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Abstract: Debates about the nature and value of popular sovereignty have returned to the centre of political discussion in recent years, in many parts of the world, and the once-revolutionary idea that sovereign power rests with ‘the will of the people’ is now a widely acknowledged principle. Just what we mean by either ‘will’ or ‘people’, however, let alone this combination of the two, remains obscure and controversial. This article aims to reclaim the slogan from reactionary attempts to hijack it, and to retain it as a useful way of assessing claims to democratic legitimacy. In order to defend an actively and forcefully democratic practice of political will, it draws on the work of Rousseau and Marx, on the legacies of the revolutions in France, Haiti, and Russia, and on the broadly voluntarist accounts of political agency and capacity advanced by figures like Robespierre, Blanqui, Luxemburg, Lenin, and Gramsci.

Keywords: sovereignty, democracy, political will, the people, the will, volition, the masses, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, Rousseau, Marx, Robespierre, Blanqui, Luxemburg, Lenin, Gramsci.

As everyone knows, our situation is shaped by overwhelming problems that we largely recognise but are not yet willing to address. These problems all stem mainly from the relentless consolidation of capital’s grip over people and the planet. Whether it’s a matter of exploitation or inequality, of forced migration or climate catastrophe, of a new arms race or newly invasive forms of state power, even the most dire warnings and statistics have lost their capacity to illuminate or provoke. The suicidal consequences of our current race to the bottom are increasingly obvious to all who are compelled to run it.

It should be equally obvious, however, that we are now moving towards a position where we could change course – if we wanted to. We could change course if we are actually willing and determined to do the things that such change demands. Ever since the hopes raised by revolution in 1917 were deflected and then dashed, the question has been: does a sufficient mass of people want to end capital’s insatiable drive to accumulate profits at our expense, or not? The answer remains uncertain but the question will not go away, and it is rapidly turning into a related but more pressing question: do enough of us want to survive at all?

What do we most want? What are we willing to do in order to achieve it? And who might this be, this ‘we’?

I Reclaiming a formula

Though widely co-opted by conservative nationalists and reactionary populists in recent years, the old revolutionary appeal to ‘the will of the people’ still remains the simplest, clearest and most suggestive way of grasping the promise of popular sovereignty, and the most incisive means of clarifying what’s at stake in arguments about competing conceptions of democracy.

Both ‘will’ and ‘people’ are notoriously indeterminate and contested notions, and for most of European intellectual history the idea that they might be combined was absurd. The

¹ *Author’s note:* This is a partial working sketch of the argument of a book I began to write back in 2005. The manuscript has ballooned, over the years, into a completely unworkable mass of notes and digressions. I have drafted this outline while working on a condensed version of the book, which Verso should publish in 2024. I’m very grateful to Tracy McNulty and Nick Nesbitt for sending rushed comments on an initial draft.

guiding thread of this project, nevertheless, is that they are each best clarified and adopted precisely through their combination, by thinking the one through the other. A *people* can be understood, then, simply as the collective actor that comes to share in the formulation, organisation and imposition of a common will or purpose. A people in this sense comes together in the making of a common cause, with no other limiting or filtering or differentiating criteria, in unqualified commitment to the principle that ‘an injury to one is an injury to all.’ A political *will* can likewise figure, from this perspective, as the collective capacity linking mass desire, commitment, and action through direct and inclusive participation in such a common cause. The formation of a ‘will of the people’, in short, can be understood as the generalising or popularising of a volition or purpose. The relative clarity and strength of such a will, its ‘will-power’ so to speak, will vary with its generality, scope, and extension, on the one hand, and with its intensity, force, and concentration, on the other.

Although several other thinkers had pondered the connotations of a ‘common mind’ and a *volonté générale* before him, Rousseau remains a primary point of reference here, and his work helps to formulate a series of tensions and challenges that have confronted many subsequent revolutionary actors, starting with leaders like Robespierre and Toussaint Louverture. But Marx is equally essential, as an analyst of the material conditions under which people, in a society structured by capital’s social relations, might strike to *make* common cause. To appeal to Rousseau without Marx risks futile exhortation; to rely on Marx without Rousseau is to depend too much on the historical equivalent of a natural force. We need them both, and many others too; a partial list of figures whose projects might be understood as integrating some of the moralising drive of a general will together with the political mission of a global proletariat would include Luxemburg, Martov, Lenin, Zetkin, Gramsci, Du Bois, Mao, Sartre, Fanon, and Che Guevara.

