, while workers who labor together have common interests and opinions. Thus, while representative democracy irrevocably removes the workers from the actual practice of power, council democracy is real democracy for the workers, because then they control their own affairs. The exploitation of the workers ends only when they themselves control the means of production; then they control the circumstances of their own lives.⁵⁴ The councils have a double function to Pannekoek: they are both the direct instruments of the fight and the organizational basis of the new society.⁵⁵

The old society, according to Pannekoek, leaves the workers powerless and manipulated: they can only choose between pre-selected party lists, and most officials of the state are not elected, but appointed from above—the people are masters of the state only in name. Pannekoek is opposed to any form of bureaucratic centralization, because it disciplines, normalizes, and homogenizes, making regulation uniform so that it can be supervised from the center: “Dependent on the central command of a government, spiritual life must fall into dull monotony; inspired by the free

⁵³ Serge Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* (Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1978), 166; John Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation 1873-1960* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 185.

⁵⁴ Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), 47; Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*, 273, 276.

⁵⁵ Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 183.

spontaneity of ... human impulse it must unfold into brilliant variety.”⁵⁶ Pannekoek condemns Lenin and his Bolshevism as “middle-class materialism,” claiming that his alleged Marxism is “nothing but a legend.”⁵⁷ The workers are still exploited under state socialism, with the only difference that the officials of the bureaucratic state own the factories, set the workers’ wages, and keep the surplus; “State socialism may quite as well be called State capitalism.”⁵⁸ Pannekoek also condemns the notion that the workers are not capable of self-liberation and have to be led by enlightened intellectuals; intellectuals claim that they have superior insight and say that if the workers do not follow them, things will fall apart—when in reality, any leadership by an intellectual elite can only retard progress.⁵⁹ Why, Pannekoek asks, should the workers, once they have overthrown capitalism and won their freedom, relinquish it and become slaves to new masters?⁶⁰

Instead, they will liberate themselves and form their own organizations: workers’ councils. There will be a multitude of competing voices and opinions, and the workers will create groups to discuss their ideas and to enlighten their comrades. In the councils, all decisions will be made deliberatively, through discussion and action. The organization of the councils cannot be predicted beforehand, because the councils are concerned above all with the principle of workers’ self-governance, not with the correct organizational structure; each council will develop according to its

⁵⁶ Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, 50, also 31.

⁵⁷ Pannekoek is unequivocal on this point: “Lenin never knew real Marxism.” Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher: A Critical Examination of the Philosophical Basis of Leninism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 151-52.

⁵⁸ Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, 32, also 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 35, 38. For example, Pannekoek criticized Cornelius Castoriadis and the *Socialism ou Barbarie* group because he thought that its attempt to reconcile self-government with leadership by a small group of intellectuals was simply reproducing Leninism. See Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers’ Self-Emancipation*, 196.

⁶⁰ Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, 35.

deliberative needs, not according to a prefabricated theoretical model.⁶¹ The councils will be very different from the current unions and parties: in unions, ideas are left to the union officials while the workers, with their tired bodies and weary minds, simply vote but do not think. In the councils, the workers will do everything themselves—coming up with the ideas as well as carrying them out. Parties, similarly, are too rigid: they do not develop the workers' creativity, but train obedient disciples. In the councils there will be freedom of ideas, but the parties allow only their own opinions.⁶²

In the new society, political organization will be direct action in the workplace. The workers of each factory will choose someone from among themselves to express their opinions; this representative will always be in contact with the workers who elected him, and can be replaced at any time. In this way, all of the workers will make up the ruling body in each factory, so that those who do the work also regulate the work. And in bigger factories, with too many workers for direct democracy, each section of the factory will form a council, which will send delegates to a central committee for that factory. The same principle, that those who do the work should also regulate it, will hold in non-productive fields of work as well—healthcare, education, culture, and so on.⁶³ Each autonomous council will be part of a network encompassing all of society, in which higher councils will coordinate the work of local councils. These higher councils are not ruling bodies; they merely connect workers in different councils, so that production forms a single, interconnected whole of collaborating yet independent producers. It is always the

⁶¹ Ibid., 48, 92; Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*, 289.

⁶² Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 20; Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 182-83.

⁶³ Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*, 166; Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 20, 49-50.

workers themselves, not the higher councils, who regulate production.⁶⁴ According to Pannekoek, the network of councils form a kind of state, but without the bureaucracy that makes the state the ruler over its citizens. The councils are not a government, but rather the opposite of governmental authority: all power and all decisions rest in the hands of the workers themselves, and the higher councils have no instruments of power by which to impose their will on the workers.⁶⁵ The council state is one of workers' self-government.

This self-government emerges spontaneously in current working-class practice: in both wildcat strikes and factory occupations, the workers take control over their own production, and therefore anticipate the later development of councils. Pannekoek is less interested in the organizational structure of the councils than the spirit of rebellion and self-reliance that they embody.⁶⁶ The council state will not last forever; no political form ever does. Rather, the councils are the organizational form of society during the transition phase, before society becomes completely self-regulating.⁶⁷ The councils will completely transform society, because once the workers understand the labor process and their place in it, they will be able to consciously control society: "From obedient subjects they are changed into free and self-reliant masters of their fate, capable to build and to manage their new world."⁶⁸ This new world will transform the mind as well: no longer slaves to bourgeois

⁶⁴ Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 21, 45, 49-50; Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 184.

⁶⁵ Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*, 167; Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 48; Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 184.

⁶⁶ Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 63-64, 68; Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 179-80.

⁶⁷ "When life and work in community are natural habit, when mankind entirely controls its own life, necessity gives way to freedom and the strict rules of justice established before dissolve into spontaneous behavior." Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 33. See also Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 186.

materialism and self-obsession, the workers will become truly communal, social beings. Unlike Lenin's revolution, Pannekoek's revolution will be organic, driven by the workers' initiative: the councils cannot be artificially created by revolutionary intellectuals, but have to appear spontaneously.⁶⁹

This spontaneity is characteristic of the workers' councils which appeared in the first truly far-reaching revolt against the Leninist system of an enlightened party ruling in the name of the workers: the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. During the revolution and its aftermath, workers' councils, which took control over political, economic, and social life, were created all over Hungary, even in Budapest where Imre Nagy's government had given the workers a great deal of freedom.⁷⁰ The creation of the councils was completely simultaneous with the revolution: the first workers' council was created on October 22, the day before the revolution broke out in Budapest, and many more councils were set up in the next few days. Thus, "[instead] of the mob rule which might have been expected, there appeared immediately, almost simultaneously with the uprising itself, the Revolutionary and Workers' Councils, that is, the same organization which for more than a hundred years now has emerged whenever the people have been permitted for a few days, or a few weeks or months, to follow their own political devices without a government (or a party program) imposed from above."⁷¹ The councils successfully restored order, and even began organizing themselves spontaneously into higher and more general councils, even after the Soviet invasion on November 4. The first county-level

⁶⁹ Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 47; Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 178-79, 185.

⁷⁰ Bill Lomax, Ed. *Hungarian Workers' Councils in 1956* (Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1990), xx, 310.

⁷¹ Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism", 28.

council was created on October 27, only four days after the revolution started, and on October 31, a parliament of workers' councils for greater Budapest was formed.⁷² Several district workers' councils were created after the invasion, and a national workers' council was supposed to be created on November 21.

However, Soviet tanks prevented the formation of a national council, and as the newly installed Kádár government reestablished Soviet hegemony over Hungary, the councils were rooted out and their leaders punished.⁷³ Still, in a very brief time the councils had begun setting up what would have amounted to a parallel government. The idea to sidestep the Kádár government entirely and negotiate directly with the Soviets, in effect demonstrating that the councils had become the alternative, and more powerful, government, was proposed but rejected.⁷⁴ From the very beginning, ideology and political expediency mattered less than being allowed to act again, to not be shackled by the automatism of ritualized behavior which had been imposed by the socialist state: "what carried the revolution was the sheer momentum of acting-together of the whole people whose demands were so obvious that they hardly needed elaborate formulation: Russian troops should leave the territory and free elections should determine a new government. The question was no longer how much freedom to permit to action, speech and thought, but how to institutionalize a freedom which was already an accomplished fact."⁷⁵ But the Hungarian experiment

⁷² At this meeting, the idea to create a national council was put forth, but was rejected because no delegates from other districts were present, and the Budapest councils did not have the mandate to create a national council on its own accord. This "shows that the question of the National Council was not considered just from the point of view of political effectiveness, but also—more importantly—in a democratic spirit. For the Hungarian workers and their delegates the most important thing about the councils was precisely their democratic nature." Lomax, Ed. *Hungarian Workers' Councils*, 321.

⁷³ For a complete chronology of events, see *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 306-07.

⁷⁵ Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism", 26.

with workers' councils was short-lived, and the Soviet tanks prevented it from at least attempting to create an actual council state.

There are other examples of workers' councils appearing spontaneously in times of crisis. Although the existence of councils were not a major reason for the Soviet intervention which ended the Prague Spring, they were a significant cause for the imposition of normalization: only 19 councils existed in Czechoslovakia in September 1968, but there were 260 by the end of the year; at their peak, the councils encompassed more than a million workers.⁷⁶ In Germany in 1848, there were so many clubs and societies that the newspaper began publishing special columns with "association news." So-called "March clubs" were created everywhere.⁷⁷ Later, after the humiliating defeat of the German army in World War I, Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacus League were involved in creating a massive workers' council movement; in Berlin, the network of councils was so strong in November 1918 that it had not only taken over factories, but also several police districts. And in Turin, Antonio Gramsci helped build a workers' council movement in 1919.⁷⁸ The theory of workers' councils could not always be translated into an actual movement: in Britain, the anti-parliamentary communists thought that the revolution could only be carried out by the active efforts of the workers, and called, with very limited success, for the creation of workers' councils.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Vladimír Fišera, Ed. *Workers' Councils in Czechoslovakia 1968-9: Documents and Essays* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978), 12, 14.

⁷⁷ P. H. Noyes, *Organization and Revolution: Working-Class Associations in the German Revolutions of 1848-1849* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 125.

⁷⁸ Donny Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets: Councils versus Parliament 1915-1920* (London: Bookmarks, 1985), 113, 123, 162, 185.

⁷⁹ Mark Shipway, *Anti-Parliamentary Communism: The Movement for Workers' Councils in Britain, 1917-45* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988), 24-25, 203.

Workers' councils are certainly more likely to create freedom than Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat, but the attempts to implement workers' councils and Pannekoek's theory of council communism both inherit from Marx's creative freedom the problems associated with making production the privileged human activity. Since Pannekoek thinks that all social existence is derived from production, he can imagine only the factory as a source and location of the revolution; "the council communists were unable to conceive of any strategy for democratic transformation outside of the workplace and, in the end, were forced to fall back on an illusory confidence in an heroic industrial proletariat..."⁸⁰ Also, Pannekoek cannot escape the Marxian dream of a completely transformed and emancipated society: once the workers have conscious control over their own production, the councils will wither away, and the need for politics and deliberation will disappear.⁸¹ Pannekoek does not see that the self-government which the councils offer goes beyond simply controlling production, and so he merely tries to politicize administration, to insert action into the sphere of production.

Hence, the workers' councils must fail—because production is not the only human activity. Production is not a political activity as such, whereas the councils as a form of organization is fundamentally political: the activity of production and the activity of discussion, even about production, are not the same. The councils are spaces of action, of freedom; they bring us together as more than just producers, and the empowerment they offer is not restricted to the regulation of our own production. The discussions which take place in Pannekoek's councils are primarily functional,

⁸⁰ Gerber, *Pannekoek and Workers' Self-Emancipation*, 177, also 201.

⁸¹ Pannekoek writes: "Under council organization political democracy has disappeared, because politics itself disappeared and gave way to social economy." Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, 48.

serving the ultimate goal of human liberation—only that Pannekoek puts the power of change into the hands of the workers rather than the vanguard party. Pannekoek does not recognize that his councils are the place to find the freedom he seeks, and so he too dismisses them as nothing more than temporary instruments of the revolution.

Jefferson's ward republics

Thomas Jefferson, like Pannekoek, thinks that ordinary people can, and should, govern themselves.⁸² His understanding of freedom springs directly from this; he thinks of freedom as both the traditional liberal freedom from government interference and the more republican notion of participation in the public arena without which no life can be fully human.⁸³ When these two understandings are put together, one can see that Jefferson understands freedom as self-government. To him, the people are the only guardians of public liberty; therefore, the state should not punish them too harshly when they make mistakes in trying to protect that liberty. The people already have less control over their government than they should, because the state distrusts its citizens.⁸⁴ Good government, Jefferson thinks, is divided among the many, so that each level of government has exclusive jurisdiction over the issues most relevant to it; centralization of power has invariably destroyed freedom. This is precisely why participation in public affairs is so important: man's innate moral sense is, like his muscles, developed only when it is exercised, and since man is a social animal, this moral sense is exercised by participating in one's own self-government.

⁸² "Every man, and every body of men on earth, possesses the right of self-government." Thomas Jefferson, *Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 159.

⁸³ Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 141.

⁸⁴ Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 153, 209.

Acting politically by getting involved with a political party is not enough, because parties, by imposing their own opinions and ideological categories on their members, stifle critical thought and fail to exercise the moral sense as much as any other administrative institution.⁸⁵

Because Jefferson wants self-government, he is suspicious of the state ruling over people; he fears the selfishness of unchecked rulers rather than the independence of the people.⁸⁶ In a letter commenting on the proposed constitution, he writes: “I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive.”⁸⁷ Hence, every people on earth is entitled to a bill of rights protecting them from their government. That the new republic flourishes is not because of the constitution, Jefferson thinks, but because of the spirit of the people which prevails *in spite* of the constitution. Ordinary citizens, capable of governing themselves wisely and virtuously, are engaged in a constant battle with the corrupt and power-hungry centralized government. For Jefferson, only independent citizens will be able to fight the state’s attempts to disempower them and strip them of agency.⁸⁸

While Jefferson thinks that the people are the best way of preventing government from abusing its powers, James Madison fears that the people, who are fractious and unenlightened, will destroy public liberty if they are allowed to govern. He argues that government should regulate the passions of the people, and that elected representatives will rule with reason, while participatory democracy will

⁸⁵ Jefferson writes about submitting one’s mind to a party that “[such] an addiction is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all.” *Ibid.*, 410, also 204-05, 253.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 214, 423.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 212, 361; Sheldon, *Political Philosophy of Jefferson*, 78.

descend into chaos and mob rule. Madison trusts the rulers more than the people, and so he wants the tasks of government to be delegated to the highest, and most enlightened, level—whereas Jefferson wants the responsibilities of government to be carried out as locally as possible.⁸⁹

Jefferson is uncomfortable with all forms of reverence of authority, and does not approve of the constitutional worship he sees developing. No constitution is sacred, and although a constitution should not be changed lightly, merely to accommodate the whims of the moment, Jefferson thinks that all laws and institutions must evolve as society itself evolves. Every constitution should be revised periodically, because each generation has the right to choose its own form of government. No society can make a constitution that lasts forever; enforcing a constitution longer than one generation is an act of domination. To Jefferson, ruling from beyond the grave is the most outrageous of all tyrannies; it would be an injustice of the highest order that his generation alone should have the power to form the body politic.⁹⁰ Each generation, Jefferson thinks, is like a distinct nation, and its members can bind themselves together, but have no power to bind succeeding generations. The earth belongs always to the living, and “the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.”⁹¹ If preserving the constitution becomes more important than allowing the people to choose their own form of government, Jefferson fears that people will resort to rebellion. In fact, he thinks that if there is no space in which people can come together

⁸⁹ Gary Hart, *Restoration of the Republic: The Jeffersonian Ideal in 21st-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12, 46, 86, 119.

