

*Thin Democracy:
The Argument against Liberalism*

Thin Democracy: Politics as Zookeeping

[One must not] think that Men are so foolish that they take care to avoid what Mischiefs may be done them by Pole-Cats, or Foxes, but are content, nay think it Safety, to be devoured by Lions.

(John Locke)

. . . democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history.

(Reinhold Niebuhr)

Liberal democracy has been one of the sturdiest political systems in the history of the modern West. As the dominant modern form of democracy, it has informed and guided several of the most successful and enduring governments the world has known, not least among them that of the United States.

Liberal democracy has in fact become such a powerful model that sometimes, in the Western world at least, the very future of democracy seems to depend entirely on its fortunes and thus on the American system of government and its supporting liberal culture. This perceived monopoly not only limits the alternatives apparent to those seeking other legitimate forms of politics but leaves Americans themselves with no standard against which to measure their own liberal politics and with no ideal by which to modify them, should they wish to do so.

Furthermore, successful as it has been, liberal democracy has not always been able to resist its major twentieth-century adversaries: the illegitimate politics of fascism and Stalinism or of military dicta-

torship and totalism. Nor has it been able to cope effectively with its own internal weaknesses and contradictions, many of which grow more intractable as the American system ages and as its internal contradictions gradually emerge (a process discussed in Chapter 5).

It is the central argument of the first part of this book that many of these problems stem from the political theory of liberal democracy itself. Liberal democracy is based on premises about human nature, knowledge, and politics that are genuinely liberal but that are not intrinsically democratic. Its conception of the individual and of individual interest undermines the democratic practices upon which both individuals and their interests depend.

Liberal democracy is thus a “thin” theory of democracy, one whose democratic values are prudential and thus provisional, optional, and conditional—means to exclusively individualistic and private ends. From this precarious foundation, no firm theory of citizenship, participation, public goods, or civic virtue can be expected to arise. Liberal democracy, therefore, can never lead too far from Ambrose Bierce’s cynical definition of politics as “the conduct of public affairs for private advantage.” It can never rise far above the provisional and private prudence expressed in John Locke’s explanation that men consent to live under government only for “the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates.” And it can never evade the irony of Winston Churchill’s portrait of democracy as “the worst form of government in the world, except for all the other forms.” A democracy that can be defended only by mordant skepticism may find it difficult to combat the zealotry of non-democrats.

In fact, Churchill’s remark suggests that liberal democracy may not be a theory of political community at all. It does not so much provide a justification for politics as it offers a politics that justifies individual rights. It is concerned more to promote individual liberty than to secure public justice, to advance interests rather than to discover goods, and to keep men safely apart rather than to bring them fruitfully together. As a consequence, it is capable of fiercely resisting every assault on the individual—his privacy, his property, his interests, and his rights—but is far less effective in resisting assaults on community or justice or citizenship or participation. Ultimately, this vulnerability undermines its defense of the individual; for the individual’s freedom is not the precondition for political activity but rather the product of it.

This is not to say that there is anything simple about liberal democracy. It is an exotic, complex, and frequently paradoxical form of politics. It comprises at least three dominant *dispositions*, each of which entails a quite distinctive set of attitudes, inclinations, and political values. The three dispositions can be conveniently called *anarchist*, *realist*, and *minimalist*. Although actual democratic regimes usually combine traits of all three dispositions, the individual dispositions are evident in particular theories of liberal democracy. Thus in his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick tries to move from anarchist to minimalist arguments without violating the belief in individual rights that underlies both dispositions. A more complex democratic liberal, Bertrand Russell, managed in the course of his long career to experiment with each of the three dispositions. His early works were tinged with anarchism, his mature works informed by realism, and his late works touched by minimalism. Russell's espousal of classical liberalism and of social-contract theory moved him easily from an anarchist defense of the sanctity of individual rights to the realist conclusion that a sovereign was needed to guarantee those rights to minimalist addenda intended to circumscribe the powers of the sovereign.

The American political system is a remarkable example of the co-existence—sometimes harmonious, more often uncomfortable—of all three dispositions. Americans, we might say, are anarchists in their values (privacy, liberty, individualism, property, and rights); realists in their means (power, law, coercive mediation, and sovereign adjudication); and minimalists in their political temper (tolerance, wariness of government, pluralism, and such institutionalizations of caution as the separation of powers and judicial review).