The main obstacles that have helped to prevent the sort of generalising that Rousseau and then Marx anticipated can themselves be understood as a series of four distinct but mutually reinforcing anti-democratic or aristocratic ramparts. Drawing on a way of speaking that became current during the French Revolution, and in keeping with Robespierre’s definition of ‘aristocracy [a]s the state in which one portion of the citizens is sovereign and the rest subjects,’² they might be crudely listed as the fourfold aristocracies of blood, skin, property, and nation. Each of these ramparts have helped to obstruct or at least contain the rise of a genuinely popular sovereign authority. Taken together, and combined in each case with recourse to the oldest and most ubiquitous of all mechanisms of divide and rule, patriarchy, their abiding power remains fundamental to the current configuration of class rule. Taken together, they continue to invest the involuntary circumstance par excellence – the mere place and contingencies of one’s birth – as the main determining factor that still shapes a person’s life.

If we consider them in chronological sequence, these four barriers to the massing of a popular will were most directly challenged by the successive revolutions in France (1789-94), Haiti (1791-1803), Russia (1917-20), and then, after China, Korea and Vietnam, in Cuba and other fronts in the wider national-liberation or Third World projects (1950s and 60s).³

Blood. Feudal social relations bequeathed a relatively immobile social order, one defined by inherited or purchased social positions and the reproduction of caste-like estates, in which transmissions of privilege could still be justified in part through appeals to the mythology of ‘noble blood’.

Within its limits, many elements of this first obstacle were tackled by the French Revolution, its abolition of privilege and its assertion of legal equality.

Skin. Consolidation of European colonial holdings in the Americas, combining the expropriation of indigenous peoples together with the importation of a new enslaved labour force, erected the further rampart that some French revolutionaries denounced as an

² Robespierre, ‘On the Silver Mark’ (April 1791), in Robespierre 2007, p. 7.

³ Although these sequences make up four distinct chapters in the book-length version of this discussion, there is space here in this outline to consider only the revolutions in France and then Russia.

‘aristocracy of the skin’. In the decade that followed their massive uprising in 1791 the slaves of Saint-Domingue overcame this rampart by imposing universal emancipation, winning independence from France, breaking up the great estates, and undermining the material basis of ‘race’.⁴ Du Bois’ path-breaking account of Black Reconstruction picks up here where C.L.R. James’ famous telling of the Haitian Revolution leaves off. The slaves whose mobilisation and general strike decided the outcome of the American Civil War followed in the Haitians’ footsteps, but lacking a comparable monopoly on coercive force, they were prevented from pursuing an egalitarian agenda in the 1870s on the basis of a redistribution of land and property.

Needless to say, many elements of this second obstacle persist to this day.

Property. The Russian revolutions of 1917 went on to challenge the ‘aristocracy of wealth’ and property that had sustained the Tsarist autocracy, and by transferring ‘all power to the Soviets’, i.e. to councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants, they instituted a government no less responsive to the will of the people than the one overseen by the Jacobin-dominated Convention of 1793.⁵ No less than August 1792, the insurrection of October 1917 consolidated a long-running push to organise and assert mass sovereignty. In the face of enormous challenges, however, it wasn’t long before the new Bolshevik government usurped this popular sovereign authority, imposed party discipline upon the loose-knit councils, and converted regrettable but justifiable emergency measures into enduring authoritarian institutions. Top-down attempts to institute socialism by decree managed to decapitate the old patrician classes but did not so much eliminate as rework the capital-labour relation itself, through to the slow consolidation of a more centralised ‘state capitalism’.

All aspects of this third obstacle, of course, have only been reinforced in the years that followed the eventual collapse of the USSR.

