

CHAPTER THIRTY

On Political Will

Peter Hallward

Revised and adapted from the article 'From Prescription to Volition', in *Politics and Culture* (2014); published in Pendakis, Andrew, Jeff Diamanti, Nicholas Brown, Josh Robinson, and Imre Szeman, eds. *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Ch. 30.

The best way to address questions about emancipatory political practice, I think, is to pose them in terms of political will. Right away, this foregrounds the basic difference between the involuntary and the voluntary dimensions of social life, and thus helps reduce or transform the one in favor of the other. In every situation where it applies, it helps clarify a version of what I take to be the most important question of political practice: how can a dominated and coerced group or class of people free themselves from this coercion and acquire the power they need to determine their own course of action, consciously, deliberately, or “willingly,” in the face of the specific obstacles and resistance this course will confront?

I

The guiding intuition of this project is that the homely and clichéd phrase, “the will of the people,” remains the best way of approaching the question of democratic politics, and of making distinctions between genuine and deceptive forms of democracy. In direct opposition to oligarchy, genuine democracy means the rule of the people—the people as distinct from a privileged few or ruling elite, the people understood as the many or as the great majority of the population. Democracy applies in situations where the will of the people (however this is formulated or expressed) can overpower the will or wills of those few who might seek to exploit, oppress, or deceive them.

These two vague terms, people and will, are both notoriously difficult to pin down. Despite their revolutionary history and implications, both have been yoked to reactionary and in some cases ultrareactionary political projects. Taken on their own, both terms are now widely considered to be almost indefensible as political categories; the notion of will, in particular, has been the object of varied but relentless philosophical assault for much of the past century, going back at least to Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche, and recurring in the work of thinkers as varied as Althusser, Derrida, Agamben, Deleuze, and many others. I’d like to suggest, however, that the combination of these two terms, in the formulation of a will of the people, serves to frame if not answer most of the general questions that a theory of emancipatory politics needs to address.

Compared to other, more conventional ways of formulating the question of democracy (for instance in terms of state institutions, electoral mechanisms, market structures, “civil society,” “liberal values,” and so on), our cliché has a couple of advantages.

First of all, nobody quite knows what it means. Of all the basic concepts at issue in modern political theory and philosophy, the notion of a will of the people is perhaps

the most indeterminate. Everyone is familiar with the words, and their combination, but as things stand today their meaning is quite literally up for grabs, and in the last couple of years in particular, it has been invoked in all kinds of ways, and in all kinds of situations.

On the one hand, diplomatic reference to “the will of the people” has long been one of the most formulaic turns of phrase in the modern political lexicon. In mainstream discussion of current affairs this usually amounts to nothing more than a token nod to “formal democratic” mechanisms for ensuring some sort of minimal choice in the selection of political representatives. So long as such selection is controlled in ways that restrict any challenge to the established order of things, apparent respect for the will of the people is an integral aspect of the status quo, and has been so for a long time. Even so conservative a constitution as the one described by the French writer Benjamin Constant in 1815 “recognizes the principle of the sovereignty of the people, that is, the supremacy of the general will over every particular will,”¹ and today there is perhaps no modern political principle more widely shared than the one that condemns as illegitimate any attempt to govern people against their will. It’s in this sense that even so aristocratic an oligarch as Winston Churchill might defer to a representation of the people’s will,² and it’s in this sense that presidents of the United States like to remind the world they dominate that they “support the democratic aspirations of all people,” including a few places “where the will of the people [has] proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator.”³ Even the president whom Cornel West memorably derided as “a black mascot of Wall Street oligarchs and a black puppet of corporate plutocrats”⁴ does not hesitate to define “self-determination” as “the chance to make of your life what you will.”⁵

On the other hand, the concentration and assertion of the people’s will has been central to the whole modern trajectory of revolutionary practice. From the Jacobin constitution of 1793 France through the ANC’s Freedom Charter of 1955 to the new Bolivian constitution of 2009 and the Arab revolutions of 2011, a long and versatile emancipatory tradition has affirmed the will of the people as the basis of political action and legitimacy. The ANC’s Charter, for instance, before it denounces apartheid, racism, and social inequality, opens with the assertion that “no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people,” and insists as its first demand: “The People shall govern!” National liberation movements from Algeria to Zimbabwe took shape around a similar “will to independence.”⁶ The 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, likewise, crystallized around a literal assertion of the people’s will, expressed in the innumerable variations of the slogan that has already transformed the Middle East: “the people want to topple the regime.”⁷ Reference to emancipatory political will is also essential to the political theory and practice of a wide range of revolutionary thinkers, from Robespierre and Saint-Just through Lenin and Gramsci to Mao and Fanon. Insofar as what is at stake is the empowerment of people to determine their own destiny and their own political program, Tony Benn is right to insist that democracy remains the most revolutionary program of all, “the most revolutionary thing in the world.”⁸

This uncertainty in the status of our phrase gives it a unique strategic purchase. Unlike concepts that are more directly associated with orthodox Marxist or Communist traditions, reference to the will of the people evokes a revolutionary practice that also retains a thoroughly “mainstream” significance.