⁹⁰ Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 215-16, 596; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 233.

⁹¹ Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 593, also 599. When the majority of those writing the laws have died, their laws should die as well. “All ecclesiastical and feudal privileges, all entails, hereditary offices, jurisdictions and titles, and perpetual monopolies of every kind could be rightfully abolished whenever a majority of living men so desired.” Daniel J Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 208.

and have their voices heard, if they cannot write their own laws, they *should* rebel. The occasional rebellion is good for the body politic, because it keeps government from degenerating—“a little rebellion now and then is a good thing.” Commenting on Shays’s Rebellion, Jefferson writes: “God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion. . . . The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.”⁹²

But if the people are given the opportunity to revise their constitution when they want, there will be no need for rebellion. The problem here lies in collecting the voice of the people to write a new constitution. Jefferson realizes that a direct democracy must always be very limited both spatially and population-wise, but at the same time he thinks that the US is too large for a single government: centralized public servants will be too far removed to govern the localities well. He thinks that a system of wards, which would be small enough to allow all citizens to participate directly in public discussions, would solve the problem of how to hear the voice of the people: each ward would have meetings to gauge its citizens’ opinions, and from there the impetus for peaceful change would flow up to the higher levels of government.⁹³ The wards will be a kind of “elementary republics,” the sum of which will compose the state. Business that goes beyond the wards will have to be done by representation, on either the county or state or national level. And if the elected representatives should ever try to abuse or expand their power, the wards will allow the people to come together peacefully to remove “their unfaithful agents.”⁹⁴ This is why Jefferson claims that the future of the republic hangs on the two hooks of public

⁹² Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 108, 110, also 217.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 169, 207, 216-17.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

education and the sub-division of counties into wards: without either of them, the people will be vulnerable to an elected despotism. Jefferson's conception of freedom as self-government is meant not only to protect the individual from a tyrannical government, but also to protect the local practice of democracy from being suffocated by the centralized government.⁹⁵

If counties are divided into wards, each citizen would have access to the public realm in person and would be able to act politically. Everyday participation in public affairs reinforces the strength of the entire republic: the ward republics, Jefferson thinks, are the foundation on which the national government rests.⁹⁶ The wards would be self-governing in the areas that are exclusively their business: Jefferson proposes that the wards would provide, most importantly, public education which, by rewarding the best students regardless of background, would help defeat the advantages of privilege. But the wards would also be in charge of their own roads, of caring for the poor, of their own policing, of administering justice in minor cases, and of elections. In short, "[each] ward would thus be a small republic within itself, and every man in the State would thus become an acting member of the common government, transacting in person a great portion of its rights and duties, subordinate indeed, yet important, and entirely within his competence."⁹⁷ In Jefferson's scheme, there would be a hierarchy of governmental levels, and the power and legitimacy of the representative government of the higher levels—county, state, and nation—flows from and is anchored in the self-government and direct participation in the wards. Each level of government functions as its own republic, governing only what is

⁹⁵ Ibid., 197; Sheldon, *Political Philosophy of Jefferson*, 142.

⁹⁶ Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 183, 213-14.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 385, also 189.

proper to it, and deriving its authority from the level preceding it. In this way, each citizen is tied directly to the governing of the nation as a whole, and the elected representatives cannot become elected tyrants.⁹⁸ The wards guarantee a public space in which ordinary citizens can participate in the daily practice of politics, but also, if the need arises, to carry out a peaceful revolution and found the body politic anew.

For Jefferson, a complete life requires both public and private happiness; choosing one over the other is detrimental to both the individual and society. However, since, in the absence of the wards, the public realm is open only to the elected representatives and not to the people themselves, most of us will be able to find only private happiness and will therefore live lives that are not fully human. We must participate in our own government in order to be free; otherwise, we are vulnerable to tyranny.⁹⁹ The public realm of the wards is itself the antidote to the misuse of public power, precisely because it is public and hence makes every action visible. Jefferson fears that if there is no public space other than the ballot box, the ability of the people to act as citizens will be taken away from them. They have been granted power over the republic, certainly, but only as private individuals, not as citizens.¹⁰⁰ The constitution has not created a space in which ordinary citizens can exercise their freedom, and this is another reason that Jefferson insists on recurring

⁹⁸ Richard K Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 82; Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 205. Jefferson writes: "Where every man is a sharer in the direction of his ward-republic, or of some of the higher ones, and feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year, but every day; when there shall not be a man in the State who will not be a member of some one of its councils, great or small, he will let his heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Cæsar or a Bonaparte."

⁹⁹ Matthews, *Radical Politics of Jefferson*, 89; Hart, *Restoration of the Republic*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ That is, "the danger was that all power had been given to the people in their private capacity and that there was no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens." Arendt, *On Revolution*, 253.

foundations: the republic is not yet complete. The wards, by being small republics, would be the public realm in which each citizen could participate in the actions of government. In this sense, the ward republics are the purpose of the larger republic: since it is only there that citizens participate directly in public affairs, they alone provide a public space for the everyday practice of freedom.¹⁰¹

However, Jefferson realizes that to be able to participate in public life, one must first have taken care of one's biological needs. Without property, one is dependent on others to fulfill these needs—either on the rich for employment or on the state for hand-outs—and if one is dependent, one cannot be a full citizen. If we become economically dependent, we will become mentally dependent as well, because we have no leisure time during which to think, and those on whom we are dependent have power over us; we are reduced to “mere automatons of misery” with “no sensibilities left but for sinning and suffering.”¹⁰² This is why Jefferson opposes unlimited trade: it leads to war and dependence for the many. If any state in the union were to prefer unlimited trade to a restricted, primarily agrarian economy, Jefferson would not hesitate to let that state separate from the union. He understands that economic relations translate into social hierarchies, and so he believes that being independent farmers would allow ordinary citizens to escape the tyranny of dependence.¹⁰³ Owning one's own property allows one to be self-sufficient, and property ownership is therefore a protection against both economic and political domination. Hence, Jefferson proposes a fifty-acre voting qualification for Virginia,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 235, 250-51, 254-55.

¹⁰² Jefferson, *Political Writings*, 214-15. See also Hart, *Restoration of the Republic*, 157.

¹⁰³ Matthews, *Radical Politics of Jefferson*, 37; Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 269.

but suggests at the same time that every adult white male who does not own land should be given fifty acres.¹⁰⁴ Independent farming allows a fully human life, but a life dominated by commerce does not.¹⁰⁵

Jefferson's vision of ward republics is problematic today because Jefferson presupposes economically independent citizens, citizens who are not preoccupied with their private welfare. But the world is more crowded now than it was in Jefferson's time, and we cannot be self-sufficient, pastoral smallholders even if we wanted to: we are all dependent on the market to one degree or another, and we are all—willingly or unwillingly—caught in liberal democracy's illusion that public happiness is subordinate to private happiness.

Conclusion

What we can learn from the alternative traditions is that freedom does not have to be total or institutional: it can also be conceived as a public experience, as acting together with others. It is not enough simply to be left alone, because we are still vulnerable to power and domination. Just as total freedom can be realized in a tyranny—in fact, it probably *has* to be realized in a tyranny—so can private freedom also be realized in a tyranny. A tyranny may put up procedural fences protecting the individual from arbitrary interference but still leave her without any influence over the body politic or the other social institutions which shape her existence. The privately free individual can be equally powerless in a representative democracy as

¹⁰⁴ Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism*, 301. This proposal also highlights the limits of Jefferson's conception of freedom: he thinks that neither women nor African-Americans or Native American are capable of self-government, and should therefore not be given the privileges of citizenship. See Jefferson, *Political Writings*, xxvi-xxx.

¹⁰⁵ Matthews, *Radical Politics of Jefferson*, 40.

well. Moreover, a freedom which can be fulfilled in private, precisely because it is private, always comes back to overcoming necessity, to consumption: the private realm is where we satisfy the needs of the body, but it does not link us to the world and to other people. In private freedom, we can live in abundance but still be isolated and lonely.

This is why freedom is better conceived as acting in public, and by engaging the world—however minimally—participating in governing oneself. Even if one does not act politically, action is self-governing, because unlike behavior, action is self-authored: I am responsible for my actions, they originate with me, and they reveal who I am—when I act, I define myself rather than accept the self imposed on me when I behave. But action requires a space in which one can appear, and Arendt thinks that the council system, unlike totalitarianism or representative democracy, provides such a space even for ordinary citizens. She sees the councils, which emerge spontaneously in the absence of a state, as “an entirely new form of government, ... a new public space for freedom...”¹⁰⁶ But as much as Arendt, and also Camus, favors spontaneity and self-governance, she tends to overlook that even spontaneous action cannot dispense with organization: even councils must be organized, planned, and administered to a certain extent. The councils, however much they may be an entirely new form of government, underestimate the need of *any* modern state for administration.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 249.

¹⁰⁷ Arendt admits as much: “If it is true that the revolutionary parties never understood to what an extent the council system was identical with the emergence of a new form of government, it is no less true that the councils were incapable of understanding to what enormous extent the government machinery in modern societies must indeed perform the functions of administration. The fatal mistake of the councils has always been that they themselves did not distinguish clearly between participation in public affairs and administration or management of things in the public interest.” This is particularly

Although the council system provides a public space in which to practice freedom, it does have very serious flaws. Because they are so spontaneous and open, lacking a fixed organization, councils tend to be transitory and unstable; even if they were to last, it is doubtful that they could sustain their high levels of voluntary participation beyond the moments of crisis in which they appear. And because their political process is one of direct democracy, their representation is always very geographically limited, leaving them powerless to influence more global concerns and vulnerable to external forces of domination.¹⁰⁸

Arendt's discussion of the council system also brings up a more general point: her limits on action and what is political are too narrow. Issues which Arendt would dismiss as prepolitical have proven to inspire exactly the kind of action she associates with the practice of freedom.¹⁰⁹ And Arendt's insistence that politics has to be practiced in the public realm ignores action which must be hidden from publicity. When everyday people do not have access to the public realm, public spaces—and Arendt's own example of the French resistance supports this—can be created in the

true of the workers' councils: "In the form of workers' councils, they have again and again tried to take over the management of the factories, and all these attempts have ended in dismal failure. . . . The same men, entirely capable of acting in a political capacity, were bound to fail if entrusted with the management of a factory or other administrative duties. For the qualities of the statesmen or the political man and the qualities of the manager or administrator are not only not the same, they very seldom are to be found in the same individual. . . . The councils in the factories brought an element of action into the management of things, and this indeed could not but create chaos." *Ibid.*, 273-74. See also Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 244.

¹⁰⁸ Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 245-46.

¹⁰⁹ As Isaac points out, "much of twentieth-century politics has concerned itself precisely with the ways in which women have contested—politicized—the treatment of such seemingly natural activities as sex, conception, and childbirth." *Ibid.*, 231.

private realm.¹¹⁰ As the revolutions of 1989 demonstrate, sometimes politics takes place outside the public realm and freedom is practiced in private spaces.

¹¹⁰ This obviously does not let either totalitarianism or liberal democracy off the hook: just because people can create their own public spaces when the official public spaces are closed to them does not mean that they *will* do so or that the state can feel free to neglect public space.

CHAPTER EIGHT: 1989 AND THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

If freedom is not a product of correct institutional design, one must look for it outside the sphere of formal institutions. A truly *political* freedom—that is, a freedom understood as action in the public realm—cannot be found in the administration of private desires and isolated individuals. One must search for it where people act politically; freedom is a practice, not an idea.

This practice is not confined to the established sites of political action—voting booths and parliaments—but can spring up anywhere at any time. In particular, the practice of freedom seems to explode in times of crisis: if the citizens are apathetic, only sporadically engaging in political action while politics is simply business as usual, they become fervently political in times of rebellion and revolution. During revolutions, everyday citizens engage in spontaneous political action to a degree almost unthinkable in normal times. This leads to the question: why are revolutions such fertile soil for freedom?

That the practice of freedom should be especially common during revolutions is curious, since we tend to associate revolutions with violence. Violence cannot speak, and therefore has no place in the political realm; insofar as we are political animals, we must be able to speak. But in situations of absolute violence, there can only be absolute silence: a bullet cannot be persuaded. Violence, because it silences speech, contradicts politics and denies freedom.¹ However, while revolutions tend to

¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 18-19.

be violent, they are not necessarily violent, nor are they absolutely violent. Even in violent revolutions, there are spaces in which speech and freedom can exist.

Another characteristic of revolutions which seems to contradict the practice of freedom is their irresistibility. Just as the planets are irresistibly in revolution around the sun, we tend to think of human revolutions as something which also cannot be stopped. We believe that the course of a revolution is inevitable; human beings are powerless to arrest a revolution, whose force is as irresistible as the laws of nature.² In an irresistible revolution, the individual becomes a spectator, not an actor or agent. This irresistibility is closely tied to the idea that anything is possible: the revolutionary moment is one of infinite opportunity, of liberation from established roles and norms—it is a time to forge dreams into realities.³ It is precisely because the momentum of the revolution is irresistible that everything seems possible; people are forced by this momentum into new, previously unthinkable situations, and because being carried there by the revolution required no effort on their part, they think that they can go anywhere. And since revolutions aim at liberation, an irresistible revolution will necessarily create freedom: Marx's total freedom is a more or less automatic consequence of his proletarian revolution. Irresistible revolutions, then, are determined by history, not action, and revolutionaries are actors only in the sense that they play a part which they have been assigned on the stage of history—they are not

² Ibid., 47-48. This irresistibility is implicit in Crane Brinton's natural history of revolution, which studies revolution as if it followed the inevitable life cycle of a living organism—hence the title. See Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

³ Aristide R. Zolberg, "Moments of Madness" in *Politics and Society* (vol. 2, no. 2: Winter 1972), 196.

participants who can practice their freedom, but are swept along in their pre-determined roles.⁴

Irresistible revolutions, because they have been ordained by history to produce liberation, extend liberation beyond the political sphere and into the sphere of necessity. Not content with the liberation from tyranny, they seek the liberation of life itself. In the French Revolution, the cries of the poor for bread led Robespierre to surrender freedom for necessity, to abandon political equality for material equality. Rather than aim at freedom, the revolution now aimed at the happiness of the people.⁵ But once a revolution turns from the question of freedom to the social question—how to overcome necessity—it is doomed to fail. Life itself is not a political question; no amount of good intentions or enlightened discussion can feed the hungry. Overcoming necessity requires force, not speech, and a revolution that tries to solve the social question must also destroy the political realm. But a revolution cannot solve the social question: it changes the form of government, but that in itself does not provide bread. A revolution can only create conditions more favorable to overcoming necessity; it cannot create the actual bread.⁶ Concerns with necessity are contrary to politics: they are private, intimate concerns—each life must be upheld individually—and the needs of the body cannot be alleviated through politics. A politics dedicated to overcoming necessity is a politics striving for liberation, not freedom—it is not so much political as it is administrative.

⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 57-58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁶ Arendt believes that “although the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads into terror, and that it is terror which sends revolutions to their doom, it can hardly be denied that avoiding this fatal mistake is almost impossible when a revolution breaks out under conditions of mass poverty.” *Ibid.*, 112.

Liberation is necessary for freedom—it is difficult to act politically when the needs of the body are so much more urgent—but liberation is not the same as freedom. We tend to associate revolutions with liberation: Marx’s revolution would resolve “the conflict between man and nature,” and Lenin and Stalin’s attempt to implement Marx’s revolution was at the same time an attempt to eliminate necessity.⁷ But revolutions cannot merely be about liberation. Liberation is negative; it is liberation *from* something—government, starvation, and so on—and cannot become positive without the assistance of freedom—freedom *to* participate. Revolutions are always concerned with both liberation and freedom: they are both an outcry against oppressive conditions and a call for a new political form.⁸ In revolutions, the irresistible force of necessity coexists with the practice of freedom, but we forget about the latter, because it disappears as the revolution becomes solely a project of providing for a multitude of bodies.

We forget, that is, that revolutions are fundamentally *political* moments: for a brief while, the state does not exist, and the future form of government is a blank slate. The question of governance is no longer the business merely of a privileged elite; it is a concern for each citizen. A revolution is political because a new form of government can only be born from action, from the practice of freedom: violence cannot create something new, it can only force people to accept what is handed to them. Unlike *coups d’état* or civil wars, revolutions are new beginnings. A *coup d’état* can only exchange rulers, and a civil war can only destroy an existing body politic; a revolution, on the other hand, can create an entirely new form of

⁷ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), 102.

⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 32-33.

government, can found a wholly new body politic.⁹ It is because of the absence of the state, because they are moments in which self-government is possible, that revolutions are so intimately tied to the practice of freedom.

The revolutions of 1989 and their long gestation are no exception. It seems strange to say that the state did not exist in the revolutions of 1989; in fact, there are few regimes which have states that are as prominent in the everyday lives of their citizens as were the regimes of the former Soviet bloc. However, as plural and multifaceted as the opposition to communism was, all of the opposition groups had at least one thing in common: they refused to accept the state's monopoly over life—both private and public. Instead, they found myriad ways to practice their freedom: long before the revolutions actually broke out, people had started living—partially and discontinuously—as if the state was absent.

Life before 1989

As in Stalin's Soviet Union, the communist states in East-Central Europe wanted to control every aspect of their citizens' lives. However, East-Central Europe before 1989 was not the Soviet Union during the Great Terror: people were not totally dominated, and the type of oppositional activities that occurred in East-Central Europe would not have been possible in a truly totalitarian society.¹⁰ Thus, some countries, such as Poland, could develop an independent society which would later provide viable negotiating partners for the communists, while other countries, such as

⁹ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁰ This has led some observers, most famously Václav Havel, to use the term "post-totalitarian" to describe the regimes of East-Central Europe. I will not use this term, because the distinction is not important here.

Romania, were closer to traditional Stalinism and remained so repressive that organized opposition was impossible.¹¹ If Poland had been more like Romania, there would have been no Solidarity. But although countries like Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia were not as totalitarian as, for example, Romania and Albania, they were by no means open societies. Seemingly innocuous laws were used to suppress activities or individuals the state did not like: a statute against “disturbing the peace,” for example, was so malleable that any activity could be considered disturbing the peace and be subject to political repression. In the name of protecting the peace, the state could coerce its citizens to follow its norms of acceptable behavior, to be suspicious of each other, to socialize only per official instructions. And in a statute requiring everyone to have a stamp from their current employer in their ID booklet to ensure that they were not evading honest work, the state put into law the principle that everyone must be visible and available to the state at all times, always having their papers in order. Citizens should have no secrets from the state, and the state must always know where one was, what one was doing, what one was thinking. If one refused to conform to the state’s prescribed life, one could get thrown in prison for disturbing the peace or for evading work.¹²

Just as the intellectual climate was not as oppressive in East-Central Europe before 1989 as it was in Stalin’s Soviet Union, so was life itself more comfortable as well. Although the state could not provide enough varieties and quantities of consumer goods, people in East-Central Europe were not starving. The economies of

¹¹ Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 55; Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 134.

¹² See “Article 202” and “Article 203” in Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

these countries were not so bad that people were rioting for bread, as during the French Revolution—compared to the rest of the world, these were fairly rich countries with successful economies—but they were definitely failures compared to the Western economies. Since all economic decisions were politically and ideologically driven rather than based on market pressures, these economies were inefficient—but more importantly, they did not follow the technological development of the West. Whereas Europe and the U.S. had moved on to cars, petrochemicals, and electronics, the communist economies remained in heavy industry: steel and chemicals. The Brezhnev years were an attempt to hold on to those ideologically significant industries, so that by the 1980s, the Soviet Union and East-Central Europe found themselves with “the most advanced industries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—polluting, wasteful, energy intensive, massive, inflexible—in short, with giant rust belts.”¹³ But as stagnant as those economies were, they did manage to provide somewhat—the standard of living was not necessarily good or even acceptable, but it was also not disastrous.

One reason for the improved standard of living was the policy of *normalization*: each major conflict between the state and society was followed by punishment for those who rebelled as well as increased consumer rewards for those who conformed. The state in effect struck a bargain with the people: they would forget about freedom and politics, and in return they would receive material comforts. The citizens did not even have to believe in the ideology of the state, but they should pretend that they did—voting in rigged elections, attending ritualized mass rallies,

¹³ Daniel Chirot, “What Happened in Eastern Europe in 1989” in Daniel Chirot, Ed. *The Crisis of Leninism and the Decline of the Left: The Revolutions of 1989* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 8.

participating in the state's charade of democracy.¹⁴ While for most people, normalization made life easier, it made life more difficult for the opposition: firstly, because it distanced the opposition from the rest of society; and secondly, because the new, supposedly milder penalties for political transgressions were actually more difficult to bear. For most people, a fine equaling two months' wages was perceived as a more damaging penalty than a prison sentence. So while the regime could profess to be more liberal, since it did not have as many political prisoners, the possibilities for an independent life were more limited.¹⁵ Normalization encouraged the people to abandon their minds and become nothing more than consumers.

The trouble with the bargain of “goulash socialism”—consumer goods for the illusion of a functioning socialism—is that it reduces the people to concerns only with life itself, with necessity. Human existence becomes functional, with appropriation of material objects as the highest achievement; consumption makes production the greatest of human activities.¹⁶ But concerns with life itself are strictly private: goulash socialism compelled the people to leave public life to the Party, and to retreat into the privacy of material comforts. Rather than be offered to participate freely in their own governance, people were offered only to choose freely between consumer goods. But the role of consumer is limiting, confined to private pursuits. “The danger that [a person] might conceive a longing to fulfill some of the immense and unpredictable potential he has as a human being is to be nipped in the bud by imprisoning him

¹⁴ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (New York: Random House, 1989), 62.

¹⁵ Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 26, 31-32.

¹⁶ Arendt's critique of a consumer's society is that it is worldless—in fact, it destroys the world—and the life defined exclusively by consumption is not fully human, because it never moves beyond the animal instinct to maintain life. See, in particular, section 17 of Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

within the wretched range of parts he can play as a consumer...”¹⁷ The authorities arrogantly assumed that the people would be content with material goods, believing that the freedom of the people could be bought with bread and sausages. But the people wanted more than that; they also wanted “to be autonomous actors in their own lives.”¹⁸ Contrary to the authorities’ calculations, the people of East-Central Europe did not accept humiliation and powerlessness in exchange for a relatively comfortable life.

Once upon a time, the Party might have been able to justify the powerlessness of its subjects in the name of communist utopia. Marxists had always been able to claim the moral high ground, since they were on the side of the oppressed; but when the oppressed themselves pointed out how the Party had betrayed its own promises, the moral leadership shifted from the government to the opposition. Blinded by the semantic obfuscation of its own ideological categories, the Party leadership could not understand that the opposition was not driven by fanaticism or false consciousness: the Party had lost its legitimacy because it humiliated the people it proposed to liberate.¹⁹ The system was completely bankrupt, but since the bargain of normalization required the people to play along with the government’s socialist charade, no one could acknowledge that the system was bankrupt, and the Party leadership could continue convincing itself that it was still progressing toward a communist paradise.²⁰ However, its legitimacy rested on a contradiction—a contradiction stretching back to the tension between Marx’s voluntaristic creative

¹⁷ Havel, *Open Letters*, 59.

¹⁸ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23, 105.

²⁰ Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 137.

freedom and his deterministic total freedom: on the one hand, the Party required high levels of social mobilization—what could be seen as democratic participation—but on the other hand, its totalitarian nature compelled it to regulate that mobilization in every detail.²¹ Precisely because the Party made everything political by trying to control every aspect of human existence, but denied people the public space in which to practice politics, it also laid the groundwork for its own destruction—once the Party lost legitimacy, the communist system, by the totality of its nature, had to disintegrate completely.

Because of the totalitarian impulse for complete control, the politics in East-Central Europe was characterized by ideological ritual. Perfectly in keeping with its reduction of all activities to simple concerns with necessity, the Party reduced politics to a kind of automatism, in which all events were predictable and nothing new or unexpected ever happened. As Havel points out, the totalitarian system is fundamentally at odds with life's inherent tendency toward plurality: it demands uniformity and conformity, not uniqueness and autonomy.²² It tries to standardize the conditions of life, which has the effect of standardizing life itself, of flattening the spectrum of possibilities. In the totalitarian system, “order prevails: a bureaucratic order of gray monotony that stifles all individuality; of mechanical precision that suppresses everything of unique quality; of musty inertia that excludes the

²¹ S.N. Eisenstadt, “The Breakdown of Communist Regimes and the Vicissitudes of Modernity” in *Daedalus* (vol. 121, no. 2: Spring 1992), 28-29.

²² “While life ever strives to create new and improbable structures, the ... system contrives to force life into its most probable states.” Havel, *Open Letters*, 135.

transcendent. What prevails is order without life.”²³ By imposing order and automating politics, the Party could enforce conformity.

This conformity was not entirely of the Party’s making, however: in exchange for consumer goods, the citizens promised to play along with the system, and by doing so, they helped perpetuate that system. Everyone, from the Party leadership to the youngest schoolchildren, were entangled in the same web: by participating in the system, by following the rules set up by the authorities, even those who did not believe in the Party’s ideology ensured the survival of the totalitarian system. Simply adapting to one’s environment and trying to create a normal life under absurd conditions helped sustain those conditions. Everyone was caught up in the simulation and at least to a certain extent had to surrender their personal identities for the prefabricated identity of the totalitarian system. By conforming, one put pressure on others to conform. No one was entirely innocent, because the line between the rulers and the ruled ran “*de facto* through each person, for everyone in his own way [was] both a victim and a supporter of the system.”²⁴ In a moral universe where everyone is complicit, there can be no easy moral judgments, and precisely that moral ambiguity denied absolute opposition: the people shared the guilt with the Party leadership, although of course not to anywhere near the same degree.

The only hope one had of escaping this guilt was to participate in the system as little as possible. And since the system could not be reformed—the Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring had proven that—there was no point in getting involved in public life. Instead, people turned their attention inward, to the private

²³ Ibid., 72. Regarding the standardization of life, Havel writes: “In such an environment, stories become interchangeable.” Ibid., 344.

²⁴ Ibid., 144.

sphere, where they could create a comfortable life which was protected from the madness of the world by the four walls of their home.²⁵ Like the citizens of Tocqueville's democratic despotism, the people of East-Central Europe retreated into the circles of friends and family, hoping to escape the state, but escaping plurality as well. When one withdraws into the private sphere, one is never exposed to the vast multiplicity of human experiences—so in trying to escape the state's imposed sameness of life, people still surrounded themselves with others more or less like them.

The authorities welcomed this focus on the private sphere, because energy turned inward is energy not spent on resisting the state. When people ventured out in public, they wore masks—not literally, of course, but they pretended outwardly to be good, obedient socialists while protecting their private, secret thoughts. These were very different masks than the ones worn publicly in the 18th century: the latter obliterated the face to allow one freely to create a public persona, while the former obliterated the soul to allow one a tranquil private life. The masks were a kind of theater of subordination, a strategy of the powerless to appear to obey the powerful while trying to protect their own interests.²⁶ It would be a mistake to assume, as the men of the French Revolution did, that there is an authentic, natural person behind the mask: in their zeal to unmask hypocrisy, the French revolutionaries left the people entirely naked, without a public persona or “the protecting mask of a legal personality.” The communist rulers in East-Central Europe had also left their subjects without a

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

²⁶ One should remember, however, that the range of public roles were assigned by the Party, and that the possibilities for action were severely restricted. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 34-35.

persona: the communists had wanted to liberate the people, but as members of a class, not as individuals. And so in their public life, the people were simply part of a crowd; and as an individual mass man, one was perhaps a human being—a member of the species *homo sapiens*—but without a persona, one was “a politically irrelevant being.”²⁷ Thus, the masks that should have enabled a rich public life were instead instruments of conformity.

People conformed—wore public masks to disguise their inner selves—so they could live in peace and comfort. More importantly, though, they conformed out of fear: not the fear of torture, forced labor camps, or execution—not anymore—but a more subtle, existential fear—the fear of being excluded from society, the fear of being branded a subversive, the fear of being singled out from an indistinguishable mass.²⁸ The nail that stands out gets hammered down.

But even in conformity, people found ways to express their discontent with the totalitarian regimes. In the Polish town of Łódź, people protested against the lies of the official state television by taking a walk around town with their hats on backwards at the time of the official news broadcast. Conforming to official prescribed behavior—whether it be in a communist dictatorship or in a shopping mall—is never

²⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 107-08.

²⁸ “For fear of losing his job, the schoolteacher teaches things he does not believe; fearing for his future, the pupil repeats them after him; for fear of not being allowed to continue his studies, the young man joins the Youth League and participates in whatever of its activities are necessary; fear that, under the monstrous system of political credits, his son or daughter will not acquire the necessary total of points for enrollment at a school leads the father to take on all manner of responsibilities and ‘voluntarily’ to do everything required. Fear of the consequences of refusal leads people to take part in elections, to vote for the proposed candidates, and to pretend that they regard such ceremonies as genuine elections; out of fear for their livelihood, position, or prospects, they go to meetings, vote for every resolution they have to, or at least keep silent; it is fear that carries them through humiliating acts of self-criticism and penance and the dishonest filling out of a mass of degrading questionnaires; fear that someone might inform against them prevents them from giving public, and often even private, expression to their true opinions. . . . Fear causes people to attend all those official celebrations, demonstrations, and marches.” Havel, *Open Letters*, 52.

a simple matter of capitulation. Behavior is a battlefield of conflicting, often confused strategies and challenged boundaries. When, in the guerilla war over how far the authorities can impose their preferred behavior, one avenue of contestation is shut down, another one, perhaps in a completely different location, takes its place. Or when one boundary is firmly established, some other, as yet unfixd boundary, is transgressed. Thus, when the authorities in Łódź imposed a curfew during the official news broadcast to stop the protest walks, people put their television sets in their windows, blaring out the news at full volume to the empty streets.²⁹ Even the totalitarian system could not control its subjects absolutely. Konrád writes that “it proved impossible to swallow up the citizen body and soul. Man and wife still strolled at length, emptying their hearts to each other. Workmates leaned close in the taverns, illegal parties whispered in the cafés. What we didn’t do from sheer mischief, so things wouldn’t be the way they were supposed to be, so what was forbidden would happen anyway! An air of sweet deceit bound the whole city together.”³⁰ It was by using these stolen moments and hidden spaces beyond the reach of the state, not by confronting the totalitarian system directly, that the opposition sought to fight communism. If victory was not possible, at least one should be able to live with oneself.