Nation. Upholding and reinforcing these first three barriers, the nation-state persists, both through and after the revolutions in Russia, China, and Vietnam, as a further and more subtly internalised rampart against a fully generalised will of the people, one that the great national liberation movements of the post-war period sought to challenge on its own terms. Though regularly derided by a hostile metropole, the efforts and achievements of the revolutionary mobilisations associated with figures like Castro, Che, Fanon, and Cabral should speak for themselves, and they continue to inspire some of the most fruitful critical engagement with the prevailing global order of things.⁶ The kind of patriotic internationalism that prevailed most especially in Cuba proved difficult to replicate, however, and over the last forty years, the world’s most powerful nations have had little trouble maintaining their dominance over less powerful ones. For most intents and purposes the nation-state remains the primary field and horizon of any consequential will of the people – but also, and in keeping with its essential class purpose, it further remains the primary means of ensuring that such a will is kept securely within its sanctioned place, contained within its borders, and channelled through its existing mechanisms of representation. From the French and Haitian through to the Russian and Cuban, each of the great modern revolutions was waged in the name of universal principles, as part of a global or at least tri-continental struggle; but in each case, the threatening ‘contagion of revolution’ was quarantined within the limits of its national point of departure. Today, whether it’s in the US, the UK, Brazil, India, Turkey, Italy, Russia, Israel, Pakistan, Hungary, Sweden – i.e. almost any place you might care to mention – reactionary nationalisms still help to compensate for the predations of transnational neoliberalism. Arguably it is now the nation, more than race or caste, that provides a global capitalist class with its most important ideological bulwark.

One of the main goals of the present study is to listen as far as space allows to the actors involved in these revolutionary sequences, and to foreground some of their many remarkable efforts and achievements. The aim is not to fetishise or romanticise these

⁴ C.L.R. James’ student Carolyn Fick brings out the grassroots quality and scale of these achievements in her *The Making of Haiti* (1991).

⁵ Robespierre: ‘And what an aristocracy! The most intolerable of all, that of the rich’ (Robespierre 2007, p. 7).

⁶ See for instance the enthusiastic reception given to Getachew 2020; cf. Prashad 2008.

sequences, and I don't mean to suggest that they represent the only consequential forms of political will, or to propose them (with all their baggage and limitations) as templates to imitate. I refer to them here because they dramatise, within their own particular situations, and in the most emphatic terms, both the capacities and limits of mass political engagement. As Lenin put it during the events that convulsed Russia after 1917, 'the history of revolutions is always richer in its content, more varied, more many-sided, more alive, more ingenious' than the history and practice of even the most effective organisations or 'the most conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes.' And this advantage is perfectly understandable,

since the best vanguards express the consciousness, the will and the passion of tens of thousands of people, while the revolution is one of the moments of special exaltation and tension of all human faculties – the work of the consciousness, the will, the imagination, the passion of hundreds of thousands of people spurred on by the harshest class struggle.⁷

Trotsky's version of this observation likewise emphasises the same two key factors, in recognition of the primacy of political mass psychology – or in other words, of the primacy of class volition. As he notes in the preface to his *History of the Russian Revolution*, 'the most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events', thereby interrupting the ordinary routine of rule by their authorised governments and representatives, whether these be kings, ministers, or bureaucrats. At the same time, the distinctive 'dynamic of revolutionary events is directly determined by swift, intense and passionate changes in the psychology of the classes' participating in it. Taken together, from this perspective 'the history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.'⁸

Nobody has made this general point better than Blanqui, who in the mid-nineteenth century, in terms shaped by his experience of the usurped victories of July 1830 and February 1848, repeatedly affirmed his belief that only active and engaged participation in revolutionary change (as distinct from gradual progress or piecemeal reforms) can overcome the profound inertia that sustains the status quo. By the simple but far-reaching fact that it is indeed *established*, he notes, 'the established order is a barrier that conceals the future from us and covers it in an almost impenetrable fog.' 'Only the revolution, in clearing the terrain, will reveal the horizon, slowly lift the veil, and open up the routes, or rather the multiple paths, that lead to the new order.' Utopian hopes or aspirations alone, however alluring their formulation, will never suffice to make the transition from theory to practice. Only direct participation in revolutionary practice can transform diffuse wishes into a focused will. 'Right up until the moment of death and rebirth, the doctrines [that will serve as the] bases of the future society, remain vague aspirations, distant and hazy glimpses', for 'nothing illuminates the way, nothing lifts the veil of the horizon, nothing resolves problems like a great social upheaval.'⁹ Again, if 'a revolution improvises more ideas in one day than the previous thirty years were able to wrest from the brains of a thousand thinkers', 'this is because a revolution transforms a glimmer that once floated like a cloud in the minds of a few into a light that shines forth from the minds of everyone.' Such is the basis for Blanqui's indomitable optimism. 'We must march on. When the masses encounter an obstacle they stop, gather