A second and more important advantage stems from the peculiar and problematic conjunction of the two terms in question: “people” and “will.” If we leave the partial exception of ancient Athens to one side, the connection of these two notions was scarcely thinkable before the world was “turned upside down” by the Levellers, Diggers, and other egalitarian mobilizations during the English revolution of the 1640s,

and among the privileged classes it has remained the primary source of political anxiety ever since. Although important initial contributions were made by early modern thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes, I think that it's only with Rousseau that the notion of a collective or "general" will began to receive adequate theoretical definition. It is only with Rousseau's Jacobin admirers, furthermore, during the French and Haitian revolutions, that such a notion came to orient political practice, and it is only after Marx that such practice gained the sort of historical determination required to give it far-reaching strategic purchase on a situation. If we can clarify what is meant by these elusive terms "people" and "will," and what their combination requires and implies, then we may also clarify what is required to move from merely formal to actual democracy.

My hypothesis is that their conjunction is enough all by itself to provide a normative basis for democratic practice, and thus for the political project of changing a world ruled by and for the few into a world ruled by and for the many. Precisely on account of their generic and transhistorical quality, these terms offer a useful basis for getting a grip on a wide range of situations. Compared with emancipatory perspectives that filter the category of the people through preexisting categories of identity, occupation, or history, or with conceptions of volition filtered through (or displaced by) notions of instinct, intellect, appetite, affect, or communication, the terms will and people are as wide-ranging and versatile as the notions of empowerment and liberation themselves.

It's equally important to stress, however, that they also prescribe a certain specificity. The category of "the people," as is well known, is always bound up with the tension between abstract inclusion (the people simply as everyone, or as the whole population, the "realm" or nation as a more or less harmonious totality) and concrete exclusion (whereby the category of the people excludes those "enemies" who exploit, oppress, or dominate them); it is only through its articulation with concrete political practice that its orientation is decided, in one direction or the other. The practice of political will likewise mediates the norm of free self-determination and the necessity to engage with the constraints that inhibit popular participation in such determination, the obstacles or tendencies that might divide, isolate, or deceive those who seek to formulate and impose their will.

Will and people: rejecting the merely formal, that is, oligarchic conceptions of democracy that disguise the established balance of class power, a genuinely or literally democratic politics can be described as the effort to think and practice one term through the other. On the one hand, a will of the *people* must of course involve association and collective action, and will depend on a capacity to invent and preserve forms of inclusive assembly (e.g., through demonstrations, meetings, unions, parties, networks, websites, and so on). If an action is prescribed by popular *will*, on the other hand, then what's at stake is a free or voluntary course of action, decided on the basis of informed and reasoned deliberation. Since there's no agreement on the meaning of the term will (or even on its very existence), its usage calls for some further clarification.

By "will" I mean, first of all, the actual exercise of willing a particular purpose or end. For precisely this reason I will prefer the generic term *actor* over the term "subject," since it avoids or recasts some of the well-known ambiguities of latter (as both agent and substrate, active and passive, free and "subjected," and so on) in favor of a direct derivation from the verb *to act*, a verb whose own ambiguity is productive and illuminating. To will is a practical rather than theoretical matter, and as a matter of practice it involves direct participation, action, and effort on the part of its subject or actor, undertaken as deliberate and purposeful (rather than conceived as an "authentic" expression of an essence or identity). There is an essential difference between active

involvement in an act of willing and its representation, measurement, or interpretation by external observers.

There is likewise an essential difference between voluntary and involuntary kinds of action. Unlike an involuntary action or movement, for instance a movement determined by a reflex or instinct, or one that has become routine by force of repetition or habit, and unlike action that is coerced or compelled, a voluntary or willed action is more or less freely chosen, intended, and sustained, on the basis of more or less well-informed rational deliberation. (As opposed to a metaphysical understanding of the will as endowed with a kind of absolute or quasi-divine freedom, the freedom at issue is indeed always a matter of “more or less,” since freedom is also to be understood here as a practice, as a process of *freeing* or emancipating—a practice through which actors liberate themselves, more or less, from the various constraints they confront, and thereby acquire a degree of autonomy).

The kinds of purpose at issue in an act of will are also more or less distinct from those involved with mere impulses of whim or wish. Whereas much of the scholarly work done on the problem of free will might better be described as reflection on “free whim,” the notion of political will that interests me, and that has its roots in Rousseau and in Machiavelli, instead associates will and “virtue” with power and the capacity to act. Unlike mere whim or wish, or the simple expression of an opinion or preference, to will a purpose is itself to embark on the course of action that may realize it, in spite of the obstacles and vagaries of fortune it must confront. No doubt the difference here is more a matter of dialectical transition than of categorical distinction: a certain quantity of wish, so to speak, may well cross the qualitative threshold that separates it from will. But once this threshold is crossed, in ways that will vary with the situation and the obstacles involved, then the old truisms remain true: where there’s a will there’s a way, so long as those who will the end will the means.