The theory of opposition

Because the communist regimes saw everything through the lens of ideology, the thought of the opposition tends to be not only against communism, but also against

²⁹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 140.

³⁰ George Konrád, *Antipolitics* (San Diego: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1984), 204.

ideology as such.³¹ Totalitarian systems use a single, overarching idea to explain all aspects of human life, and to prove themselves right, their ideology forces everyone to conform to that idea. Hence, life in a totalitarian state is regulated, covered by a network of petty, complicated rules and orders, narrow norms, and enforced uniformity; any deviation from the ideologically determined norm is not on account of individual eccentricity but of a faulty, degenerate personality.³² A totalitarian state, since it provides a complete worldview, is by necessity a closed society—it claims not only to have found a solution to humanity’s problem, but to have found the *right* solution.³³ Any challenge to an ideologically driven state is, in the eyes of its believers, automatically wrong, and therefore unnecessary. This is why the communists attacked East-Central European culture so ferociously: they were not just establishing their hegemony, they were stripping the people of any identity separate from ideology, leaving them “defenseless and naked before the Russian army and the omnipresent state television.”³⁴ Totalitarianism captures the mind, and when people succumb to ideological captivity, they lose their plurality and become types defined by fixed categories rather than by individual character.³⁵

The opposition thinkers reacted against the ideological state’s monopoly on correct thoughts, but they also reacted against ideology’s tendency to obscure and conceal rather than clarify. Ideology misdirects, evading the heart of the matter: it

³¹ Konrád perhaps sums up this position the most succinctly: “I am neither a communist nor an anticommunist, neither a capitalist nor an anticapitalist...” Ibid., 35.

³² Havel, *Open Letters*, 186.

³³ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Warsaw* (New York: Times Books, 1990), 61.

³⁴ Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe” in Gale Stokes, Ed. *From Stalinism to Pluralism: A Documentary History of Eastern Europe Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 1996), 222.

³⁵ Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *After the Fall: The Pursuit of Democracy in Central Europe* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), xxv.

pretends that squalid living conditions are simply an issue of an insufficiently socialist consciousness; people who complain about the shortage of toilet paper should really be concerned about the future of humankind. In this way, ideology can divorce itself from reality and shape the world any way it likes.³⁶ Its language helps obscure reality; it uses ready-made phrases which “will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.”³⁷ Massive violations are covered up—slave labor is called “reeducation”—while the seemingly innocuous becomes momentous and slightly scary—a fireman is called an “incendiary engineer.”³⁸ Ideology hides responsibility, but the opposition thinkers insisted that ideologues must still be responsible, because ideology can kill: the planning and implementation of totalitarian tyranny requires the skills of intellectuals, and just because you call someone an “objective enemy” does not mean that his summary execution is not murder.³⁹

Havel in particular insisted that ideology is a falsification of reality; inspired by the phenomenology of Jan Patočka, he thought that ideology is a veil which shrouds our fallenness and inauthenticity—even from ourselves.⁴⁰ With ideology, we can make ourselves believe that the tyranny to which we let ourselves be subjected is actually in harmony with the moral order of the universe. Ideology “offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier

³⁶ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 11; Havel, *Open Letters*, 15.

³⁷ George Orwell, *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage* (San Diego: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1961), 362.

³⁸ Havel, *Open Letters*, 12.

³⁹ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 97.

⁴⁰ Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 136.

for them to part with them.”⁴¹ In an uncertain world, ideology offers clear answers; it explains everything, solves all moral dilemmas; it makes living easy, because you never again need to think an original thought or formulate an opinion: ideology tells you what to think and believe.⁴² It hypnotizes, offering a simple world of clearly demarcated categories and boundaries—but it is an adolescent world, without difficult moral quandaries. And precisely because ideology is such an adolescent way of relating to the world, its reactions to challenges are also childish: the communists could not accept any form of autonomy, and like a child, mad that it cannot control the world, they responded with anger and violence, letting their tanks raze any dreams of independence in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968.

For this reason, the opposition thinkers argued against confronting the communists directly. In a direct fight, the opposition would inevitably lose; therefore, struggling for independence was unrealistic. Instead, opposition thinkers such as Michnik and Havel suggested that the opposition should fight for its dignity and defend its humanity. If the members of the opposition could regain their dignity and set an example for the rest of the world, they would move closer to independence.⁴³ While the communists thought in moral absolutes, the opposition thinkers valued compromise, realizing that politics is not binary, that the state and the citizens do not confront each other from opposite poles of a vacuum, but that there is a continuum, a

⁴¹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 133.

⁴² “To wandering humankind it offers an immediately available home: all one has to do is accept it, and suddenly everything becomes clear once more, life takes on new meaning, and all mysteries, unanswered questions, anxiety, and loneliness vanish. Of course, one pays dearly for this low-rent home: the price is abdication of one’s own reason, conscience, and responsibility, for an essential aspect of this ideology is the consignment of reason and conscience to a higher authority.” *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 180; Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 107.

gray zone of morality and political action in which everyone, state and citizen alike, moves.⁴⁴ It was impossible to make a simple division between good and evil: although the members of the opposition believed that becoming a Party member was too high a price to pay for participation in public life or a decent job, they were surrounded by people who did not think so, and who could hardly be considered evil. To achieve a genuine plurality, one must learn to live with people who are willing to give up their principles for a comfortable life.⁴⁵ An opposition unwilling to compromise would be little better than the communists it tried to defeat.

The opposition leading up to the revolutions of 1989 was quite different from the earlier opposition: rather than overthrow or reform communism, the opposition tried to free itself from it. The actions of the opposition, Michnik believed, did not aim at winning power but at helping society emancipate itself from the totalitarian apparatus. Opposition groups aimed primarily at restoring society, at recreating social bonds that were not mediated by the official institutions. Only when society transformed itself from a passive receptacle into an agent of its own aspirations could it become a potential partner in power.⁴⁶ Change was possible, but it had limits. The communist system would not accept revolutions: the opposition had to think about geological change, change so minute and glacial that it might take generations to get

⁴⁴ Of course, this makes things seem simple: not all members of the opposition valued compromise, and compromise was not always possible because there was not always someone with whom to compromise. Also, the opposition was far from unanimous what to compromise about or what the extent of compromise should be. Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings* (New York: Central European University Press, 2003), 308-09.

⁴⁵ Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, 190. Michnik writes that “the angel who demands heroism not only of himself but of others, who denies the value of compromise, who perceives the world with a Manichean simplicity and despises those who have a different concept of obligations toward others—this angel, loving heaven as he may, has already started on the path that leads to hell.” *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28, 158.

rid of communism. This was the idea behind the “new evolutionism,” which directed itself at the people rather than the state, trying to change the consciousness of the people rather than suggest reforms for the state. Michnik thought that if people could become citizens again, if society could become independent of the state, the communist state would slowly become irrelevant without a direct confrontation between state and society. By applying a steady and constant pressure on the government, real, lasting change was possible.⁴⁷ This strategy had to be flexible: it had to identify and exploit new cracks in the communist façade, it had to retreat when the state pushed back, and it had to change shape so that it could always apply the right amount of pressure in the right location.⁴⁸ The form of the opposition was always an open question, but it was clear that it should not be an underground state, a government in internal exile: the communists had appointed themselves rulers, and there was no need for the opposition to do the same.⁴⁹

Instead, the opposition must test the boundaries of the state’s power. It must try the flexibility of the system and dispute its axioms; the more the opposition did, the more it could do.⁵⁰ But the state did not passively accept the opposition’s challenges: it harassed, imprisoned, and slandered the members of the opposition; it demoted them to menial jobs, denied them housing, and kept them under surveillance.⁵¹ Each side pushed and retreated, shifted strategies, and tried to shift the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 139-44; Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 128.

⁴⁸ “The Eastern European strategy is loose, individual, biological. It grows in the direction of the possible; it feels its way along the path of least resistance. It is cautious about formulating things too explicitly, it doesn’t say everything straight out, it avoids open, institutional, sharply defined forms. It moves relentlessly, mysteriously, tortuously; it can wait a long time, then suddenly spring.” Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 116.

⁴⁹ Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, 53.

⁵⁰ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 70; Havel, *Open Letters*, 6.

⁵¹ Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 141.

balance of power in its favor; far from static, the battle between state and society was waged on innumerable, constantly changing fronts.⁵² In such a situation, the state in particular must always be vigilant, because “any weakness in surveillance and enforcement is likely to be quickly exploited; ground left undefended is likely to be ground lost.”⁵³ For example, in the wake of the Helsinki accords in 1975, in which the countries of the Warsaw Pact signed an agreement pledging to uphold human rights, the opposition had a legal basis to legitimately challenge the communist regimes on the discrepancy between their promises and their practices—the Helsinki agreements completely reconfigured the battleground of human rights.⁵⁴ The boundaries had moved, and the opposition could now test these new boundaries.

Challenging boundaries was important if for no other reason than that the communist states had overstepped the limits of politics, politicizing things that they should have left alone. In East-Central Europe, one could not be apolitical, because an apolitical life was a life spent hiding from politics—so it was still defined by politics. The opposition wanted everyday life to be depoliticized and the state to stay within its proper limits. Society should keep the state in check, not the other way around—because when the state limits society, the people become stultified.⁵⁵ The opposition’s politics was the reverse of the communists’ politics: it was anti-utilitarian, non-

⁵² Scott writes that “the actual balance of forces is never precisely known, and estimates about what it might be are largely inferred from the outcomes of previous probes and encounters. Assuming, as we must, that both sides hope to prevail, there is likely to be a constant testing of the equilibrium. One side advances a salient to see if it survives or is attacked and, if so, in what strength. It is in this no-man’s-land of feints, small attacks, probings to find weaknesses, and not in the rare frontal assault, that the ordinary battlefield lies. . . . The limits of the possible are encountered only in an empirical process of search and probing.” Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 192-93.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁴ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 24; Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 117-18.

⁵⁵ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 181, 227, 229-30.

functional, non-hierarchical—it was *antipolitics*.⁵⁶ Rather than be strictly instrumental, antipolitics was supposed to be meaning-creating, one way to achieve a meaningful life.⁵⁷ And since communist politics was hidden in secrecy, its public dimension merely empty ritual, antipolitics had to be open, public; the opposition had to be visible in public life, organizing mass rallies and strikes as well as publishing its alternative vision—it had to show that it was not afraid to stand up for its beliefs.⁵⁸

But those beliefs were far from uniform, nor should they be. Even a single movement like Solidarity had to encompass a wealth of approaches, not to mention individuals. The organizational structure of the opposition should not exclude either intellectuals or workers, and so underground publishing houses had to coexist with strike committees; the opposition could not surrender plurality to organization. Michnik thought that one always had to remember that no person is completely determined by the political system. The picture is always complex: intentions and motivations are not clear, and bad actions are not necessarily performed in bad faith. No one is an angel, no one is perfectly consistent or persistently brave; we should keep in mind that “abandoning a worldview that encompasses the complexity of human obligations and achievements and replacing it with a crystal-clear picture can lead to simplistic judgments and harmful verdicts.”⁵⁹ The opposition should not fall into the same trap as the communists and see the world only in black and white—that would be a delusion.

⁵⁶ “In our area the time has come for a kind of politics—or rather antipolitics, as I would call it—which doesn’t just mean rising on the ladder of state office. It would not bring a better job, promotion, or jump in income. It would not bring an official car, a bodyguard, and a flock of secretaries. It would mean defending the place, the job, and the work we now have and want to keep. Antipolitics is not a dream of the future; it is respect for the present.” Ibid., 184-85.

⁵⁷ Havel, *Open Letters*, 269.

⁵⁸ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 232; Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, 147.

⁵⁹ Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, 54, 177-78, 187.

Precisely because the totalitarian system was delusional, built on lies, the opposition had to speak the truth. The system encouraged self-deception and acquiescence to its absurd demands—such as Havel’s greengrocer mindlessly hanging a poster with the slogan “Workers of the world unite!” in his shop window—so simply to live honestly, to live in truth, was a political rebellion. Living in truth is not a grandiose rebellion; it could be nothing more than refusing to obey the dictates of the system. The boundaries around living in truth are vague and undefined; any attempt to resist manipulation, to live in greater dignity could be an attempt to live in truth. There is no guarantee that living in truth will improve the situation; in fact, one’s only reward is probably a prison sentence for disturbing the peace—as well as the more personal reward of maintaining one’s self-respect. But by exposing the totalitarian lie as a lie, the person trying to live in truth has shown, for everyone to see, that the emperor is naked. In this sense, living in truth addresses the world: it shows the world that it is possible to live in truth. The totalitarian lie, which seems to be an unassailable edifice, has one weakness: like the gods, it can exist only if we believe in it. And as soon as the person living in truth tells the world that the emperor is naked, there is no reason to keep believing in the totalitarian lie, which crumbles as if it were made of paper. This is why Havel thinks that one person living in truth has more power than thousands of anonymous voters: a ballot does not expose the emperor as naked, because the very act of voting is a tacit acceptance of the legitimacy of the system.⁶⁰ But the consequences of living in truth are boundless,

⁶⁰ Havel, *Open Letters*, 132-33, 146-53, 175-76, 270.

“because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.”⁶¹

The opposition thinkers realized that people did not want to be treated as slaves, but wanted to be the masters of their own fate—and that they would actively try to win their own freedom. Clearly, the state would not give people their freedom on its own accord; the only freedom they could expect was what they had stubbornly wrested from the grip of the state. This is why people had to live as if they were free, even when they were afraid: if they acted scared, the state would never concede.⁶² But with freedom also comes responsibility: a sense of responsibility could quite accidentally lead one to become a dissident—one started trying to do one’s work well and ended up branded an enemy of the people. Since taking responsibility implies at least some autonomy, the totalitarian system diffused personal responsibility as much as possible; one of the great comforts of the totalitarian system was that one could evade personal responsibility. Hence, to free oneself from the system, one had to be personally responsible, not simply hiding in a collective responsibility.⁶³ Opposition thinkers insisted on reclaiming responsibility because they wanted people once again to be citizens rather than subjects.

This responsibility could be reclaimed in almost any area of human life, which is why opposition could be understood as every attempt to live in truth. Every action which had a political effect, broadly understood—including every attempt to reclaim one’s autonomy and sense of responsibility—threatened the totalitarian system and

⁶¹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 190.

⁶² Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, 80; Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 24, 82.