⁷ Lenin 1966, p. 95.

⁸ Trotsky 1932, preface.

⁹ This is one of the several ways that Blanqui echoes a principle recognised by Spinoza, one subsequently emphasised by Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Badiou, and then in different ways by more recent scholars like Nick Nesbitt, Tracy McNulty, and Bruno Bosteels: 'Nothing positive contained in a false idea can be annulled by the presence of what is true' (Spinoza 2002, p. 323 [*Ethics* book IV, proposition 1]; cf. for example Nesbitt 2022, p. 107; Nesbitt 2008; McNulty 2009; Bosteels 2011). Mere truth alone isn't sufficient to displace what is false or deceptive; the composition and intervention of an engaged collective actor remains an essential operator in any passage from the one to the other.

themselves together, and overturn it. This is the history of the past; it is also that of the future.’¹⁰

This project aims to acknowledge, then, the significance of revolutionary mobilisations for the analysis of political will. But it also aims to acknowledge their limitations, and to consider how some of these very achievements came to be re-purposed as new barriers to the wider goal of a fully inclusive democratic politics, i.e. as barriers to the consolidation of a political will unbound by *any* geographic marker. Such would be a will organised and sustained, finally, as the ‘*will of people*’ without any delimitation at all (apart from the exclusion of those who themselves oppose such a fully generalised will, by insisting their particular powers or class privileges). By contrast, the great national revolutions remained precisely that, and were thus limited by their national (and all too often nationalist) limits – the usurpation of the French and Russian revolutions by Napoleon and Stalin is paradigmatic here. And although it’s well-known that it was the massing of militant women who played a decisive vanguard role in these events, for instance in the October 1789 march on Versailles or the defiant celebrations of International Women’s Day in February 1917, some of the nationalist limits of these sequences were further reinforced by the gendered priorities of their leadership. Notwithstanding the role of figures like Claire Lacombe and Pauline Léon, the Jacobin sequence in France did little to challenge Rousseau’s own thoroughly conventional conceptions of virility and femininity. The Russian revolutionaries were less blinkered, but despite the significance of figures like Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin, or of Catherine Breshkovsky and Maria Spiridonova, it’s no secret that their world was again dominated by male actors. I hope it goes without saying that an appreciation for Jacobin and Bolshevik achievements and resolve isn’t intended to suggest that revolutionary war or national liberation movements are the only forms that political will might take, to the exclusion of struggles led by, for instance, climate activists, indigenous land defenders, trade union militants, landless workers, and many others. The revolutionary sequences take pride of place here simply because their leading actors regular frame them in the explicit terms of a will of the people, and because they illustrate in no uncertain terms what the realisation of such a will might involve.

Apart from the enormous power of all those who remain determined to resist it, another thing that today makes such realisation seem so difficult and remote is the fact that resistance to a voluntarist emphasis on a general or popular will isn’t just as old as entrenched bourgeois opposition to both Rousseau or Marx, or to the legacies of the Jacobin and Bolshevik revolutions. It goes back much further than that, and can be traced to some of the earliest explicit accounts of the will in what becomes the ‘European’ tradition – the thoroughly individualising or anti-generalising conceptions of *voluntas* developed by the Stoics and then Augustine and other Christian theologians. The Stoics help to consolidate and then popularise a conceptual pairing that will persist, in one form or another, via the Reformation and the subsequent rise of *laissez-faire* or possessive individualism, through market-conforming liberalism and on to more recent and still dominant anti-collectivist neoliberalisms. This pairing combines a private freedom or ‘inner citadel’ of rational self-mastery along with an equally rationalised public submission to the causal forces that apparently determine one’s destiny as part of the wider and irresistible course of things. As Jessica Whyte shows in a compelling study, what remains most characteristic of our own neoliberal morality is the way it combines narrowly circumscribed inward freedoms with unconditional submission to general market outcomes and their social consequences, however catastrophic these might be – consequences that appear to impose themselves on people as a kind of inescapable destiny or ‘fate’.¹¹