Examples of the sort of egalitarian political will I have in mind are easy to list: along with the Bolivarian projects of Latin America and the recent mobilizations in north Africa (along with, on what remains for the time being a more modest scale, the anti-neoliberal demonstrations across Europe and much of the world), they could include the political determination of South Africa’s United Democratic Front, Haiti’s Lavalas, and Palestine’s Intifada to confront forms of inequality and injustice based on race, culture, privilege, and class. For me the most instructive examples remain the great revolutions that took place in France and Haiti, and then in Russia, China, and Cuba, along with the anticolonial liberation movements that drew much of their inspiration from these revolutions.

In each case, a threshold is crossed when the actors in these sequences apply a version of Danton’s principle, later cited by Engels, Lenin, and many others: “*de l’audace, de l’audace, encore de l’audace!*”⁹ In each case, a decisive element in the struggle is the respective actors’ capacity and willingness to act—the capacity of those who control the economic levers of power and the repressive machinery of the state, on the one hand, versus the people’s collective capacity to act deliberately and forcefully in pursuit of common goals on the other hand. When a struggle reaches a decisive point, those waging it must decide between fright and fight. Anyone involved in a popular struggle knows that if we are to continue to fight, and to fight to win, then we need to maintain solidarity and unity, to resist fragmentation and dispersal, to invent forms of discipline and organization, and to encourage means of leadership that are both responsive and decisive. A popular mobilization prevails when its sense of purpose is strong and its principles are clear, and when it is prepared to take the steps needed to apply them. As Frederick Douglass realized early in a long cycle of antiimperialist struggle, “power concedes nothing without a demand”¹⁰—but by the same token, as the

Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giáp argued later in that same cycle, when a popular demand is clear, conscious, and well organized, when it is made with “unshakeable conviction,” then it commands “invincible strength” and can “overcome all difficulties and hardships to defeat an enemy who at first was several times stronger.”¹¹ Along the way, uncounted numbers of people struggling against all sorts of powerful enemies have repeated the slogan that prevails whenever it is put into practice with the determination it requires: “the people, united, will never be defeated!” Popular determination, in the past, has put an end to slavery, colonialism, child labor, and apartheid; only similar determination can, in the future, put an end to capitalist exploitation, imperialist oppression, nuclear proliferation, and environmental catastrophe.

II

I’m currently trying to tackle this cluster of ideas and historical sequences from two angles: one broadly synthetic and the other more genealogical. The synthetic project is intended to be a somewhat systematic study of the notion and practice of the will of the people as such, with sections devoted to accounts of the people on the one hand and of the will on the other, along with the most fruitful attempts to think them together, for instance via the effort made by Marx and Blanqui, followed by Luxemburg, Lenin, and their contemporaries, to think the notion of a resolute, determined, and autonomous proletariat, as the “leading edge” of a mobilization in pursuit of the political and economic emancipation of the people as a whole. This project also includes some discussion of several of the essential practices that figure as conditions for the organized exercise of such a political will: practices of association, combination, and assembly (for instance in the Jacobin clubs, or municipal sections of the French Revolution, in trade unions, workers’ councils, and political parties, in the *ti legliz* and base ecclesial communities of liberation theology, and so on); practices of education, information, deliberation, and debate, that allow for the formulation and assertion of collective priorities, goals, and decisions; practices that enable these decisions to be imposed and these goals to be realized, in the face of whatever opposition they might encounter from more privileged members of the situation; practices that encourage the cultivation of a collective spirit, discipline, and courage (practices that Rousseau, followed by, e.g., Mao and Che, described in terms of political “virtue”), to counter the inevitable tendencies that encourage the pursuit of private, factional, or divisive interests; practices that enable a popular political will to persevere as united (but not uniform), determined (but not dogmatic), self-critical (but not cynical), steadfast (but not rigid), and so on.

Several broad suppositions underlie this approach to emancipatory politics. One is that the conscious and deliberate intentions of the actors are an important (though certainly not the exclusive) factor in the determination of political struggle. This factor has been systematically downplayed if not dismissed by many of the most innovative figures in continental philosophy, ever since the turn against Sartre and existentialism in the early 1960s—and in many ways, ever since the turn away from the voluntarist conceptions of moral and political philosophy defended, in various ways, by Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, but then rejected by figures as diverse as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Stalin, and his epigones, the later Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, and so on. Any analysis of imperial and neocolonial policies, for instance, or of neoliberal policies, or of the policies that in recent years have targeted the labor movement, immigrant workers, antiimperialist “insurgents,” and so on, that doesn’t/don’t pay attention to the perfectly explicit, perfectly deliberate intentions of the actors involved, has no chance of grasping the class and power dynamics involved—and the same goes, of course, for the emancipatory movements resisting these policies.