⁶³ Havel, *Open Letters*, 174; George Konrád, *The Melancholy of Rebirth: Essays from Post-Communist Central Europe, 1989-1994* (San Diego: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1995), 86.

was thus oppositional.⁶⁴ Thus, refusing to vote in fixed elections, although meaningless from the point of view of global politics, was an important act of opposition because it was a refusal to be subjugated, to be a slave, and instead save one's dignity.⁶⁵ The importance of the struggle lay not in the slim chance of its ever being victorious, but in the value of the cause itself: one had to resist not because one aimed at overthrowing the totalitarian system, but because it was right. The opposition to communism was a Sisyphean task, ever so slowly moving boundaries and pointing out silly contradictions, all in a perhaps fruitless quest to be able to live honestly.⁶⁶

Since one could not hope to change the totalitarian system itself, one could at least try to change one's relation to the system. This is the heart of antipolitics: change can happen in each individual's interior ethical world. Thus, antipolitics can take place almost anywhere under almost any circumstances; independent thought and action survives by retreating into the private realm.⁶⁷ In a police state, self-government survives only in private life. Discussions which should be public do not disappear as such, but they are forced into privacy, into personal conversation. Konrád suggested a segregation of life: the time at work is theirs, but the other hours of the day are ours. Since we cannot seek freedom at work—we have sold ourselves to our employers for eight hours each day—we should seek it at home. The state has its domain; we have ours, and that is what we should defend. If we define ourselves

⁶⁴ Havel, *Open Letters*, 164.

⁶⁵ Michnik compares voting to baboons presenting their rear end to a superior: "So we are supposed to be like baboons: whoever goes to the ballot box performs such a servile act. He will say to the general: you can screw me. Even if only this is the reason for not voting, it is enough." Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, 72-73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 68; Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 74.

⁶⁷ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 22; Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 307.

by our job, we are truly dependent. We can find independence in our free time. “Home and free time: these are the spatial and temporal dimensions of civic independence.” We should not try to vanquish the state’s institutions, but rather try to expand the boundaries of private life. Antipolitics exists outside politics; it “neither supports nor opposes governments.” It exerts pressure on government, but only to ensure the independence of individuals and society.⁶⁸ The state can enslave the population, but it cannot eradicate their minds—people have memories, conversations, free thoughts. There are always gaps which the state cannot touch. It is in these gaps that antipolitics takes place: it is self-government in the absence of the state.

Antipolitics goes beyond being merely a clever oppositional strategy: it was not simply a tactic of liberation, nor was it a solipsistic escape from politics; antipolitics was intended as a different way of doing politics. It wanted to reintroduce personal responsibility and morally informed action into a realm taken over by utilitarian calculations and economic self-interest—East as well as West.⁶⁹ The opposition did not counter the communist utopia with a utopia of its own; it did not want to create an ideal society. It wanted an independent, self-governing society—but even that was too much for the communist regimes: martial law was declared in Poland because the state could not accept the very existence of an autonomous institution with popular support.⁷⁰ The totalitarian state could not see antipolitics for

⁶⁸ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 197, 200-03, 231.

⁶⁹ “The moral imperatives of solidarity, human rights, and ‘thick’ responsibility exist over and against the ... compartmentalization and professionalization of partisan politics, as well as the neo-liberal imperatives of marketization and globalization.” Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 341.

⁷⁰ Michnik, *Letters from Prison*, 26, 88.

what it was: not a grab at power, but an attempt to create an independent sphere where one could practice a politics of meaning.

This sphere would always stand outside politics, a space for those who do not want power: “Antipolitics is the emergence of independent forums that can be appealed to against political power; it is a counter-power that cannot take power and does not wish to. ... If the political opposition comes to power, antipolitics keeps at the same distance from, and shows the same independence of, the new government. It will do so even if the new government is made up of sympathetic individuals, friends perhaps; indeed, in such cases it will have the greatest need for independence and distance.”⁷¹ These “independent forums” are reminiscent of Arendt’s councils; both are political spaces outside organized politics, and in which the practice of freedom is more important than having power. Havel, following Václav Benda, talks about “parallel structures,” which are also spaces in which life can be lived differently, in which one can be independent from the totalitarian state and have something resembling a public dimension of one’s life.⁷² In the absence of a state, people will organize and govern themselves; similarly, in the absence of a public sphere, people will create public spheres of their own. Antipolitics was, to a certain extent, a necessary strategy for the opposition, but it was also a vision of an alternative politics—a politics of small, local public spheres in which citizens can confront each other as independent, autonomous agents.⁷³ One must keep in mind, however, that an independent society is not necessarily better or more moral than the society controlled

⁷¹ Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 230-31.

⁷² Havel, *Open Letters*, 193-94, 200.

⁷³ “I believe in structures that are not aimed at the technical aspect of the execution of power... There can and must be structures that are open, dynamic, and small; beyond a certain point, human ties like personal trust and personal responsibility cannot work.” *Ibid.*, 210.

and sponsored by the state: self-governance does not transform us as human beings, but it does make us be responsible for our actions and opinions. And that is the reason the opposition insisted on independent forums and parallel structures: they foster our plurality and allow us to go beyond the one-dimensional personality of the administered life. In reality, that plurality was clearly manifested in the opposition, which included an almost countless number of independent forums and parallel structures of different shapes, sizes, and strategies.

The practice of freedom

The opposition was far from homogeneous; people united against the common enemy of communist tyranny, but they did not give up their political leanings.⁷⁴ The years before the revolutions of 1989 can be described as a carnival, in which scores of movements and ideas and styles, often contradictory, coexisted and even fed off each other. Many of the movements at this time, from new movements such as Freedom and Peace in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary to well-established movements such as Solidarity, welcomed a wide internal pluralism: whether the members of a movement united in a common method—as in Solidarity—or pursued a variety of strategies—as in Freedom and Peace—they could retain their own opinions and ideas. Unlike the Party, which required all its members to surrender even the most private recesses of their minds, the opposition movements provided spaces in which opinions could clash and actual discussions were at least possible. This is another sense in which the years before 1989 were carnivalesque: they challenged the existing order by transgressing

⁷⁴ “Totalitarian dictatorship suspended rather than annulled ideological divisions.” Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 155.

the rules and hierarchies of communist society.⁷⁵ In the opposition, people could confront one another as equals in public space, not simply as private, isolated subjects.

One reason for the opposition's plurality was that the strategy for how best to defeat communism was not immediately obvious. For example, after the imposition of martial law, there was a lot of debate about how underground Solidarity should be organized. Some wanted to confront the regime directly, while others suggested constructing an independent society completely divorced from politics; some wanted a centralized organization to fight the state more efficiently, while others proposed an underground network of mutually independent groups, each one autonomous and self-directed. There were many proposed roads to fighting communism: some were against any dialogue with the regime and wanted to engage in sabotage, while others thought that even creating a formal political organization put them in same ethical category as the regime. After a year of martial law, hundreds of small groups had emerged all over Poland, most of them ineffective and badly organized, but put together, they constituted a flourishing of diverse opposition movements.⁷⁶ There was an abundance of niches within the opposition, not all of them cute and cuddly: a group in Kraków marked the doors of informants with painted slogans and called for the murder of all communists and their families.⁷⁷ And the internal disagreements of non-communists could not always be reconciled: in Hungary, the division between the "populists," georgic nationalists protective of Hungarian traditions and culture, and the "urbanists," cosmopolitans more comfortable with Europe than provincial

⁷⁵ Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution*, 4-5, 62, 143.

⁷⁶ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 105-08.

⁷⁷ Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution*, 175.

Hungary, could not be bridged, and the opposition was made up primarily of urbanists, while the populists made their peace with the regime.⁷⁸ The communists could not eliminate the inherent plurality of their subjects, either within or outside the opposition.

For all its plurality, only a small number of people were involved in the opposition—mostly students, intellectuals, and workers in the major industrial centers: for most people, the opposition was something done somewhere else by others. Still, even with a limited amount of active members, the opposition engaged in a variety of activities. In Poland, strikes were common, particularly during Solidarity's brief legal existence. Poland also had an extensive underground press, with a bewildering array of publications and a considerable reach: by 1979, over 100,000 copies of journals, pamphlets, and books were printed each month. There was also the "flying university," impromptu lectures and seminars outside the censored education of the official universities; the idea was to create an open, critical debate on topics which could not be discussed publicly, as well as to provide a place of learning for those who could not attend a university. The opposition in Hungary, although more limited than the one in Poland, began around the same time, and had its own underground press and its own version of the flying university.⁷⁹ Intellectuals were important in the opposition—partly because they were so active, but also because they traded in ideas, and the communist regimes were dictatorships justified by ideas. But they were perhaps too important: a non-communist poet could not simply be a poet—he also had to have profound insights into the nature of

⁷⁸ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 125.

⁷⁹ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 27, 30-31, 88-89; Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 41-43.

totalitarianism—and a mediocre poet may be celebrated because he was officially criticized; one’s political stance is a poor indicator of the quality of one’s work and thought.⁸⁰ Still, intellectuals were crucial to the opposition, because they supplied the framework and inspiration for it. Intellectuals came up with the notion of creating an independent, parallel society which organizations such as Solidarity later put into practice.⁸¹

Just as ideas were important weapons in the opposition’s struggle against communism, so was symbolic politics. When the Hungarian communists tried to regain popular support in 1989 by shifting the national holiday from November 7, the day of the October Revolution, to March 15, the day of the revolution of 1848, the opposition staged a counter-celebration to the official ceremony. Around 100,000 people marched to six locations in Budapest that were symbolically linked to the 1848 and 1956 revolutions; rather than let the regime co-opt history, the opposition tried to rekindle memories of a Hungarian past without communism. And on June 16, when the communists tried to reclaim Imre Nagy, the man they had executed for his role in the 1956 revolution, as one of their own in a ceremonial reburial, Viktor Orbán of Fidesz delivered a speech calling attention to the communists’ hypocrisy, thus pulling the rug of respectability out from under them.⁸² But the majority of symbolic

⁸⁰ Garton Ash, *Uses of Adversity*, 116.

⁸¹ Solidarity “was not simply a movement restricted to the defense of the workers’ interests. As Wałęsa himself noted, Solidarity meant the rise of a new form of politics, one opposed to the duplicitous rituals practiced by the rulers. Later on, Václav Havel would speak about the politics of truth. And that of course was the deeper meaning of the appearance of Solidarity and of its victory over the principles of self-serving Realpolitik: It was the dissident’s dream turned into a mass movement, the triumph of the humanist creed over bureaucratic pragmatism.” Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 130.

⁸² “We young people fail to understand many things that are obvious to the older generations. We are puzzled that those who were so eager to slander the Revolution and Imre Nagy have suddenly become the greatest supporter of the former prime minister’s policies. Nor do we understand why the party leaders who saw to it that we were taught from books that falsified the Revolution are now rushing to

politics took the shape of everyday resistance: in Poland during martial law, for example, old women, and later students, laid down flowers in the form of a large cross on Victory Square in Warsaw to commemorate Cardinal Wyszyński, who had been an active critic of the communist regime. Each night, the police would wash away the flowers, and the next day the cross would be reconstructed; eventually, the authorities closed off the square to put an end to “the battle of the crosses.”⁸³

The younger generation of opposition fighters, who had lived their whole lives during normalization and who had not experienced the turbulence of 1968, were not as politicized as their older counterparts—in fact, many of them were explicitly non-political—and tended to favor symbolic politics. They sought out apolitical areas of life and, following the lead of earlier opposition thinkers like Havel and Konrád, tried to live independently in those areas. Precisely because the communist regimes tried to control every aspect of life, even apparently non-political activism was a threat to the authority of the regime. This is why even seemingly innocuous movements were met with government repression—thereby pointing out even more sharply the conflict between the state and society. At the same time, since these new movements were not obviously political, but rather rooted in everyday activities, they were more accessible than the traditional opposition movements. The new movements were sometimes criticized as escapist, directing their energy away from fighting the authorities and into harmless pursuits; the people in these movements thought, rather, that “they had eroded a small corner of state authority and created unexpected spheres of social

touch the coffins as if they were good-luck charms. We need not be grateful for their permission to bury our martyrs after thirty-one years; nor do we have to thank them for allowing our political organizations to function.” See *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸³ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 108.

autonomy...”⁸⁴ By moving away from more straightforward, political activism, they could expose the state’s greatest vulnerability: the regulation of and monopoly over all forms of social activity.

Thus, while the underground music scene was not oppositional in itself, it was an environment where people could act independently, which in turn might attract them to the opposition. The same was true of science fiction clubs and student journals—ways to exercise a critical voice, to practice for the opposition, as it were. Other movements seemed to have nothing to do with the political opposition, but managed to get into trouble all the same: for example, members of a Polish temperance movement were arrested when they picketed liquor stores in Warsaw, urging people not to drink. They could deliver a message of self-sufficiency—deciding one’s own alcohol consumption—while also making the regime look foolish: the police not help but look ridiculous arresting peaceful protestors merely asking people to drink in moderation. And in Czechoslovakia, a spontaneous annual gathering of hippies commemorating the murder of John Lennon grew into an organized peace demonstration. The environmental movement, which by no means should have posed a threat to the communist regimes, also became a site for opposition. Six members from Freedom and Peace, who protested against the government’s plan to use some abandoned bunkers to store nuclear waste, spawned a local protest movement in the small, rural town of Międzyrzecz in western Poland that mobilized the entire community and eventually managed to defeat the government’s proposed policy. As with most of the new movements, environmentalism was not necessarily oppositional, but the mere fact of being

⁸⁴ Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution*, 14, 48.

involved in an activity not sponsored or condoned by the state started many people down the road to anticommunism. These new movements found weak spots in the communist regimes' defenses, and confronted the regimes on sensitive issues on which they could actually consider compromising; in this way, when the time came for the roundtable negotiations, the communists had already learned that concessions to the opposition were actually possible.⁸⁵

Orange Alternative was perhaps the most novel of the new opposition movements. It mastered the art of confusing resistance: it staged happenings which were deliberately ambiguous—or perhaps merely absurd. In one such happening, the participants wore sombreros, sang harmless songs, marched to the zoo and demanded freedom for the bears, and threw flowers at the policemen who had been dispatched to arrest them. The police was not quite sure what to do with the protesters, however: it was obvious that they were anti-establishment, but the police could not send what seemed to be little more than a bunch of lunatics to jail without appearing brutal and repressive. Meeting absurd protests with violence cannot help but make the state look monstrous: an image of, for example, a police in faceless riot gear beating a candy-throwing elf is not the image of a humane, tolerant state. Thus, the communist state found itself in a losing situation when it came to Orange Alternative: if it hauled the protestors off to jail, the state invited comparisons with the brutality of its response to the 1968 uprising, but if it allowed the happenings, it implicitly admitted that its authority could be challenged. This was Orange Alternative's stroke of genius: its foolishness granted "a kind of surreal immunity from repression." Rather than meet the state's violence with armed resistance of its own, Orange Alternative met it with

⁸⁵ Ibid., 11, 49, 74-75, 79, 89, 152, 155-56, 166-67.

laughter, thereby demonstrating the absurdity of the totalitarian state: “To be detained by the police and taken to jail, even for only two hours, for wearing red stockings could be a sign that state repression was crueller than ever. On the other hand, to march down the street with a banner—even one with a meaningless slogan—and only be detained: that had rarely been possible in communist Central Europe.”⁸⁶

By taking the fight into the sphere of social activity, the new movements had expanded the realm of opposition. Most people, however, did not participate in the opposition, but still found ways to defy the state; although perhaps not consciously oppositional, everyday activities outside the reach of the state helped undermine the communist regimes. Living *as if*—as if the state did not exist, as if one lived in a free country—could be done without being an active member of the opposition. When the independent society was strong enough, the state could simply be ignored, and a whole parallel culture and society existed alongside the official one.⁸⁷ Having learned from 1956 and 1968, the opposition did not try to overthrow or reform the communist system, opting instead for evading it as much as possible. The independent society was separated from the state and indifferent to it. This was a whole new form of politics: rather than engage the state, the opposition simply went about recreating society as if the state did not exist. By ignoring the state, the opposition opened up

⁸⁶ Ibid., 158-63. Orange Alternative’s strategy of defusing the seriousness of power through laughter is reminiscent of Nietzsche: “And when I saw my devil, I found him serious, thorough, profound, and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity—through him all things fall. Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!” Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1978), 41.