To this day, to the extent that a notion of the will is accepted at all, it’s generally as a merely individual faculty, on the model of utilitarian or consumer choice. More political appeals to voluntarism are routinely condemned as complicit with disastrous motifs of

¹⁰ Blanqui 2018, all cited in Hallward 2017.

¹¹ Whyte 2019, pp. 162, 113.

anthropocentric mastery and control, as an echo of the fatal hubris that prevents us from relating to the earth and the species we share it with. Aversion to the very notion of a general will, and to the concepts of sovereignty and command that are associated with it, remains almost ubiquitous across European political philosophy in particular, especially in the calamitous wake of fascistic acclamations that sought to dress themselves up as the ‘triumph of the will’. A very partial list of principled opponents would include Adorno, the later Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Agamben. Even more engaged thinkers like Sartre or Badiou, for all for their investment in collective commitments, try to steer clear of the dubiously ‘psychological’ domain of the will per se. Suspicion of or hostility to the whole cluster of notions bound up with volition, intention, purpose, sincerity, and cause – the cluster that Rousseau tends to bundle together around the notion of *virtue* and the ‘force’ or strength he associates with it – remains a widely shared reflex across many academic disciplines. So does suspicion of the very categories of generality and universality, whose apparently authoritarian or flattening connotations are routinely condemned in favour of values like difference, diversity, singularity, fragmentation, disruption, complexity, *errance*, and so on. One way or another, aversion to any sort of voluntarism is shared across a very broad political spectrum, from conservative traditionalists (who favour continuity and sedimented habits) to free-market individualists (who embrace the market’s capacity to generate apparently ‘spontaneous’ and emphatically un-willed and unplanned patterns of order and distribution). Those who prioritise the sub-voluntary force of unconscious, neurological, environmental, economic, or technological tendencies all draw on a similar aversion.

II Voluntarist priorities

Against this anti-voluntarist consensus, the main goal of this project is to reclaim and defend the much derided, much dismissed and much misunderstood category of the will, understood as a relational capacity that links, more or less adequately, desires to expectations, expectations to intentions, intentions to decisions, decisions to actions, and actions to consequences. If it exists at all, the will operates as a loosely defined practical faculty, without sharply circumscribed edges or limits; as a mental capacity it has more in common with something like imagination or desire than it does with say memory or perception. It operates by making connections across distinct domains, and not through confinement to specific tasks. To affirm voluntary and moral action as enjoying a relative autonomy in practice, and thus as irreducible to natural processes, is not to deny the ways that human beings are part of nature, or our kinship with other species. There is nothing about its way of linking of means and ends, and of expectations and outcomes, furthermore, that restricts the will to a merely individual domain – such a domain would figure, instead, as the most restricted and typically most inconsequential dimension of an essentially social and collective faculty. As Gerard Winstanley could see very well, much of what might ordinarily be experienced as forms of ‘inward bondage’ (including ‘pride, hypocrisy, envy, sorrow, fears, desperation and madness’) are in part ‘all occasioned by the outward bondage that one sort of people lay upon another’, and are best addressed by confronting the ‘relation between the oppressor and the oppressed.’¹² Even when it is exercised by an isolated individual, volition is no more solitary a practice than speech, and the extent to which its exercise is atomised or combined, in any given situation, itself varies with its extensity and intensity, and with the ways it is more or less organised, sustained, informed, concentrated, and so on.

The wager of this project is that the most fruitful way of both understanding and participating in political practice is to acknowledge the primacy of political will as determinant in the *first* instance. ‘Insurrection of thought’, as Wendell Phillips recognised,

¹² Gerard Winstanley, ‘*The Law of Freedom in a Platform*’ (1652), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/winstanley/1652/law-freedom/ch01.htm>.