In the absence of any “neutral” means of deciding the issue, the sort of voluntarism I’m defending here implies a readiness to treat both oppressive and emancipatory processes less as reflections of “objective tendencies” or “systemic laws” than as more or less deliberate strategies conceived by conscious and specific actors, albeit in circumstances that are forced upon rather than chosen by them. Against the theoretical reflexes that have long dominated the human sciences in general and contemporary European philosophy in particular, this approach involves recognition that no adequate account of political action can proceed without considering its “psychological” or psychopolitical dimension, and without addressing the hopes and motivations of the actors themselves. It involves a willingness to listen to the reasons actors give for acting the way they do, before jumping to the conclusion that these reasons simply mask “deeper” (unconscious, involuntary, ideological, and so on) forms of determination. It accepts that some kinds of situation are only intelligible from the perspective of those who are engaged in the process of its transformation, and that people should be treated as the “authors and actors of their own drama,” rather than as puppets subjected to the play of forces they cannot understand.¹²

A second and equally self-evident supposition is that the actors who seek to exploit and dominate target groups or populations usually go to a good deal of trouble to disguise their intentions, and to control the way they are represented in what passes for the public means of information and education. The ideal form of domination, of course, is one that can be represented, and perhaps even lived, as “voluntarily” accepted by those it targets, and thus not as a form of domination at all. The genius of capitalism, as the coercive “command of unpaid labor,”¹³ is that despite its violent origins and premises its coercion eventually comes to take on an apparently free or voluntary form, as mediated by the labor market, in which buyers and sellers appear to meet on an “equal” footing. The genius of “humanitarian” forms of imperial intervention—for instance as recently perfected by the “donor” countries who have long controlled Haiti’s economy and government—likewise focuses on the apparent dependence and presumed gratitude of its beneficiaries, their need to be “protected” from home-grown political projects that might threaten the status quo.

A third supposition turns on the relationship between a will and its consequences, and qualifies the primacy of willed intention. Even so austere a political voluntarist as Saint-Just understood, of course, that “the force of circumstance [*la force des choses*] may lead us to results that we never thought of” (February 26, 1793). To insist on the importance of deliberate intention and conscious purpose is not to pretend that intentions alone might determine what happens over a course of action. An intention is not the virtual blueprint for a series of deeds that simply brings it to fruition in actuality. To will an end or outcome is not to will a fully formed solution in advance of engaging with the problem; it is rather the readiness to follow through on a decision and the principles that orient it, the willingness to do what is required to overcome the obstacles, both predictable and unforeseen, that may emerge over the course of its imposition. If to will the end is also to will the means, then participation in a political will is participation in the effort, which is invariably specific to a particular situation of struggle, to align means and ends in the way that appears to promise maximum conformity of the former to the latter. A will cannot dictate its consequences in advance, but the people who affirm it can be more or less capable of following the partially contingent sequence of its consequences, and of doing what is necessary to see them through, without falling prey to dogmatic rigidity on the one hand or opportunistic compromises on the other.

A further presumption concerns the nature of the actor or subject of political will. I take the capacity to will to be a universal and thoroughly ordinary human ability,

like the capacity to speak or think, an ability whose most fundamental conditions of possibility stem from the way that we evolved as a species. Among other things, this evolution dictates that the actor who speaks, thinks, or wills is an individual (rather than a group) while at the same time ensuring that willing individuals are always more or less “grouped,” in keeping with the commonplace idea that human individuals are always constitutively and irreducibly social. There is then a kind of continuum, one that crosses multiple thresholds of scale and capacity, between individual and collective acts of will. “The individual is the element of humanity,” as Blanqui argues, “like the stitch in a piece of knitting”—without willing and politically educated individuals nothing is possible, but if the political fabric they form is too loose or shapeless then when it comes to social or economic struggles such isolated individuals are reduced to impotence.¹⁴ Only individuals can will, but as a matter of course only organized groups of individual have the capacity to engage in a political will, and thus challenge the terms of their employment, confront the class of people who exploit them, or struggle with those who dominate them.

Running through all these assumptions is the correlation of will and capacity, the capacities to deliberate with others, to formulate an end, follow its consequences, and so on. The second of the two projects I’m currently engaged in aims to unpack these assumptions and to explore the link between will and capacity. There are lots of ways you could try to do this, but for the time being I’ve decided that the most economical way is to focus on what I take to be the three most important figures to have contributed to the modern practice of emancipatory politics—Rousseau, Blanqui, and Marx.

III

By framing the theoretical roots of political will in terms of this trio, I mean to emphasize the fact that no single philosopher or political thinker provides an adequate account of its practice, or deserves to be taken as a sufficient guide on their own. Rousseau, Blanqui, and Marx differ in many ways, of course, and sometimes spectacularly so. Nevertheless, I hope to show that they can be productively read as contributions to a common project, and that taken together they provide the most **concise** way of laying the foundations for a general account of political will in this activist and emancipatory sense. Of course many other thinkers should be added to create a more complete list (for instance Machiavelli, Kant, Robespierre, Marat, Fichte, Babeuf, and so on), but I’ve chosen these particular three, beyond their canonical status and their direct influence on other figures, because together they seem to offer, with a minimum of direct overlap, the most forceful and suggestive way of framing the issue.