⁸⁷ Timothy Garton-Ash writes about Poland in 1985 that “here is a Communist state in which the best writers are published by underground publishers, the best journalists write for underground papers, the best teachers work out of school; in which banned theater companies just carry on performing, in monasteries, while sacked professors carry on lecturing as ‘private guests’ at their own seminars; in which churches are also schools, concert halls, and art galleries. An entire world of learning and culture exists quite independent of the state that claims to control it...” Garton Ash, *Uses of Adversity*, 105, also 116.

entirely new spaces of freedom, moving the boundaries of oppositional activity to include almost any activity at almost any time.⁸⁸

These new spaces, clearly inspired by Konrad's antipolitics and Havel's living in truth, were very real public spaces for everyday people. The constant pressure that the opposition had applied to the communist regimes, as well as those regimes' bending to that pressure—at least in Poland and Hungary—had opened up public space beyond simply ritualized ideological spectacles. Even very early in its career, Solidarity had created elbow room for independent activity that could not exist in a truly totalitarian state. The independent life of society can never be completely suppressed, but its expression can, and the opposition succeeded in reopening spaces for that expression.⁸⁹ So although a multi-party system in Hungary seemed only a distant dream in 1987, it became reality in 1988: the new openness brought about a proliferation of clubs, associations, and organizations, some of which would become the main post-revolutionary political parties. But those were just a few of the many new groups, which covered all sides of the political spectrum. Most were very small, but put together, they embodied an eruption of spontaneous political activity.⁹⁰

In this respect, the revolutions of 1989 were no different from all other major modern revolutions: as the state begins to wither, the people create their own structures of governance—councils or associations—which reopen public space for all citizens, not simply the empowered elites. In the absence of a state—and the opposition's ignoring the state made it as absent as the revolutions later would—spontaneous public spaces for everyday self-governance spring up. This is

⁸⁸ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 47; Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution*, 5.

⁸⁹ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 121; Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 123, 142.

⁹⁰ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 93-98.

particularly obvious in revolutions, but the multitude of oppositional activities aimed at creating an independent society are also examples of this phenomenon. This spontaneous creation of public spaces is at the heart of the practice of freedom: without a space in which we can appear to others, in which we can confront each other as individual human beings and not simply representatives of our various needs, freedom is impossible. Undoubtedly the people in the opposition believed that life without communism would be materially better—perhaps the most disillusioning aspect of postcommunism to many—but the opposition was not fighting primarily for bread: it was fighting because life with communism was merely life for the sake of life, a life deprived of everything which makes it specifically human. It was a life without freedom.

Charter 77 is an example of a spontaneously created public space. It was not an organization as such; it was a collection of individuals united by little more than a moral conviction. Charter 77 was neither left nor right nor middle; it considered itself outside the political spectrum; it did not have a political program, but merely wanted to speak honestly. Despite all their philosophical differences, the signatories of Charter 77 all desired to live in truth. This attitude was both its greatest strength and greatest weakness: on the one hand, the government could not stop anyone from living in truth, but on the other hand, most people were not willing to put up with the harassment and penalties which the government imposed on those who tried to live in truth. Although Charter 77 always insisted that it was pluralist and did not endorse *any* political philosophy, and that it therefore was not an opposition movement, the very existence of a movement that embraced intellectual differences was a highly

political gesture in a totalitarian system. Charter 77 tried to accomplish specific goals, but it did not seek to directly influence public policy; simply trying to live in truth was enough for the government to brand it an opposition movement.⁹¹ Charter 77 was an island of freedom in the sense that it was a space in which one could distinguish oneself from the surrounding sea of enforced obedience. The communists demanded behavior, while participation in Charter 77 and other opposition activities was action—and action, because it is new, always requires courage. The Chartists refused to see themselves as superior because they had the courage to act; they understood that they were themselves complicit in the crimes of the regime, just as the most conformist members of society were not completely defined by the regime. They were, however, elites, but they “were not elites in the conventional sense. They were elites only in the sense of people bound together by a common refusal to be swallowed up by the conformity that surrounded them. Their members lived in truth where most lived a lie.”⁹² In this sense, all those who participated in opposition activities were self-selected elites: rather than accept their situation uncritically and disappear into the isolation of privacy, they dared take the leap into acting publicly; they dared stand out against the background of mass conformity; they dared distinguish themselves in word and deed.

The existence of movements like Charter 77 and Solidarity, not to mention the multitude of smaller, lesser known opposition groups, ensured that a sphere beyond the reach of the state, in which one could practice one’s autonomy, survived. Because this independent society existed and flourished, the revolutions of 1989 could be

⁹¹ Ibid., 151; Havel, *Open Letters*, 165, 326; Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 115; Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 141.

⁹² Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 117.

negotiated rather than violent: throughout the opposition years, the constant pressure from the opposition had slowly taught the communists that compromise with the people was not only possible, but perhaps even necessary. This was symbolized by the enormous roundtable used in the opening and closing ceremonies of the Polish negotiations: it minimized confrontation, suggesting instead an equal distance between all parties.⁹³ As a result of the negotiations, a parliamentary election was held in June. The communists were expected to do well, but the election was a crushing victory for Solidarity, not just in terms of numbers, but symbolically as well—the election was a statement by the Polish people that the communists had lost all legitimacy: Solidarity won every seat it contested except one, and a majority of the voters bothered to cross out the names of the communist candidates on the ballots.⁹⁴ Thirty-three out of thirty-five communist candidates did not even get the required fifty percent of the vote in *uncontested* races. These were the first free elections in the Soviet bloc, and even though the Polish compromise may now seem too limited, too reconciliatory, at the time “it was a revolutionary alteration in the logic of power within the communist world.”⁹⁵ In other words, Poland showed the other countries that the communists were beatable, and that the road to freedom was open.

The revolution in Hungary was also a negotiated revolution: roundtable talks started in June 1989. The situation was a lot messier than in Poland: although it was clear that a multiparty system was emerging, the relations between the new parties were not always easy. Still, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the communist

⁹³ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 124-25.

⁹⁴ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 30.

⁹⁵ Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 194.

parliament officially changed the name of the country from the People's Republic of Hungary to the Republic of Hungary, and all the elements of a multiparty democratic system were in place.⁹⁶ It is telling that none of the new opposition movements were parties to the negotiations either in Poland or Hungary: they were perhaps not serious enough, and they were definitely not experienced enough, to participate in the creation of the future form of government.⁹⁷ But these movements had from the very beginning shunned politics; they were not so much interested in the business of politics as they were in acting freely in the public spaces they themselves had created—whereas the more explicitly political figure Václav Havel chose to accept the presidency of Czechoslovakia. Just as the councils and associations Arendt discusses disappeared once the revolutions became institutionalized, so did most of the opposition movements that had helped create the conditions for the revolutions of 1989.

But the fact that the spontaneously created public spaces disappeared and were replaced by the bureaucratized politics of liberal democracy should not make us forget that these were first and foremost *popular* revolutions: “Whatever specific events happened in the various countries involved, all of them were made possible by people throwing off forty years of passivity.”⁹⁸ In East Germany, for example, the opposition was minimal even by the summer of 1989—around 160 groups, with a total of perhaps 2,500 members. But in September and October, massive demonstrations grew out of a peace service that had been held in a church in Leipzig on Monday afternoons since 1982. Each Monday, thousands more gathered, until a

⁹⁶ Garton Ash, *Magic Lantern*, 65; Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 135.

⁹⁷ Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution*, 299.

⁹⁸ Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 166.

crowd of 50,000 people marched through the center of Leipzig on October 9, chanting “We are the people.” The demonstrations spread throughout East Germany, constantly growing in size; on November 4, half a million people took to the streets in Berlin. Events were beyond the point of no return; the Party could under no circumstance hold on to power. This was not merely a crisis; it was a revolution, staged by the entire people. It was simply a matter of time before the floodgates opened, and on November 9, a rumor that travel to West Berlin was now permitted led hundreds of thousands of Berliners, both East and West, to cross the border and start tearing down the reviled Berlin Wall. In a single night, the map of Europe that had persisted for forty years had been irrevocably redrawn.⁹⁹

Similarly in Czechoslovakia, massive crowds of demonstrators forced the communists to step aside. A demonstration in January in honor of Jan Palach, a student who had had set himself on fire in 1969 to protest the Soviet invasion which put an end to the Prague Spring, ended with massive arrests and several days of street fighting. But the communists could keep a lid on the people’s anger only until November: on November 17, an anti-Nazi rally was brutally put down by the police. Rumors of this “massacre” quickly spread throughout the country, which erupted with demonstrations: three days after the initial demonstration, hundreds of thousands gathered in Prague, chanting “This is it” and “Now is the time.” A general strike one week later showed once and for all that the people had indeed taken power back into their own hands; the communists tried some desperate appeasement measures, but to no avail. On December 9, only three weeks after the first demonstration, Gustav

⁹⁹ Ibid., 138-41.

Husák resigned the presidency and a coalition government took power.¹⁰⁰ The crowning moment of the Velvet Revolution came on New Year's Day, 1990, when Václav Havel, who in matter of weeks had changed his residence from a dank prison cell to Charles Castle, took over the post as president with the words "People, your government has returned to you!"¹⁰¹ The people, tired of the lies and unfreedom of the totalitarian system, had made their own revolution: the communist regimes of East-Central Europe had been overthrown by hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens who had appeared in public to express their frustration.¹⁰² Tired of being relegated to the role of private, isolate consumers, they demanded to once again become citizens.

It was not, in other words, the so-called "Gorbachev factor" that caused the revolutions of 1989. Gorbachev certainly was not unimportant: his reforms signaled a new openness, and the opposition certainly would not have been as bold without his repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine.¹⁰³ But that boldness was conditional at best: the people of East-Central Europe had lived through several cycles of thaws and freezes, and had no reason to believe that this was not merely a new phase in such a cycle. And although repression was less brutal in the years before 1989, it was still quite severe, and it was not obvious that the easing of repression was in any way

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 149, 154-57.

¹⁰¹ Václav Havel, *Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice: Speeches and Writings, 1990-1996* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 9.

¹⁰² Stokes, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 167.

¹⁰³ As Jowitt points out, this was not meant as an invitation to overthrow communism: "The significance of Gorbachev's actions in 1989 is that he was willing to accept the possible collapse of Leninist rule in Eastern Europe in order to maintain it in the Soviet Union; not that he intended or foresaw the political collapse of Leninism in Eastern Europe." Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 256.

connected to Gorbachev.¹⁰⁴ The perspective of hindsight is quite different from the perspective of an activist on the ground before the revolution, and one should not succumb to the temptation of retroactive determinism simply because it bestows a neat organization upon history.

The bright hopes of the revolutions of 1989 are inseparable from the nature of these revolutions: non-violent, not irresistible, not historically predestined. The old regimes used violence to exert their authority, so violence became the symbol for the illegitimate rule of the communists. Violence is also intimately tied to the concept of irresistibility, and with it necessity, both historical and biological. Because these were revolutions against communism, they also had to be anti-communist revolutions, i.e., opposite from communist revolutions. There was no sense that victory was inevitable because these revolutions would liberate the masses from the shackles of oppression—they clearly would not—or that the force and violence needed to effect change was irresistible—no such force or change was needed, nor was the change irresistible. These were not revolutions of spectators, but of actors. Most importantly, these revolutions would not lead to some final, paradisiacal state in history—first and foremost, they would lead to freedom.

Nor would the revolutions end all social problems; they were not revolutions to solve the social question. The economy in the Soviet bloc was bad, but there were no starving masses ready to run down everything in their path for a piece of bread. The goal of the revolutions was liberation from tyranny, not from suffering. Again, this is because of the anti-communist nature of the revolutions. Lenin begun his revolution with the goal of “electrification plus *soviets*,” but he sacrificed the latter

¹⁰⁴ Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution*, 122.

for the former, i.e., freedom for material equality. In 1989, the electrification was already there, but the *soviets*, the public spaces, were not.

The revolutions of 1989 were creative rather than destructive: they did not aim at destroying the world in order to usher in a new age of humanity, but aimed at founding a new political order. In this sense, it is appropriate to think of them as rebirths—”periods of great activity [that] involve many individuals and groups engaged in their own projects, largely independent of all the others.”¹⁰⁵ Rather than engage in grandiose projects of social transformation, the revolutions of 1989 were new beginnings, because they were an opportunity to found freedom—or rather, to found spaces in which freedom would be possible. This is why the writing of a new constitution is so important: more than just an opportunity to put into law the differences in principles between the new state and the old regime, constitutions can create and protect public spaces to which everyday citizens have access. Constitutions can also have a powerful symbolic value: they can be an artifact around which the nation can rally, and they can present an opportunity for the victors to build their philosophical principles into the very framework of the new regime as well as to drum up support for their most central policies.¹⁰⁶ Someone like Arendt would have none of this; for her, the purpose of a constitution is not to impose one’s fundamental principles, however noble they may be, on future generations, and a constitution is definitely not a public relations ploy to gather support for one’s policies. The purpose of a constitution is the creation and formulation of the public realm, nothing more,

¹⁰⁵ Karol Soltan, “1989 as Rebirth” in Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismaneanu, Eds., *Between Past & Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath* (New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 32.

¹⁰⁶ See Bruce A. Ackerman, *The Future of Liberal Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 49.

nothing less—it is a way to ensure that the contingencies of one’s own peculiar time are not carried over to later times, when specific policies that make sense now may be outdated and irrelevant. Above all, the constitution, since it in itself cannot actually create freedom, should allow for the creation of the public spaces in which freedom can be practiced.

Unless the constitution can protect the existence of those public spaces, they are likely to disappear altogether—just as the public spaces created by the opposition disappeared after the revolutions of 1989, and just as the councils and associations that have sprung up in all major modern revolutions disappeared once the state reaffirmed its monopoly over the public realm. In the public spaces of the opposition, action was possible; they were spaces in which one could distinguish oneself—as opposed to the space controlled by the state, in which anything but conformist behavior was suspicious. In the plurality of the opposition’s activities and in the revolutions themselves, a multitude of public spaces that had not existed before were opened up. These spaces, which now have been forgotten in the rush to create more or less dysfunctional liberal democracies, were the real treasure of the revolutions—another addition to Arendt’s lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition. Certainly these spaces would not have existed if people had not united to fight communism, but they were more than just functional: they were also islands of freedom in which one could be the author of one’s own actions. The reason these spaces, together with the other spontaneous, localized, fleeting space of all the other revolutions, are the *lost* treasure of the revolutionary tradition is that we seem unable to imagine a body politic that is not presided over by a state. We abandon the public realm to the state,

which dismisses non-functional activities in public for the sake of administrative convenience. And so we forget what happens when the state does not exist: we govern ourselves. The spaces created by the opposition were not intended to replace the government, but that does not mean that they were not *political* spaces. These spaces were a new political form—not a new form of government, but perhaps a new form of governance. Unlike the new administrative state institutions which replaced the old administrative state institutions, these spaces were spaces for the practice of freedom.