‘always precedes insurrection of arms’¹³, and if sufficiently determined it may sometimes disarm its most powerful opponents.

To stress the first instance isn’t to conflate it with the ‘last instance’ or with every instance. The priority is to foreground concerns and purposes that come to be deliberately shared across groups of actors who commit to a common cause, actors whose solidarity and collective capacity ultimately rests on nothing but the strength and perseverance of this voluntary commitment. However much they might be conditioned by economic pressures and facilitated by conducive circumstances or situations, willed association and collective action are willed or voluntary ‘all the way down’. Their scope and limits remain more or less ‘up to us’ in basically the same sense as any voluntary action.

The repeated insistence on ‘more or less’ here and all through this study is meant to emphasise the relative and relational quality of the will and its capacities. A will is always more or less general, more or less expansive, more or less inclusive, more or less informed, more or less united, more or less committed, more or less determined, organised, disciplined, resolute, forceful, self-critical, etc. Nothing is more damaging than to embrace (or reject) the will as an absolute, as an all-or-nothing package, on either libertarian or determinist grounds. To hold any actor wholly responsible for an action and its consequences is as misguided as the denial of agency altogether. The goal here is rather to discern and highlight the role played by purposeful actors as part of the interminable work of critical reflection upon their priorities, values, and choices, and thus to honour them as the working ‘authors and actors of their own drama.’¹⁴ It is to credit them as actors even as they play out their roles in situations that they confront rather than invent: to insist that people make their own history is never to suggest that they make it in circumstances of their choosing. There need be no insurmountable tension between an emphasis on political will and a recognition of the many pressures that operate ‘independently of the will’ of those affected by them. But unlike some recent readings of Marx, rather than draw out the remorseless imperatives of capital as an impersonal logic and self-contradicting system, the priority of a voluntarist approach would rather be to confront the purposes and actions of class actors themselves – starting with those capitalist actors who, as we all know, quite deliberately put profits before people, and who are perfectly willing to do everything necessary to police the consequences. The markets in coffee, sugar, tobacco and cotton, no less than in oil, cobalt or lithium, were developed and funded by specific people for perfectly conscious reasons. From enclosing landlords to industrial magnates, from William Randolph Hearst to Rupert Murdoch, from Henry Ford to Jeff Bezos, from the Mont Pèlerin pioneers to Koch Industries (such lists quickly become tedious...) – the histories made by such people are not exhausted by referring to them simply as the ‘bearers’ of impersonal forces or functions.

Nor, more importantly, can we understand the measures taken by the exploited and the oppressed without foregrounding their own expectations and priorities, and the strategic choices they made to advance their ends. Although historians regularly emphasise the often-unexpected and surprising quality of the mass insurrections that occasionally punctuate modern political history, it would be a big mistake to infer that revolutionary mobilisations are themselves essentially ‘involuntary’ sequences. On the contrary, the great revolutions remain the most suggestive demonstrations of what mass political will involves, and what it is capable of. Not only were pivotal sequences like October 1917 in Russia, or August 1792 in France, or the 1791 Bois Caïman gathering in Haiti, or the campaign in Cuba that began in 1953, etc., all thoroughly planned affairs; more importantly, the mass capacities for deliberation and collective action that made these sequences possible, and that were grounded in the day-to-day relations of solidarity that helped ordinary people endure life in cities like Paris or Petrograd or Havana, are the very stuff and substance of political will. It is these capacities that allowed for collective defiance of ruling class strategies, and it is sustained cultivation of these (thoroughly ‘conscious’ and articulate) capacities, over many years and in

¹³ Wendell Phillips, ‘Harper’s Ferry’ (1 November 1859), in Phillips 2001, p. 75.

¹⁴ Marx 2000, p. 223 [*The Poverty of Philosophy*].

the face of daunting obstacles, that also empowered a critical mass of people to take the initiative on decisive occasions like the Petrograd celebration of International Women's Day in February 1917 or the women's march on Versailles in October 1789.

Several methodological priorities follow from this general orientation.