The anarchist, realist, and minimalist dispositions can all be regarded as political responses to *conflict*, which is the fundamental condition of all liberal democratic politics. Autonomous individuals occupying private and separate spaces are the players in the game of liberal politics; conflict is their characteristic mode of interaction. Whether he perceives conflict as a function of scarce resources (as do Hobbes and Marx), of insatiable appetites (as do Russell and Freud), or of a natural lust for power and glory (as does Machiavelli), the liberal democrat places it at the center of human interaction and makes it the chief concern of politics.

While the three dispositions may share a belief in the primacy of conflict, they suggest radically different approaches to its ameliora-

tion. Put very briefly, anarchism is *conflict-denying*, realism is *conflict-repressing*, and minimalism is *conflict-tolerating*. The first approach tries to wish conflict away, the second to extirpate it, and the third to live with it. Liberal democracy, the compound and real American form, is conflict-denying in its free-market assumptions about the private sector and its supposed elasticity and egalitarianism; it is conflict-repressing and also conflict-adjusting in its prudential uses of political power to adjudicate the struggle of individuals and groups; and it is conflict-tolerating in its characteristic liberal-skeptical temper.

In considering these three individual dispositions more closely, then, we must not forget that they are in fact contradictory impulses acting within a single political tradition rather than independent philosophies belonging to distinct political systems.

THE ANARCHIST DISPOSITION IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Anarchism as a disposition may be understood as the nonpolitics or the antipolitics of liberal democracy. It disposes women and men to regard themselves as generically autonomous beings with needs and wants that can (at least in the abstract) be satisfied outside of coercive civil communities. From this viewpoint, conflict is a problem created by political interaction rather than the condition that gives rise to politics. Wedded to an absolutist conception of individual rights, this disposition is implacably hostile to political power—and above all to democratic political power, which because it is more “legitimate” is less resistible.

The anarchist disposition figures most clearly in the liberal democratic account of the ends of politics. These are always circumscribed by the individual and his autonomy. In this view freedom is the absence of external (hence, of political) constraints on individual action; the natural condition of the individual is independence and solitude; and human beings are by definition autonomous, separate, and free agents. The basic classics of the American tradition are rich with this quasi-anarchist individualist imagery. Thomas Hobbes may have become the philosopher of indivisible sovereign power, but he was persuaded that “the final cause, end design of men who naturally love liberty [in entering civil society] is the fore-

sight of their own preservation."¹ John Locke argued with equal force that "the great and chief end therefore of men uniting into commonwealths and putting themselves under government . . . is the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name property."² And the revolutionary secessionists who founded the American Republic thought it "self-evident" that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Only after these radically individualist premises, vibrant with the colonial American's distrust of all government, had been laid out and justified could the prudential edifice of government, instituted solely "to secure these rights," be raised.

Thomas Carlyle captured the anarchist disposition of liberal democracy perfectly when he dismissed utilitarian liberalism as "anarchy plus a constable." The liberal democrat may acknowledge the presence and even the possible usefulness of power, but he continues pertinaciously to distrust it. John Stuart Mill's caution that all restraint, qua restraint, is an evil permeates liberal political theory and disposes it to regard politics less as the art of using power than as the art of controlling and containing power. Robert Dahl can thus portray democratic theory as "at a minimum . . . concerned with processes by which ordinary citizens exert a relatively high degree of control over leaders."³ And David Easton can define democracy itself as "a political system in which power is so distributed that control over the authoritative allocation of values lies in the hands of the mass of people."⁴

It is not surprising that liberals, who regard political community as an instrumental rather than an intrinsic good, should hold the idea of participation in disdain. The aim is not to share in power or to be part of a community but to contain power and community and to judge them by how they affect freedom and private interest. Indeed, as Carole Pateman has noticed, "not only has [participation] a minimal role, but a prominent feature of recent theories of democ-

1. Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, part 2, chap. 17.

2. John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, chap. 9, par. 124.

3. Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 3.