On both historical and conceptual grounds, Rousseau clearly figures as the first, most fundamental figure of this modern tradition, insofar as he posits as a primary and irreducible point of departure that “the principle of every action is in the will of a free being,” such that “it is not the word freedom which means nothing; it is the word necessity.”¹⁵ A person’s freedom, Rousseau concludes, “doesn’t consist in doing merely what he wills or wants, but rather in never doing what he does not want to do.”¹⁶ It is the constitutive alignment of willing and doing, which has to be worked out through practice and experiment, that establishes the ground for a collective and egalitarian notion of freedom. Rousseau then sketches a normative account of political community and social justice on the basis of this principle, a sketch that Robespierre and Marat, along with a host of other Jacobins and *sans-culottes*, would soon strive to put into revolutionary practice.¹⁷ Against the many variations of the argument that downplay the significance of the French revolution, and that try either to limit their implications or confine them to an outdated historical moment, I side with those who affirm it as the inauguration of a revolutionary period that remains open to this day, and in particular as

the initiation of what might be called a “Jacobin-Bolshevik” project whose significance, however battered and maligned over recent decades, is far from exhausted.

If Robespierre emerged as the dominant political figure of the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution it’s because he understood most clearly why, to accomplish its goals, “we need a single will, ONE will [*une volonté UNE*],” the will of the people in general—and since the main resistance to such a general will “comes from the bourgeois” so then Robespierre recognized that “*to defeat the bourgeois we must rally the people.*”¹⁸ After Robespierre, Saint-Just summarized the whole Jacobin political project when he rejected “purely speculative” or “intellectual” conceptions of justice, as if “laws were the expression of taste rather than of the general will.” The only legitimate basis for autonomous self-determination, from this perspective, is instead “the material will of the people, its simultaneous will; its goal is to consecrate the active and not the passive interest of the greatest number of people.”¹⁹ In the wake of Thermidorian reaction, Babeuf quickly realized that the “first and crucial step” toward a more equal distribution of resources and opportunities was “the achievement of a truly effective democracy through which the people’s will could be expressed.”²⁰

After Babeuf and Buonarrati, Blanqui again adopts the ends and means of this neo-Jacobin project, and his lifelong effort “to continue the revolution” is first and foremost a confrontation with the specific obstacles that now prevent conversion of *la volonté du peuple* into a sovereign political reality. Considered as a revolutionary activist, Marx shares rather more with Blanqui than most recent critics acknowledge. Although Marx is more concerned with the socioeconomic dimensions of this conversion, of course, if we read him as a political theorist then Lucio Colletti isn’t far off the mark when he suggests that Marx adds little or “nothing to Rousseau, except for the analysis (which is of course rather important) of the ‘economic basis’ for the withering away of the state.”²¹

We might say that Rousseau imagines an autonomous community governed by a general will; Blanqui considers the steps that need to be taken in order to actualize it; and Marx considers the historical and economic tendencies that may enable or discourage the taking of these steps. In terms of what they contribute to a general theory of revolutionary emancipation, then, these three contributions are best understood in a way that inverts their chronological order: it is Marx who reconstructs the roots and causes of a popular revolution, Blanqui who considers what is needed to trigger and sustain one, and Rousseau who ponders its consequences and continuation.

Or else, to risk a still more abstract formulation: Rousseau considers aspects of our capacity to act, the constitution of a collective actor, and the determination of a common purpose (the who and the why of action); Marx considers the conditions and tendencies that enable or discourage emancipatory political action (its where and when); and Blanqui considers the taking of action itself (what it involves and how it might prevail).

Although much recent work on Rousseau remains preoccupied by his allegedly authoritarian inclinations (and the consequent problems this poses for trying to read him as compatible with approaches he heartily detests: parliamentary democracy and free-market liberalism), I hope that few readers will dispute his foundational place in this wider project. Blanqui too, although marginalized for more than a century, as much by a certain Marxist tradition as by more “moderate” forms of republicanism, is a relatively obvious choice. Although certainly not as thorough, original, or influential a thinker as Rousseau or Marx, and despite the clear limits and ambiguity of some of his positions, Blanqui deserves to be rescued from neglect because he poses with unrivalled force the essential question of revolutionary politics—the question of taking and retaining the

political power that alone can change a society structured in dominance and oppression. Although they may not have known it (or been willing to admit it), the next generation of revolutionary activists, the generation of Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, and Gramsci (to say nothing of Mao, Che or Giáp), followed Blanqui almost as much as they did Marx.²²

The association of Marx with any kind of voluntarism may be more controversial. As his every reader knows, Marx is certainly critical of the sort of “merely” political will he associates, in different places, with Robespierre, Hegel, or Bauer, and with some of Blanqui’s own supporters in exile. There are also aspects of Marx’s own work that in my opinion go too far in the opposite, antivoluntarist, direction, and that help to justify some of the recurring attempts to dismiss him as guilty of a reductive sociohistorical determinism. One-sided emphasis on the ways that “social being determines consciousness,” if not corrected by consideration of political practice and organization, sometimes encourages Marx to downplay questions of proletarian agency and purpose in favor of an analysis of “*what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do.”²³ Marx rarely worries that proletarian actors might think and act in ways that could conflict with the underlying tendencies shaping their proletarian being and “forcing” them into revolutionary conflict with those who exploit them.²⁴ A similar confidence will enable him to assume, with remarkable brevity and nonchalance, that “capitalist production begets its own negation with the inexorability of a natural process.”²⁵ There is no denying the problematic consequences of this side of his legacy.