(a) If the will is to be taken as 'determinant in the first instance', in the analysis of a political situation the first priority should always be to listen to the actors and to try to interpret what they mean to say and do. This involves relating to them as *actors* in both the actional and theatrical sense of the term, i.e. as actors (rather than more equivocal 'subjects', 'agents' or 'beings') who can decide on some aspects of the roles they believe they are required to play, on the stage where they find themselves, in keeping with Sartre's maxim that 'we can always make something of what is made of us.' It involves accepting that any exercise of volition can only be properly understood from the perspective of the actor rather than the observer: if it exists at all, the will is a faculty that can be understood only from the first-person perspective of an I or a we. Direct participation has priority here over detached observation. For reasons that Sartre, Fanon and then Badiou help to explain, only 'partisan' commitment or engagement can illuminate what a willed action involves. If as Rousseau emphasises 'power can be represented but not will,'¹⁵ the implications of his famous critique of representation reach well beyond his contempt for parliamentarism.

(b) If the will is a matter of intentions and purpose, furthermore, then there is indeed no evading the equally Rousseauist (and again thoroughly old-fashioned) questions of 'sincerity' and integrity, for reasons that Robespierre or Martov might foreground as much as Sartre or Che. The risks here are obvious but unavoidable, as matters of trust and confidence have always been essential to any sort of collective commitment; the fates of insurgents like Gracchus Babeuf, Emiliano Zapata, or Charles Peralte (not to mention Lumumba or Allende) dramatise a much wider point. By the same token, intentions can only be assessed via actions, for the will is itself the process, as Hegel argues in the opening of his *Philosophy of Right*, that translates the former into the latter; critical judgement can assess only these translations and their consequences, not their origin or source. Action is the decisive and consequential element of the will.

(c) An emphasis on actors and action implies an emphasis on capacity and power, power in the sense of *pouvoir* or ability – strictly speaking, the phrase 'willing and able' is a pleonasm. If there's a way where there's a will it's because to will the end is to will the means.

(d) To foreground capacity means, in turn, to foreground what is perhaps the great tension in Rousseau's political thought, and the greatest challenge facing any voluntarist political project: the tension between generality and concentration, or between extensity and intensity. On the one hand, 'the more the state expands, the more its real force increases', and 'the most general will is also the most just';¹⁶ on the other hand, 'the people's force acts only when concentrated, it evaporates and is lost as it spreads, like the effect of gunpowder scattered on the ground and which ignites only grain by grain.'¹⁷

Against the routine investment in difference, divergence, disruption, fragmentation, and so on, the great challenge of our time remains that of simultaneously *generalising* and *concentrating* a common and egalitarian will. Against the array of forces striving to divide and contain, our watchwords should be those of confluence and convergence – an emphasis that is all the more pressing now that we can no longer set automatic store by the hope that was so appealing to an older generation of revolutionaries, of trusting that in time the irresistible current of proletarianisation would, all by itself, help to level and coordinate a global working class. Time is a luxury we no longer have, and Benjamin and Gramsci were surely right when they noticed that the great mistake of their generation had been to believe that it was

¹⁵ Rousseau 1997c, p. 57 [SC 2:1].

¹⁶ Rousseau, 1997c, p. 88 [SC 3:2]; Rousseau, 1997b, p. 8.

¹⁷ Rousseau, 1997c, p. 104 [SC 3:8].

swimming with the prevailing current, rather than against it.¹⁸ The only way to build a counter-current powerful and massive enough to change the established course of things is to combine every emancipatory stream that is compatible with a shared sense of direction, one that might be willed by people in general. There is no shortcut through the endless, far-flung work of discussions and deliberations that may eventually converge in a common cause – or as Gramsci puts it, there is no sidestepping that ‘endless quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral debates repeated countless times, which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour that gives birth to a collective will’ equipped with the clarity and ‘degree of homogeneity’ its realisation requires.¹⁹ Of course each stream and each debate has its own source, its own terrain, its own trajectory and élan, but it’s only their converging in a common torrent that can lend them the force required to overwhelm the defences of the status quo.

The challenge remains: the more general a will becomes, the more its exercise tends to stretch and slacken. The more a coalition widens to accommodate divergent perspectives, the more likely it is to accommodate compromises with the status quo. A torrent that simply floods its banks (to end this protracted metaphor) risks stagnation pure and simple. This is a problem that the mere political equivalent of gravity will never solve.