Conclusion

The revolutions of 1989 are often accused of being nothing more than a mad, mindless rush to adopt liberal democracy. Some observers claim that there was nothing new about these revolutions: Timothy Garton Ash has “yet to hear what big new ideas emerged from the revolution of 1989 to compare with ‘*liberté, égalité, fraternité*’ of 1789 or to compare with ‘all power to the Soviets’ and the idea of a heaven built upon earth, the communist utopia.” He goes on to say that “[there] was no distinctively new project for the remaking of society in 1989.”¹⁰⁷ And Habermas sees 1989 as a “revolution of recuperation, ... meant to make possible a return to constitutional democracy and a connection with developed capitalism...” What is peculiar about this revolution, for Habermas, is “its total lack of ideas that are either

¹⁰⁷ Timothy Garton Ash, “Conclusions” in Antohi and Tismaneanu, Eds., *Between Past & Future*, 397.

innovative or oriented towards the future.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Bruce Ackerman views the revolutions of 1989 as part of a larger cycle of liberal revolutions.¹⁰⁹

Each of these observers takes different lessons from 1989: Habermas thinks that “[it] is not as though the collapse of the Berlin Wall has solved a single one of the problems specific to our system.”¹¹⁰ Certainly, the problems he lists—economic disparities at home and abroad, as well as environmental degradation, both as a result of the impetus of consumption within market societies—have not been solved by the revolutions of 1989—nor could they be. That does not mean, however, that there is nothing new about these revolutions or that the countries outside East-Central Europe cannot learn from them.

That is the standpoint of Garton Ash (and also Ackerman)—while he does not grant the revolutions of 1989 novelty of ideas, he does recognize that they were historically new: the “particular model of peaceful, sustained, marvelously inventive, massive civil disobedience channeled into an oppositional elite that was itself prepared to negotiate and to compromise with the existing powers, the powers that were (in short, the round table)—that was the historical novelty of 1989.”¹¹¹ And Ackerman believes that 1989 poses a challenge to Western Europe: it, too, has to seriously rethink the foundations of its political system if it wants to protect itself from the antiliberal forces which threaten it.¹¹² The lesson of 1989, for Ackerman, is

¹⁰⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Revolutions of Recuperation and the Need for New Thinking” in Robin Blackburn, Ed. *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 27.

¹⁰⁹ See Ackerman, *Future of Liberal Revolution*.

¹¹⁰ Habermas in Blackburn, Ed. *After the Fall*, 41.

¹¹¹ Garton Ash in Antohi and Tismaneanu, Eds., *Between Past & Future*, 398.

¹¹² Ackerman mentions regional insulation and militant nationalism as the two biggest threats; today, while these threats remain, we know that Western Europe will not descend into civil war because of the collapse of communism. However, new threats constantly emerge, and although most of these can

that liberal revolution—negotiated change of the constitutional principles of a society—is not something to be feared, but something which the established liberal democracies should seriously consider as well.

But were there really no new ideas in 1989? One of Garton Ash's own examples—"all power to the Soviets"—was not so new either; much like Havel's living in truth or Konrád's antipolitics, it was an amalgam of older ideas: the idea of socialist self-government, brought back to life in Lenin's time by so-called left-wing communism, goes back at least as far as Fourier and his phalanxes. Lenin was also an avid student of revolution: *The State and Revolution* is an attempt to avoid the mistakes of the Paris Commune while preserving its self-governing structure. And Leninism itself is also an amalgam of older ideas: it joins the authoritarian strand of Marx's thought with the Russian tradition of conspiratorial revolutionary violence—and Nechaev was himself inspired by Blanqui. So, yes, there were no new "big" ideas in 1989—but that is precisely the point: the philosophy of the opposition was an attempt to get away from big ideas, from total solutions, from trying to build a coherent social system in theory. Of course there were no new big ideas: after forty years of tyranny based on a big idea—the biggest, in fact: earthly redemption—who in his right mind would come up with another big idea to replace it?

Many of the dissidents called themselves liberals, and we have to take them at their word; after communism's ideocracy, liberalism's pragmatism and lack of big ideas must seem very refreshing. But we must also recognize that insofar as they were (and still are) liberals, they were liberals of a strange kind, insisting on a philosophy

be managed by the current liberal democratic system, Europe cannot afford to be complacent. See, in particular, the section on "The Next Revolution" in chapter 3, Ackerman, *Future of Liberal Revolution*.

of integrity, on personal responsibility, and on thinking without the help of ideological crutches of any color. There are echoes of earlier thinkers here, clearly, but the opposition thinkers formulated the relation between the individual and society in their own way. To claim that, for example, Havel is merely derivative of Heidegger and Patočka is to underestimate the originality of his ideas while overestimating the originality of other philosophers. Ideas are never entirely new, and that is true for the ideas of the opposition thinkers as well. But neither were their ideas simply old, recycled ideas; for example, if we accept them as genuine liberals, we have to think carefully about how their insistence on solidarity and a strong civic component of human life can fit with our own conception of life in a liberal democracy.

Clearly, the countries of East-Central Europe did not present the world with a brand new form of government, but the view that they turned to liberal democracy because it is the best possible political form is a grotesque caricature of the eschatological mentality that the opposition fought to free itself from.¹¹³ If we take the ideas of the opposition thinkers seriously, we have to acknowledge that the fight was against dogmatic thinking as such, against all ideologies that impose an intellectual straitjacket—not simply communism. Liberals have adopted the East-Central Europeans as fellow, standard-issue liberals because the revolutions of 1989 were not total revolutions, trying to emancipate humankind in its entirety; “[according] to this logic, any more ‘limited’ form of political theory, one that is

¹¹³ “Such a view recapitulates a nice, neat nineteenth-century progressivist scheme, pitting the forces of liberation against the forces of reaction, liberal democratic reformers against Communist reactionaries in league with nationalist ideologues. Revolutionary success versus reactionary failure. The choices seem clear.” Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 158.

evolutionary, or non-violent, or does not aspire to total change, must be liberal.”¹¹⁴ The chorus of liberal triumphalism, which threatens to silence any notion of alternatives, forgets that the victory over communism was not inevitable, maybe not even probable—as the Chinese communists’ response to the Tiananmen Square demonstrators the same year shows. If the exit from communism had happened differently—if it had been more gradual, or more violent—the transition would perhaps have been considered differently, as a reforming of socialism or as a move to social democracy.¹¹⁵

The opposition was *not* uncritically liberal—partly because it was not homogeneous but contained elements of all ideological stripes, and partly because even those within the opposition who were sympathetic to liberalism’s claims were still suspicious of it.¹¹⁶ Also, the opposition did not simply look to the liberal democracies of the West for inspiration: the Democratic Opposition in Hungary, for example, revived “the legacy of October 1956 by advocating political pluralism and representative democracy in government; self-management in the workplace; local government in the settlements; and national self-determination and neutrality in foreign policy.”¹¹⁷ The opposition’s wish for the institutions of liberal democracy should be seen in perspective: those institutions could protect against the arbitrary abuses people experienced on a daily basis in the totalitarian system, but there are

¹¹⁴ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 336.

¹¹⁵ Krishan Kumar, *1989: Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 60; Garton Ash in Antohi and Tismaneanu, Eds., *Between Past & Future*, 396-97; Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 337.

¹¹⁶ Konrád, for example, writes about the nuclear stand-off between East and West that “[if] liberal and communist rationalism—the two prevailing political doctrines of modern civilization—can guarantee only this extraordinarily fragile kind of security four decades after the end of World War II, we must conclude that the philosophies of the industrial world are inadequate.” Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 31.

¹¹⁷ Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 201.

other wishes of the opposition that cannot be as easily reconciled with an unquestioning adoption of liberal democratic institutions. The insistence on personal responsibility and active citizen participation, for example, cannot be legislated and cannot be guaranteed by procedures, liberal or otherwise. Several crucial aspects of the thought of the opposition are in clear tension with the procedural liberalism practiced in liberal democracy, including “the notion of politics imbued with morality, authenticity, and active subjectivity; the ethos social solidarity, the implications for participation flowing from a Havelian understanding of political responsibility; and the broad re-definition of politics itself.”¹¹⁸ The opposition thinkers called enthusiastically for the rights and liberties of liberal democracy, for the rule of law and for a morally neutral state; but their solidary, civically active subject is not the mostly private individual of liberalism. They insist on the autonomy of the individual, to be sure, but one might call it a “collective individualism,” in which “elements of liberal thinking [are] intermingled with elements of collective thinking...”¹¹⁹

The opposition’s vision of politics fits uneasily with liberal democracy. Havel criticizes the democratic West because, although its citizens have freedoms unknown to people living in communist countries, those freedoms are useless to them, since they cannot participate in public life, cannot be responsible actors in the body politic. Konrád is equally critical; he believes that a representative democracy, in which

¹¹⁸ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 339, also 344.

¹¹⁹ Jerzy Szacki, *Liberalism after Communism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995), 117. Elsewhere, Szacki writes that “[in] comparison with the liberal tradition, the idea of the autonomy of the individual we find in the writings of the dissidents is restricted in a characteristic way: the parts of the opposition are the individual and the state, the individual and the system, but not the individual and *society*.” *Ibid.*, 84. (Italics in original.)

citizens get to choose once every four years which member of the professional political class gets to shine on the public stage, is inadequate: between elections, the citizens of a representative democracy have only the same rights as the subjects of East-Central Europe: to turn off the television. This is why he claims that local self-government is more attractive to East-Central Europeans than representative democracy: “[the] interesting thing about direct democracy is that the audience takes an active part, too.”¹²⁰ This wish for a more open, correctible, spontaneous, locally grounded democracy based on active participation and personal responsibility tends to make liberals uncomfortable. They may argue that antipolitics was an effective strategy to oppose communism, but that it is a poor model for the normal, administrative politics of a “healthy” polity; too much integrity and conscientiousness is bad for the smooth functioning of liberal democratic institutions. The opposition’s notion of freedom involves too much dialogue and solidarity for the strong individualism of liberalism.¹²¹ Rather than waste time on moral speculation, liberals think that the former opposition should focus on the practical problems of how to implement an efficient liberal democratic politics.¹²² Implicit in this argument is an assumption that the adoption of liberal democracy is an obvious choice, or even a non-choice; that there could be alternative forms of political organization is almost unimaginable.

¹²⁰ Havel, *Open Letters*, 208; Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 137-38.

¹²¹ Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 159; Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 345.

¹²² “The politics of truth and authenticity can be a great inspiration. Without it politics can degenerate into mere power seeking and manipulation. But its very sublimity disables it as a guide to the practical problems of the day. Currently what East European politics needs is less of Rousseau and the moral or existential revolution and more of Jeremy Bentham and the politics of practical reconstruction.” Kumar, *1989*, 56.

The revolutions of 1989 were born from a reaction against precisely the kind of epistemological certainty which eliminates human plurality regardless of its ideological clothing. They were responses to all forms of absolute knowledge claims, even ones dressed up in the liberal rhetoric of inclusiveness, tolerance, and diversity. The opposition thinkers understood that liberalism is another ideology, a method for understanding the world which claims superiority over all others. Still, many of them chose to identify as liberals, and still do; liberalism is attractive because it “best satisfies the strong need in these countries to oppose what recently had been and to some extent still is, while at the same time offering the hope of something much better in the future.”¹²³ In a discussion with Adam Michnik about the problems and dangers of postcommunism, Jürgen Habermas suggests that the countries of East-Central Europe should stick to liberal democracy for very pragmatic reasons: not only did liberal democracy restore the standard of living in West Germany, but it has also made the return of state-sponsored violent nationalism highly unlikely. “Why,” Habermas asks, “should the Poles, the Hungarians, the Czechs, and the Slovaks be unable to achieve what the Federal Republic succeeded in doing during the last four decades?”¹²⁴ But the now former dissidents’ commitment to liberalism goes beyond merely pragmatism: when fighting communism, they saw liberal values such as civil rights and freedom of speech and assembly as weapons in the fight for human dignity, and they still do. Jeffrey Isaac argues that the former dissidents “are best understood as political agents committed to basic liberal principles as a minimum condition of

¹²³ Szacki, *Liberalism after Communism*, 7.

¹²⁴ “More Humility, Fewer Illusions: A Talk between Adam Michnik and Jürgen Habermas” in *The New York Review of Books* (vol. 41, no. 6: March 24, 1994), 26.

civility...”¹²⁵ Liberalism was not simply a convenient tool for the dissidents; they remain committed to liberal values—but not, I would argue, because they are committed to liberalism as such; rather, they are committed to human dignity in the face of political force. They are liberals, but they are also still antipoliticians.¹²⁶

The need for antipolitics continues; even liberal democracy needs a parallel *polis*. The term is accurate: it is an alternative public space, one open to all citizens, which coexists with the regular *polis* but does not lay any claim to its physical power. Under totalitarianism, but even in an open society, the parallel *polis* is a space in which one can non-conform or decide for oneself who one wants to be; it creates discourse and generates thought where previously there was none. Arendt’s councils are parallel *poleis*, as were the limited public spaces opened up by the opposition to communism. Just as in Arendt’s councils, these spaces allowed everyday people to participate in a foundational political moment—to practice their freedom. In this sense, these spaces were Arendtian: there, people could act, and not just alone, but together. This togetherness was not a simple collectivity: just as Arendt insists on the performative aspect of action, that we appear to others when we act, the spaces of the opposition were also performative: the members of the opposition appeared to each other, but also to the regime they were resisting, as well as to the world at large. Havel’s greengrocer addresses the world with his refusal to post empty slogans in his shop window, and Michnik insisted on the openness of the opposition: the communist regimes were closed and their public face was highly scripted—the opposition, by contrast, had to be open, with a performative public face. In the spaces of the

¹²⁵ Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Rethinking the Legacy of Central European Dissidence” in *Common Knowledge* (vol. 10, no. 1, 2004), 124.

¹²⁶ See *Ibid.*, 121-22.

opposition, people could act in the Arendtian sense: they could engage the world in word and deed in a way that was impossible in the official life of the communist regimes. These spaces for action, whichever form they take, demonstrate that totalitarian ideology cannot monopolize thought, but also that liberal democracy cannot monopolize thought either.