Nevertheless, along with others who have argued that Marx is more concerned with political possibility than with historical necessity, I hope to show that his most fundamental concerns can be traced back to precisely that central relation of freedom and necessity which Hegel and Kant inherited from Rousseau. The young Marx insists on the distinctive way that, unlike other animals, “man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness,”²⁶ and in a crucial chapter of *Capital* the older Marx insists on comparable terms on man’s “sovereign power” and capacity to “change his own nature,” his ability consciously and deliberately to determine his own ends, and to sustain the disciplined, “purposeful will” required to realize them.²⁷ The young Marx likewise insists on “the self-determination of the people,”²⁸ and emphasizes the unique virtues of democracy as the political form of a fully “human existence,” in which “the law exists for the sake of man” rather than vice versa,²⁹ and is formulated as “the conscious expression of the will of the people, and therefore originates with it and is created by it”³⁰; the older Marx will embrace the Paris Commune of 1871 (inspired and organized in large part by Blanqui’s supporters) as an exemplary instance of precisely this sort of democracy in action. Understood from this perspective, political decisions are in no sense limited to passively registering changes that occur at the level of the material “base” of social life. Among other things, the Commune illustrates our capacity to invent a political lever that can wedge its way “underneath” this very base, “a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule.”³¹ The base itself, moreover, is both shaped by the irreducibly political inflection of class relations, and sustained by the irreducibly “human” and thus purposeful and inventive character of the forces of production. At least during periods of revolutionary opportunity, as in 1871, or 1848–1850, what is primary is not some sort of inexorable historical determinism so much as the taking of vigorous and lucid action, carried out by an independent, resolute, and fully conscious political actor, on the model of another (temporarily) fruitful collaboration between supporters of both Marx and Blanqui: the Communist League.³²

Early and late, Marx understands communism as “the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man,” and “the true resolution of the conflict [. . .] between freedom and necessity.”³³ What is at stake in the revolutionary transition from capitalism to communism is the “development of all human powers as such,”³⁴ together with “the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which, born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed men as powers completely alien to them.”³⁵ Once we understand the way we shape our social relations, Engels adds, “it depends only upon ourselves to subject them more and more to our own will, and, by means of them, to reach our own ends [. . .]. Man’s own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by Nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action,” and confirms “the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.”³⁶

With far more depth and precision than Rousseau or Blanqui, Marx also exposes how capitalist forms of coercion take on an apparently “voluntary” form, and shows, once it has completed the brutal work of its “originary accumulation,” how capital’s “command of unpaid labor” binds it not with the flagrant chains of slavery but with the “invisible threads” and “silent compulsion” of dependence and precarity.³⁷ Marx helps us to understand how modern forms of coercion move beyond mere strategies of overt exclusion and direct domination, to encompass more subtle manipulations of our will itself. In doing so he frames what remains the central problem for a contemporary account of political will: how might we challenge forms of servitude and oppression that are represented, in the prevailing neoliberal order of things, as the very form of freedom? If the most salient historical developments of the last 30 or so years have involved, in almost every part of the world, the massive transfer of power and resources from the relatively poor to the relatively rich, perhaps the most far-reaching aspect of these developments is the way their advocates have managed to induce large numbers of people to accept and even to embrace them as necessary and unavoidable. Until we renew our capacity for political will, we will have no convincing answer to the dreary refrain: “there is no alternative.”

IV

Considered in terms of the contribution they make to an understanding of the practice of political will, if read in isolation each of these three thinkers appears one-sided and incomplete. Rousseau affirms the freedom and power of a popular or general will, but (anticipating Kant) relies too much on the abstract determination of “pure” will as such, and downplays the historical and economic context in which it takes shape and operates. Marx emphasizes “developmental” factors (following Hegel), to the occasional detriment of political action and intention. Rousseau tends to presume too much of pure volition and intention, and Marx can rely too much on the course of historical development. Blanqui stakes everything on the immediate pursuit of justice and equality, but without doing enough to consider either its relationship to the people and popular organization on the one hand or its historico-material determinants on the other. What is needed today is less the renewal of Marxism per se, and still less of Blanquism or Rousseauism (or of Leninism, Maoism, or any other proper-name-ism), so much as the construction of a more robust and assertive political *voluntarism* in general, that is, an account of the emancipation from necessity that is fully prepared to foreground its partial but decisive dependence on a whole series of political–psychological factors, including purpose, intention, consciousness, deliberation, and volition. If it is to prevail and endure, the movement from necessity to freedom must itself be freely undertaken.