4. David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 222.

racy is the emphasis placed on the dangers inherent in wide popular participation in politics.”⁵

Participation, after all, enhances the power of communities and endows them with a moral force that nonparticipatory rulership rarely achieves. Moreover, in enhancing the power of communities, participation enlarges their scope of action. An extensive and relatively ancient literature is devoted to the defense of politics against too much democracy and to the defense of democracy against too much participation. Every critique of majoritarianism, every critique of public opinion, every critique of mass politics conceals a deep distrust of popular participation. Mill, Tocqueville, Ortega y Gasset, and Walter Lippmann are liberals whose commitment to liberty pushes them toward democracy but whose distrust of participation inclines them to favor a government of minimal scope. Their fear of majorities can easily be compared to Proudhon’s indictment of universal suffrage as the counterrevolution or to Godwin’s warning (in *Political Justice*) that “the Voice of the People is not . . . the voice of Truth and God” and that “consent cannot turn wrong into right.”⁶

By the same token, liberal democrats have little sympathy for the civic ideal that treats human beings as inherently political. Citizenship is an artificial role that the natural man prudently adopts in order to safeguard his solitary humanity. That is to say, we are political in order to safeguard ourselves as men, but never men by virtue of being political (as Aristotle and the ancients would have had it).

It is little wonder, then, that liberal democracy is thin democracy. Individualists may find solace in Mill’s celebrated caution “that the

5. Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 1. An example of this distrust of participation is the question posed by B. R. Berelson, P. F. Lazarsfeld, and W. N. McPhee in their classical study, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954): “How could a mass democracy work if all the people were deeply involved in politics?” (p. 312). Or see the more recent portrait of democracy offered by Thomas R. Dye and L. Harmon Ziegler (*The Irony of Democracy* [North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1975]):

Democracy is government by the people, but the responsibility for the survival of democracy rests on the shoulders of elites. . . . if the survival of the American system depended upon an active, informed, and enlightened citizenry, then democracy in America would have disappeared long ago; for the masses of Americans are apathetic and ill-informed about politics and public policy, and they have a surprisingly weak commitment to democratic values. . . . but fortunately for these values and for American democracy, the American masses do not lead, they follow. (p. 18)

6. William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Philadelphia, 1796), vol. 2, book 8, chap. 6.

sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection."⁷ But caution provides no affirmation of public values, public thinking, or public action, and it makes the democratic forms of public life seem provisional and thus dispensable. If they are only tools of individualism, democratic forms may be supplanted by such competing instrumentalities as benevolent despotism or rational aristocracy—or, for that matter, by the anarchic state of nature whose laws and rights underlie each of liberal democracy's claims to legitimacy and to which social-contract theorists revert as a remedy for illegitimacy.

One can note revealing differences between anarchism as practiced in Europe and the anarchist disposition in America. In Europe, anarchism has most often been espoused by radicals and revolutionaries outside of the political system, by outcasts bent on overthrowing particular governments or the very idea of government. It has been an ideological sanctuary for rebels and aliens, for the driven as well as the desperate.

But in America anarchism has been a disposition of the system itself, a tendency that has in fact guided statesmen and citizens more compulsively than it has motivated dissidents and revolutionaries. It has been incorporated into popular political practice and has become an integral feature of the political heritage. Wherever privacy, freedom, and the absolute rights of the individual are championed, there the anarchist disposition is at work. Wherever free markets are regarded as promoting equality and statist regulation is decried as coercive and illegitimate, there the anarchist disposition can be felt. Libertarian conservatives who denounce big government and right-of-center liberals who denigrate the "democratic distemper" share the anarchist's antipathy to the claims of democratic community.

The political philosophy that issues from such quasi-anarchist ideals as liberty, independence, individual self-sufficiency, the free market, and privacy is encapsulated in the slogan "that government is best which governs least." The government which governs least is of course the government that does not govern at all; the only good state is the state that "withers away" (the liberal Marx also had an anarchist inclination). Given the painful necessity for *some* government, the doctrine of "least is best" finds expression in constitutional safeguards and barriers that limit both the power of rulers

7. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Dent, 1910), p. 73.

and the scope of rulership. Following Hobbes's principle that the greatest liberty is found "where the laws are silent," most liberal constitutions ultimately limit government to specifically delegated powers, reserving all other powers (in the language of the tenth amendment to the American Constitution) to the several states and the people. That the national state bears the burden of proving its right to exercise a power is a crucial indication of liberal democracy's roots in individualist and anarchist thinking.

Liberals of the anarchist disposition are forever trying to solve the classical liberal problem: how can we shape (in Rousseau's model formulation) "a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before"?⁸ But for these liberals, the crucial stipulation is that men "remain as free as before," because to them the preservation of their prior freedom is the sole warrant for political association in the first place. Rousseau himself was no anarchist (his romantic reputation notwithstanding), and he chose to resolve the tension by redefining natural freedom as civic and moral freedom and by using obedience to self as the key to solving the puzzle.⁹ Liberal democrats, by contrast, are wedded to natural or negative freedom; they can conceive of no solution other than to limit or eliminate all government. Because for them freedom and state power are mutually exclusive, the puzzle is insoluble.