The opposition, then, did not merely oppose communism; it also rejected the shallowness of modern politics and the automatism that comes with a consumer society concerned only with material accumulation and life for the sake of life itself.¹²⁷ Havel, for example, considers *all* forms of modern politics to be disempowering, leaving individuals passive, conformist, and without responsibility. Liberal democracy is desirable because it is less disempowering than totalitarianism, not because it is an inherently superior system; it is still vulnerable to the dangers of consumerism and bureaucratic corruption.¹²⁸ Modern power, Havel thinks, is a technology of manipulation; it is anonymous, impersonal. Rather than leaders, we now have managers, bureaucrats, apparatchiks—experts in administrative technique—whose function is strictly technical, cogs which make the machinery of state run efficiently. Their impersonal power is innocent, justified by rationality and efficiency rather than human needs. In such a politics, morality is irrelevant; there is no good or evil, only quantifiable success. From this perspective, totalitarianism is not a unique pathology of salvationist ideologies, but a distorted mirror of modern

¹²⁷ “What emerges clearly from the Chartist literature, and from the literature of Central European dissent more generally, is the belief that the impersonality and consumerism of modern society, the bureaucratization of political agencies, and the debasement of political communication through the cynical manipulation of language and images produce a shallow politics, a disengaged citizenry, and the domination of well-organized, entrenched corporate interests.” Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 166.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

civilization as such. Havel believes that “all of us, East and West, face one fundamental task from which all else should follow. That task is one of resisting vigilantly, thoughtfully, and attentively ... the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power—the power of ideologies, systems, apparatus, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans. We must resist its complex and wholly alienating pressure, whether it takes the form of consumption, advertising, repression, technology, or cliché—all of which are the blood brothers of fanaticism and the wellspring of totalitarianism.”¹²⁹

Havel connects the impotence and irresponsibility of the individual in the face of bureaucratic, impersonal power to the impotence brought on by technological civilization in general. Technology, he thinks, has stopped serving us, and is now enslaving us instead. All of modern civilization has succumbed to a kind of automatism, of which the totalitarian system is merely the most extreme example. Liberal democracy cannot protect us against the automatism of technological civilization because it too is caught in the instrumental reason which turns the world into an object to be used and consumed. Any solutions we could possibly imagine to combat the ills of technology are themselves technological solutions. Pollution and the destruction of the natural environment are not incidental side effects of technological civilization: they are symbols of a mentality which seeks to destroy nature so that it can control it all the more effectively. The smokestack “is a symbol of an epoch which denies the binding importance of personal experience—including the experience of mystery and of the absolute—and displaces the personally experienced absolute as the measure of the world with a new, man-made absolute,

¹²⁹ Havel, *Open Letters*, 267, also 257-59.

devoid of mystery, free of the ‘whims’ of subjectivity and, as such, impersonal and inhuman. It is the absolute of so-called objectivity: the objective, rational cognition of the scientific model of the world.”¹³⁰ Technological civilization seeks to colonize both the human and the natural world in order to eliminate unpredictability; it seeks to eradicate action, which is non-functional, and replace it with various kinds of behavior, which serve the needs of life and the body, and perhaps even engineer the soul.

Havel’s vision of politics is not one based on passive acquiescence of standardized routines, but on active involvement: “Freedom and democracy include participation and therefore responsibility from us all.”¹³¹ This is not a freedom lodged in a constitution or in the institutions of the state, but a freedom that is practiced in the public realm. It is the freedom practiced by the opposition before and during the revolutions of 1989, which is why one cannot say that these revolutions were simply a revolt against communism and for liberal democracy. If anything, they were a revolt against the impersonal power of modern civilization; many of the opposition’s criticisms against communism can be raised against liberal democracy as well: a citizenry pushed into private life, without a presence in public affairs; a politics focused on the administration of life rather than citizen self-government; and the replacement of spontaneous, autonomous action with disciplined, regulated behavior. The revolutions of 1989 did not strive simply to replace one bureaucracy with another; the citizens of East-Central Europe were tired of being relegated to the

¹³⁰ Ibid., 206-08, 251-52.

¹³¹ Ibid., 392.

isolation of a strictly private existence, and presumably did not want to be relegated back into private life in a liberal democracy.

We should not ignore that the opposition to communism might have something to teach us: that the “virtually total eclipse of democratic public life in Western liberal democracy ... makes the experience of antipolitical politics supremely relevant, as a source of both inspiration and concrete examples.”¹³² There is, in other words, more to politics—including liberal democratic politics—than institutional design. That is the lesson and the challenge of the revolutions of 1989: to rethink liberalism so that it is more civically engaged. As Garton Ash writes: “What we’ve found at the end of ten years is lessons *for* the West. We came to preach the constitution of liberty, to tell you the ingredients of western normality, and what we found is that we don’t know ourselves. We don’t know ourselves what is that extraordinarily complex and subtle mixture of ingredients—political, social, economic, cultural, moral, legal—that do make up this elusive thing we call liberal democracy or normality.”¹³³ A well-designed polity cannot produce an active citizenry, but a poorly designed one can impede, or even completely negate, all spontaneous citizen action. This is why it is so critical that the state does not, as it is its habit, shut down, take over, sell, or destroy everyday public spaces; it is in these spaces—not in the structure of government, that freedom can be found, because it is there that it can be practiced.¹³⁴

¹³² Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 178.

¹³³ Garton Ash in Antohi and Tismaneanu, Eds., *Between Past & Future*, 401.

¹³⁴ So what about these spaces under postcommunism? Have they not, just as all the various council forms that Arendt describes in *On Revolution*, disappeared? Indeed, it does seem as if the treasure of the revolutionary tradition has, after a brief revival, once again been lost. What that means is an open question. I would be hesitant to proclaim that it proves the superiority of the liberal model of governance, but we must also recognize that it tells us something about the instability of the council

model. Clearly, it cannot be depended on to supply a durable, settled model of governance. But I am not sure that was ever the point: even at their most popular, these kinds of spaces never involved a majority of the population. Rather, I think what the disappearance of these spaces should teach us is that if we fail to provide for their existence within an established form of governance, they will appear again sooner or later, and when they do, we might be facing a revolution. If we bury something, we have to expect it to be rediscovered.

CONCLUSION: ILLUSIONS OF FREEDOM

The Marxist and liberal conceptions of freedom are, in a manner of speaking, illusions. They are illusions, first, because they cannot deliver fully on their promises: Marxism's total freedom will not lead us into a higher state of humanity, and liberalism's freedom is vulnerable to encroachments on the individual's private space. But they are also illusions in a more literal sense: they present a deceptive image of what freedom should look like. That is, the Marxist and liberal notions of freedom are visual shorthands, substituting a mental picture for a more abstract understanding of freedom. In particular, both use a metaphor of visual organization, imagining freedom as a supervisable order. Stalin's implementation of Marx's total freedom is obviously the extreme example of this, with its impressive-looking steelworks and superblock apartment buildings, originating in the idea that if the society *looks* modern, it would also *be* modern. But the protected private space of liberal freedom is also a visual metaphor, and the functional separation of liberal democratic societies, with residential areas increasingly separated not only from public spaces but also from other residential areas with different demographic characteristics, is rooted in this image of a fenced-off space around the individual's freedom. In both cases, the illusion of freedom is that if one configures social spaces so that they are ordered according to one's image of freedom, the people who inhabit those social spaces will be steered to become free. But visual order is not the same as social order, and it is certainly not the same as freedom. On the contrary, imposing visual order on a social

space reduces or eliminates its potential for housing genuine plurality, and thus removes the freedom that could be practiced there as well.

It is not simply the metaphor of vision itself that is problematic, but also the type of vision implied by Marxism and liberalism's conceptions of freedom. Both of these theories are universalistic, claiming that their versions of freedom are ideal regardless of local conditions. But universal vision is disembodied; it is a view from nowhere. Seeing from nowhere is quite fantastic: without physically occupying a position outside the earth, we can look at, and act on, the earth as though we were truly separate from it. From this vantage point, nothing which happens on earth appears to be unique—every process or event can be derived from some universal law. When we see from nowhere, from an undefined point anywhere in the universe, we become less and less earthly beings, and finally become truly universal.

But perspective is important: "if one looks at what is near at hand by means of a telescope one does not use one's eyes very well. Whoever walks in the forest with an astrophysical look loses his sense of proportion."¹ With universal vision, one can claim to be omniscient, to see each locality better than those who inhabit it. Having infinitely mobile disembodied vision is an illusion, which consists in believing that we are "seeing everything from nowhere" when what we have actually done is put our vision at a point eccentric enough to ignore the contribution from our eyes in the visualization process, and then called this point "nowhere."² But we cannot pretend to see everything in perfect detail when we are actually infinitely far removed—which is

¹ Pieter Tijmes, "The Archimedean Point and Eccentricity: Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Science and Technology" in *Inquiry* (vol. 35, no. 3/4: September 1 1992), 403.

² Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 189.

precisely what universal vision does. One cannot govern the body politic through a telescope. Vision is always situated, which means that it is limited; all seeing is also partial blindness, because our vision is obscured by walls and obstructions, and it is diminished by distance. Universal vision seems to be innocent and neutral: it is not located, and hence it does not take sides—it can always claim to be objective. But this is an irresponsible objectivity, which allows Marxism and liberalism to maintain their innocence even as they push individuals into isolated privacy while trying to realize their universal freedoms on the level of society.

The view from nowhere is irresponsible also because it ignores local peculiarities: universal vision favors universal political solutions over ones limited to particular localities. Local public spaces require local vision, which, because it is restricted to a particular place, can allow each place to develop the politics which suits it best. Universal vision, on the other hand, generalizes and homogenizes; it sands down idiosyncrasies, removing signs of plurality and leaving only safe, bland conventionality. Precisely because it is universal, it engenders non-places—places which could be anywhere. With universal vision also comes a universal state: neither Marxism's nor liberalism's state is bound to a particular place, but could supposedly be instituted anywhere. And the universal state tries to universalize its citizens. In the most radical cases, the state will try to control even the private life of the citizens in the name of their freedom and material well-being. This is why we can think of society as a national household, and the government as the father figure of the family of the nation. Of course, the concern of a national household is overcoming necessity, not politics, so like Solomon's House in Bacon's *New Atlantis*, it will be a

technocratic society with institutionalized science whose purpose is to improve the quality of life for the citizens. But Solomon's House does not concern itself merely with producing better grain and medicine; it also regulates the private family with laws dictating marriage customs.³ Just as in Stalin's Soviet Union, Bacon's state tries to impose a morality that is convenient for its own administrative needs onto the citizens. Rather than adjust its practices to the varying needs of individual citizens, it tries to make the citizens universal, all with the same needs.

This is another characteristic of the universal state: it imagines that freedom is guaranteed by its institutions. Build the right (visually ordered) institutions, and freedom will follow. But freedom exists in the unpredictable, disordered, and spontaneous local practice of public life, not in universal institutions, and as the example of the revolutions of 1989 shows, people will reclaim their freedom from the universal state if its control gets too constricting. Not everything can be, or should be, controlled. We cannot deceive ourselves into thinking that we can create Solomon's House and control the lives of the citizens; people will always find ways to resist categorization and to seek freedom.

By placing the protection of freedom in universal institutions—the dictatorship of the proletariat or the protective procedures assured by the constitution—Marxism and liberalism shift the responsibility of freedom away from the citizens and to the state. And because the state needs to control its public spaces—to ensure safety, to protect civil liberties, to prevent insurrection, and so on—everyday citizens' practice of freedom in public will be severely circumscribed. Both

³ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 285.

Marxism and liberalism neglect the importance of space: in order to be citizens in a meaningful capacity, we need public spaces, spaces in which we come together for more than just private errands. Participatory politics requires a physical space in which to meet—which is not the case with electoral politics. Self-government is impossible in privatized or administered spaces, because those spaces are already governed from above. Still, people will reclaim such spaces or use them for their own purposes: Orange Alternative's happenings were as much a battle over who should control public space as they were a method for opposing communist rule. When we are offered only inhospitable public spaces or public spaces with unacceptable behavioral requirements, we create our own public spaces. These public spaces are not replacements for the official public spaces, but they are alternatives to them—they are places where everyone, not simply those approved by the state or the institution managing the space, can practice their freedom. But the fact that the people—or more precisely, some people—create their own public realm does not mean that Marxism and liberalism can neglect to protect public spaces.

When public spaces begin disappearing, we are pushed to retreat into the private realm, into the household and its concern for necessity. Neither Marxism nor liberalism hinder us from retreating back into the household, although in very different ways: Marxism's scheme of liberation completely removes the people from the political process and totally denies anyone except the highest Party members a public life, while liberalism relieves the citizens of the burden of an active public life and promises to protect them primarily as private individuals. Both also control or abandon public space—staging only ritualized mass rallies or renting public space to

the highest corporate bidder—leaving citizens with only private spaces or with public spaces that do not allow meaningful political action, such as monumental public spaces, or non-places, or commercial spaces. The very configuration of space that Marxism and liberalism’s conceptions of freedom give rise to, or at least allow—the communal spaces for mass man and the functional separation of private and public spaces, respectively—push citizens into privacy, into giving up their citizenship for the pursuit of material comfort. But by retreating into the private sphere, the citizens abandon their ties to the world, leaving them isolated and lonely.

This is why I have focused on an alternative conception of freedom, one which is practiced in everyday political spaces by ordinary people. This is not a redemptive freedom, but it gives citizens efficacy over their own lives, and it allows the creation of meaning beyond the private accumulation of material goods. However, this freedom is an ideal, just as Marxism’s communist salvation is an ideal. It cannot be implemented in a “pure” form: it presupposes a clear boundary between the political and all other realms, but in reality human activities bleed into one another and cannot be strictly separated. The political form in which this freedom will appear—for example, the councils—cannot be pure either: the discussions and deliberations will not be restricted only to the business of the councils; if they were, participation in a council would be an insufferable bore. Moreover, the councils are a *political* form, not an administrative one, and a government of councils cannot dispense with administration. Also, councils tend to be temporary, unpredictable, and voluntary—in short, fickle. They cannot by themselves guarantee the public spaces needed for their own existence. Finally, the freedom practiced in the councils is

entirely public, and thus takes the overcoming of necessity for granted; but not everyone is sufficiently liberated from necessity, so not everyone can participate in the councils. Just as Marxism and liberalism push us to live mostly private lives, so do the councils push us to live mostly public lives.

Obviously, neither is desirable; we need a moderate amount of both, not the domination of one over the other. We should therefore understand the councils and other participatory political forms as complements to administrative politics. They constitute a parallel public space in which citizens, who have their other needs taken care of through the administrative politics of Marxism or liberal democracy, can practice their freedom. Liberal democracy cannot function without localized participatory democratic forms any more than the council system can survive without administration. Administration without a public realm for everyday participation is shallow and empty—it is simply the management of life for the sake of life. Freedom *is* possible within the framework of liberal institutions—just as it is possible within the framework of totalitarian institutions, as the revolutions of 1989 show—but it is possible *despite* those institutions, not because of them. But that is putting things too harshly: liberal, or even totalitarian, institutions can protect the civil liberties needed for the practice of freedom, but those civil liberties are not in themselves freedom. So it is not that we have to discard liberal democracy, but we have to understand that institutional design is not the end of democracy, and that it does not create freedom.

Citizens need political spaces for themselves, which is why liberal democracy must be willing to accept the co-existence of other political forms. Some of these alternative political forms will appear in localized public spaces, which is why these

everyday spaces for citizen participation have to be protected. With the increasing control and commercialization of public places, these spaces are now contracting rather than expanding. But public space should not be homogenized and flattened into prefabricated nothingness; such a public space will allow only one, or a few, forms of politics. Instead, public space needs to be eccentric, each individual place having its own quirks and peculiarities; only then can the everyday political realm be truly plural. If human beings really are an irreducible plurality, how could we possibly imagine that a single mold for public space, or a single form of freedom, would be sufficient? As Camus puts it, “nothing is true that compels us to make it exclusive.”⁴ Subscribing to a single political form is a desire for the exclusive right of domination—the council system, were it allowed to rule unchallenged, would end in tyranny as surely as unchallenged totalitarianism or liberal democracy. A single vision of freedom is always an illusion.

⁴ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 165.

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