Taken in isolation, Rousseau, Blanqui, and Marx all have clear limitations, but taken together, I think it’s not much of an exaggeration to say that they anticipate most

of the concepts and concerns of a whole series of subsequent voluntarist political thinkers, including for instance Lenin, Trotsky, Serge, Gramsci, Mao, Sartre, Che, Fanon, Giáp, Dussel, Bensaïd, Badiou, and so on. For all the obvious differences in context and priority, there is a striking degree of internal consistency along this voluntarist line of political thought (so long as we don't try to trace it back to a single foundational thinker). There are few significant political concepts developed by Lenin or Mao, for instance, that weren't anticipated by either Marx, Rousseau, or Blanqui, and both of them are better understood through the lens of this triple and thoroughly integrated influence than simply as orthodox Marxists. Although it would be a sterile and reductive exercise to try to read them as mere variations in a paradigm, of course, I think it would be easy to show how Fanon and Che renew certain motifs in Rousseau, or Bensaïd and Badiou some motifs in Blanqui, and so on, in each case conditioned by particularities of context and priority. Overall, the underlying continuity is more significant, with these and other comparable figures, than their (otherwise noteworthy) innovations and peculiarities.

Gramsci is perhaps the most suggestive and fertile instance of this triple legacy, if we can call it that. Gramsci seeks, in terms that seem to draw as much on Rousseau and Blanqui as on Marx or Lenin, “to put the ‘will,’ which in the last analysis equals practical or political activity, at the base of philosophy.”³⁸ Reality itself is best understood as “a product of the application of human will to the society of things,” so “if one excludes all voluntarist elements [. . .] one mutilates reality itself. Only the man who wills something strongly can identify the elements which are necessary to the realisation of his will.”³⁹ In a more specifically Marxist sense, Gramsci explains, “will means consciousness of ends, which in turn implies having an exact notion of one's own power, and the means to express it in action.” Participation in such a will implies a capacity to determine and pursue our “specific ends, without deviations or hesitations. It means cutting a straight and direct path through to the ultimate end, without detours into the green meadows of happy brotherhood”⁴⁰ and the false community of the “realm.”

No less than Rousseau, Gramsci knows that “before it can be physical, movement must always be intellectual” and that “every action is the result of various wills, with a varying degree of intensity and awareness and of homogeneity with the entire complex of the collective will.”⁴¹ As they combine through forms of assembly and association to “forge a social, collective will,” Gramsci anticipates that people will eventually gain the ability to “control economic facts with their will, until this collective will becomes the driving force of the economy, the force which shapes reality itself, so that objective reality becomes a living, breathing force, like a current of molten lava, which can be channelled wherever and however the will directs.”⁴²

No less than Blanqui, Gramsci puts his “faith [in] man, and man's will and his capacity for action,”⁴³ and defines man as “concrete will, that is, the effective application of the abstract will or vital impulse to the concrete means which realise such a will.”⁴⁴ Gramsci understands partisan political struggle as “a conscious struggle for a precise, determinate end: it is a lucid act of the will, a discipline already forged within the mind and the will,” one that allows “workers in the Party [to] become an industrial vanguard within the workers' State, just as they are a revolutionary vanguard in the period of struggle for the introduction of proletarian power.”⁴⁵

No less than Marx, finally, Gramsci knows that if “society does not pose itself problems for whose solution the material preconditions do not already exist,” acceptance of this proposition “immediately raises the problem of the formation of a collective will”:

In order to analyse critically what this proposition means, it is necessary to study precisely how permanent collective wills are formed, and how such wills set themselves concrete short-term and long-term ends—that is, a line of collective action. It is a question of more or less long processes of development, and rarely of sudden, “synthetic” explosions. [. . .] It requires an extremely minute, molecular process of exhaustive analysis in every detail, the documentation for which is made up of an endless quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral debates repeated countless times, and which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour which gives birth to a collective will with a certain degree of homogeneity—with the degree necessary and sufficient to achieve an action which is coordinated and simultaneous in the time and the geographical space in which the historical event takes place.⁴⁶

There is no better way to begin the renewal of such study and analysis, I think, than by recalling its point of departure in the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This will be my priority for the coming months, to be followed in quick succession by brief studies of Blanqui and Marx. After this, I hope, I should be in a better position to work out a more synthetic account of political will in general, and to head off some of the objections that might be leveled at a politics of prescription.