This stance helps to explain why liberal democrats often seem so obtuse about power and conflict in the "natural market." Having stipulated that "nature" means "free" and that "community" means "coercion," they can hardly entertain the possibility that community may support certain kinds of freedom or that nature may nourish forms of coercion and conflict more insidious than those known to democratic politics. The modern liberal railing against big government while holding up the private sector as a model of equal competition and private liberty is doing no more than updating the wishful conceits of early social-contract theory.

Thus it is the anarchist disposition more than any other that leaves

8. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, book 1, chap. 6.

9. Thus Rousseau writes, "what man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty . . . ; what he gains is civil liberty . . . which is limited by the General Will" (*ibid.*, book 1, chap. 8). This formulation actually violates the terms of the problem, since men do not "remain as free as before" but exchange one kind of liberty for another.

liberal democracy so incomplete, so polarized, so thin as political theory and so vulnerable as political practice. Of course realism and minimalism, which we will discuss presently, seek to correct these tendencies. But these influences have not made liberalism very much more sophisticated about power in the private sphere, or more alert to the creative potential of democratic politics, or more sensitive to the social impulses of human nature, or more aware of the capacity of civil community for transformation, emancipation, and justice. The anarchist disposition has stood as a sentinel against public forms of tyranny, and for this we must be grateful. But it has also stood as a stubborn obstacle to the public forms of community and justice, and this recalcitrance must be the occasion of lasting regret.

THE REALIST DISPOSITION IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The disposition that inclines liberal democracy toward individualist ends and the ideal of liberty obviously has competitors. No one would accuse Americans of misunderstanding the importance and the uses of political power in the political arena. After all, it is the use of power in the pursuit of private interests that alone justifies government for the liberal. Realism, in the American context, has entailed a concern for power but also a preoccupation with law (legalism) and with sovereignty understood as will (positivism).

Realism is in its genesis little more than an extension of anarchist premises into the political realm: politics offers a joint guarantee of private interest and a public warrant for the private weal. Yet it introduces a set of attitudes that are quite foreign to the anarchist disposition. Politics for the realist becomes the art of power—to whatever ends it is exercised. And in the wake of power come fear, manipulation, enforcement, deterrence, incentive, sanction, and those other artifacts of the more coercive side of human relations.

To be sure, there is a traditional liberal argument that links anarchism to realism. In Hobbes's account, the natural world of free and equal individuals pursuing their natural interests is self-defeating: among competing individuals, none can be satisfied. One man's freedom is the next man's bondage; man's natural right to power, when exercised by some, can enslave others. Nor is succor to be found in pacts of mutual respect, in contracts promising self-restraint, or in covenants pledging obedience to the prudential rules

of enlightened self-interest (Hobbes's "Laws of Nature"). Without collective power and sovereign enforcement—without "the sword"—covenants are but words and guarantee no security at all. And so, ironically, man's love of natural liberty compels him to forsake it and to live by the law, not for its own sake but for its effect on others. What reason and good faith, what charity and altruism cannot achieve, fear and the passions on which fear plays can secure with ease.

Machiavelli is sometimes scorned for the perfidiousness of his morals, but he advanced a perfectly good protoliberal logic when he reasoned "it is better to be feared than loved . . . for love is held by a chain of obligation which, men being selfish, is broken whenever it serves their purpose; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment that never fails."¹⁰ Men may place themselves under government out of enlightened self-interest (so that others may be constrained), but they themselves obey it solely from fear (the dread of punishment).

What the realists discovered, with Machiavelli, is that fear is self-interest's secret social servant. It is the sole motive that can prompt hedonists to honor the needs and rights of others. Edmund Burke was later to claim that terror was the final redoubt of radical liberalism—the gallows at the end of the groves of Enlightenment philosophy—but it was Hobbes himself who first introduced the imagery of fear: "for the laws of nature, as justice, equity, modesty, mercy . . . of themselves, without the terror of some power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like."¹¹

In the course of this logical transition from liberty to obedience, a rather more unsettling psychological transformation takes place. The simple-minded impulsiveness of natural need is supplanted by a more complex, artificial calculation that seeks to control the world of necessity by understanding and then by exploiting its laws. The Baconian ideal of knowledge as power pervaded the liberal model of natural man and produced a new species of man and a new form of behavior. It brought forth man the artificer who could create the conditions for his material self's gratification; man the manipulator, relying on fear to preserve liberty; and man the social scientist, playing with the external world of social stimulus the better to govern

10. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 17 (Modern Library edition, 1950), p. 73.

11. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, book 2, chap. 17.

the internal world of human response. Hedonism is twisted into socially acceptable behavior by political coercion and legal sanctions. The state of nature yields to the sovereign sword; the sovereign sword is wielded as law and judicial sanction; and in the end the logic of liberty is replaced by the felicific calculus, which serves manipulated needs but ignores a freedom that is no longer thought to exist. The road from anarchism to realism, though smooth at every turning, nonetheless leads in this fashion from an extreme idea of abstract freedom to an extreme idea of abstract power.

Western liberal democracy today relies heavily on realist politics. Legislatures and courts alike deploy penal sanctions and juridical incentives aimed at controlling behavior by manipulating—but not altering or transforming—hedonistic self-interest. People are not made to reformulate private interests in public terms but are encouraged to reformulate public goods in terms of private advantage. A president who wishes to induce the public to conserve energy thus proposes a series of dog-biscuit laws, reward-and-punishment sanctions, and carrot-and-stick incentives. These do nothing to create a sense of genuine public interest or to engender affirmative community action in the name of common goals. Quite the contrary, they reaffirm the primacy of privatism by making justice a matter of personal profit. Barry Commoner has elaborated on this inversion of values with devastating insight in *The Politics of Energy*.¹²

Yet although prudence promotes power as a defender of private liberty, the politics and psychology of power place it at an ever greater remove from the liberty whose preservation is its justification. Thus, Hobbes's conception of power as relational, as a prudential "present means to some future ends," becomes in a very short time the much grimmer conception of power as substantive, as an end in itself that leads men to thirst in a vain quest "for power after power . . . that ceaseth only in death." In the same manner, the tolerance with which America's founders greeted power as a tool of national government was soon supplanted by a deep anxiety about power as an essence closely tied to man's basest instincts. "Power," warned John Adams, "naturally grows . . . because human passions are insatiable."¹³ Such anxieties were to be exacerbated by the

12. See also Barry Commoner, *The Poverty of Power: Energy and the Economic Crisis* (New York: Bantam, 1976).

13. John Adams, cited in Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (1948; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 3.

work of Darwin and Freud and by twentieth-century ideologies of nationalism and "totalitarianism," which, although they were spurned by liberal democrats, nonetheless seemed proof of the dangers of realism as a liberal democratic disposition. So for Bertrand Russell, "the laws of social dynamics are only capable of being stated in terms of power in its various forms."¹⁴ And so for modern social scientists, the study of politics often becomes synonymous with the study of power.

The liberal democrat as realist does not, of course, wish to celebrate power; he means rather to use it in the service of individual purposes and rights, a role that establishes and legitimates it. The polecats and foxes who in brute nature plague one another with their competing lusts must be caged by laws, prodded by penalties, deterred by threats, kept ruly by rules, and made pliable with rewards. Market exchange among them must be regulated, agreements and contracts interpreted and enforced, liberties adjusted and balanced, and privacy delimited and secured. Individuals remain free, to a certain degree; but where their freedom ends, a kind of terror begins. For in the vision of the liberal democratic realist, it is difficult to conceive of any halfway house between absolute authority and absolute freedom, between complete coercion and complete license, between the terrors of government by fear and the anarchy of no government at all.

As a consequence, there is something profoundly schizophrenic about liberal democracy. Failing to acknowledge any middle ground, it often trades in contrasts, in polarities, in radical dichotomies and rigid dualisms: terror or anarchy, force or freedom, fear or love. Torn from within and divided against itself, liberal democracy sets its means against its ends. Its tools of liberation become instruments of subjugation, while its individualist objectives become the agents of social disorder and anomie.

From its beginnings in America, the chief dilemma of liberal democracy has been this war between liberty and power. Because each is defined by the absence of the other, they cannot be disentangled; because each jeopardizes the other, they cannot be made to coexist. How then to discover a form of power that will serve liberty, when power itself is liberty's chief nemesis? America has survived, it has thrived, because power has saved it from the anarchy that lurks in

14. Bertrand Russell, *On Power: A New Social Analysis* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 13.