Notes

-
- ¹ Benjamin Constant, *Principes de politique*, in his *Écrits politiques* (Paris: Gallimard ‘Folio’, 1997), 310
- ² Martin Gilbert, *The Will of the People: Churchill and Parliamentary Democracy* (2006).
- ³ Barak Obama, “State of the Union Address,” January 25, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>, accessed 2 February 2014
- ⁴ Chris Hedges, ‘The Obama Deception: Why Cornel West Went Ballistic’, *Truthdig* 16 May 2011, http://www.truthdig.com/report/print/the_obama_deception_why_cornel_west_went_ballistic_20110516, accessed 2 February 2014.
- ⁵ Obama, speech of May 19, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/19/barack-obama-speech-middle-east>, accessed 2 February 2014
- ⁶ Cf. Peter Hallward, “Fanon and Political Will,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 7:1 (2011): 104-127, <http://www.cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/244/329>.
- ⁷ Cf. John Rees and Joseph Daher, *The People Demand: A Short History of the Arab Revolutions* (London: Counterfire, 2011); Elliott Colla, ‘The People Want’ (May 2012), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer263/people-want#.T8IP6zCBWnY.facebook>; Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (London: Saqi Books, 2013).
- ⁸ Tony Benn, interviewed in Michael Moore, *Sicko* (2007).
- ⁹ Antoine Saint-Just offered a more distilled variant: ‘We must dare! [Osez!] – this motto compresses the whole political logic of our revolution’ (Antoine Saint-Just, speech to the National Convention, 26 February 1794). And again: ‘Those who undertake revolutions resemble those who are the first to navigate in unknown waters, guided by their audacity’ (Report to the National Convention, 13 March 1794).
- ¹⁰ ‘If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. [...] Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them; and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress’ (Frederick Douglass, ‘The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies’ [3 August 1857], *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame [(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985] 3: 204.
- ¹¹ Vo Nguyen Giáp, ‘The South Vietnamese People Will Win’ (January 1966), in *The Military Art of People’s War* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 204.

-
- ¹² Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975-2000) 6:170.
- ¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 672.
- ¹⁴ Louis-Auguste Blanqui, Manuscripts, Bibliothèque Nationale collection NAF9591(2), f. 520 (19 October 1866).
- ¹⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, in his *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, “Pléiade,” 1969), 576.
- ¹⁶ Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, in his *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 1059.
- ¹⁷ ‘We have turned into imposing realities’, Robespierre proudly declared in 1794, ‘the laws of eternal justice that used to be contemptuously called the dreams of well-meaning people. Morality was once limited to the books of philosophers; we have put it into the government of nations’ (Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes* [Paris: PUF, 1910-1967] 10:229).
- ¹⁸ Robespierre, notes written in early June 1793, in J. Marx. Thompson, *Robespierre* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1935), II, 33–34.
- ¹⁹ Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard ‘Folio’, 2004), 547.
- ²⁰ R. B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 104; cf. Ian Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1997).
- ²¹ Lucio Colletti, ‘Rousseau as Critic of “Civil Society”’, *From Rousseau to Lenin* (London: NLB, 1972), 185; cf. Eugene Kamenka, *Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 37-47.
- ²² It’s for precisely this reason that critics keen to drive a wedge between a ‘democratic’ Marx and the ‘authoritarian’ Lenin regularly ground their interpretation in a critique of Blanqui. See for instance Hal Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 13, 25-6; Richard Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels* (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1974) 1: 13-16, 191, 289.
- ²³ Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family*, in *Collected Works* 4:37.
- ²⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Collected Works* 5:52. There are echoes of this emphasis on compulsion and forcing even in so allegedly “voluntarist” a reading of Marx as Lukacs’s *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972); see for instance, 41–42.
- ²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 929.
- ²⁶ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” [1844], *Early Writings*, 329.
- ²⁷ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 283–284.
- ²⁸ Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* [1843], *Early Writings*, 89.
- ²⁹ Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* [1843], *Early Writings*, 88.
- ³⁰ Marx, “The Divorce Bill” [1842], *Collected Works* 1:309.
- ³¹ Marx, *Class Struggles in France* [1871], *Collected Works* 22:334.
- ³² See in particular Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League” [March 1850], *Collected Works* 10:277–287.
- ³³ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* [1844], *Early Writings*, 348; cf. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 959.
- ³⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 488.
- ³⁵ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* [1846], *Collected Works* 5:51–52.
- ³⁶ Engels, *Anti-Dühring* [1877], *Collected Works* 25:266, 270.
- ³⁷ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 719, 899.
- ³⁸ Antonio Gramsci, “Study of Philosophy,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 345; cf. Gramsci, “The Modern Prince,” *Selections*, 125–133, 171–172.
- ³⁹ Gramsci, “The Modern Prince,” *Selections*, 171. Compared with the apparent solidity of actually existing reality, “what ‘ought to be’ is therefore concrete; indeed it is the only realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, it alone is history in the making and philosophy in the making, it alone is politics” (ibid., 172).
- ⁴⁰ Gramsci, “Our Marx,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57.

-
- ⁴¹ Gramsci, “Class Intransigence and Italian History,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 69; Gramsci, *Selections*, 364.
- ⁴² Gramsci, “The Revolution Against Capital,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 40.
- ⁴³ Gramsci, “Socialism and Co-operation,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 14.
- ⁴⁴ “Men create their own personality: (1) by giving a specific and concrete (“rational”) direction to their own vital impulse or will; (2) by identifying the means which will make this will concrete and specific and not arbitrary; (3) by contributing to modify the ensemble of the concrete conditions for realising this will to the extent of one’s own limits and capacities and in the most fruitful form” (Gramsci, *Selections*, 360).
- ⁴⁵ Gramsci, “The Communist Groups,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 176.
- ⁴⁶ Gramsci, *Selections*, 194, referring to Marx: “mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve” (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* [1859], *Collected Works* 29:263).