III The consolidation of sovereignty

For a long time, following the decline and then collapse of the Roman empire across Europe, diffuse feudal forms of military and ideological control proved generally sufficient to preserve social order and class hierarchies. Local rebellions might extract local concessions, but so long as populations remained overwhelmingly rural and dispersed, and linked only by rudimentary means of communication, there could be little prospect of mass collective pressure to transform the prevailing state of things. As Marx suggests in the famous final chapters of his *Capital* volume 1, things began to change over the long sixteenth century with the growth of commerce and the kinds of originary capital accumulation required for profit-oriented commodity production on a tendentially global scale – colonial conquest and the expropriation of indigenous lands, the transatlantic slave trade, the expulsion of peasants and the enclosure of their commons, anti-vagrancy laws, the growth of a destitute labour force, the expansion of cities and of markets and of an increasingly literate public sphere, and so on. Capital rose together with relatively centralising forms of state authority, as mutually enabling and reinforcing forms of class rule adapted to the newly unsettled conditions of post-feudal society. These are the modern conditions in which it slowly begins to make sense to speak of a ‘will of the people’, and of the distinctive sort of political struggles that might control or empower such a will.

In addition to their inextricable co-implication in the domains of war, finance, and credit, capital and the modern state share two distinctive characteristics that help to mark them out from previous kinds of rule.

First and foremost, they function on the basis of newly imperious forms of authority, or ‘sovereignty’. As Bodin and then Hobbes liked to emphasise, sovereign law should be understood in terms of unilateral and unequivocal *command*, and most fundamentally as ‘a command of that person (whether man or council) whose instruction is the reason for obedience.’²⁰ No additional reasons or justifications are required, so long as the commanding power is indeed supreme or sovereign, i.e. so long as it actually and reliably solicits obedience from those subjects whom it commands, notably in their roles as soldiers, as tax-payers, and as workers. ‘Whether the holder of Sovereign power is one or a few or all’, Spinoza adds, ‘indubitably the supreme right of commanding whatever they wish belongs to him or them’ – but only so long as they ‘truly hold supreme power’, and can indeed oblige others to do as

¹⁸ ‘Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current’ (Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, §11, in Benjamin 2007, p. 258; cf. Gramsci, 1994, p. 110).

¹⁹ Gramsci 1971, p. 194.

²⁰ Hobbes 1998, p. 154.

they wish or will.²¹ It's precisely this appeal to the mere will of the commander that testifies to the distinctive modern ambition of absolute sovereignty: unlike any sort of prevailing custom or tradition, and unlike any more or less benevolent or well-informed advice, the commanding power of a law here requires no 'other reason than the will of him that says it,'²² such that best way of defining a law is simply to equate it with the 'the declared will of the Sovereign.'²³

It's essential to remember that capital too is best understood as a social relation of sovereign authority and control, and Marx's simplest definition is also his most illuminating. What is capital? The answer is nothing physical (it's not simply a matter of resources, tools, machinery), but it's also not something abstract or elusive (it's not simply an impersonal logic of domination). In perhaps the most important line of his major work, Marx says that 'capital is essentially command over unpaid labour.'²⁴ Such command is as concrete and deliberate as any social relation can be. As is well known, Marx assumes that in any given society, 'the specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude', or of rulers and ruled, along with all that reproduces and reinforces this relationship.²⁵ It's the particular way that capital compels labour to undertake unremunerated work that distinguishes its rule from that of feudalism and other older modes of production, and it's this specific social relation of command that institutes 'capital [a]s the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society.'²⁶ From its violent origins in mass expulsion and expropriation, capital accumulates at a rate that varies with the scope and intensity of such command, and its other distinctive characteristics – its investment in marketisation and commodity production, its calculation of value according to socially necessary labour time, its compulsion to maximise absolute and relative surplus value, etc. – are corollaries of its capacity to impose itself as the ultimate or sovereign authority shaping social practice in general. In a world commanded by capital, furthermore, it follows that the most consequential powers of mutiny or disobedience (and with them the potential for an alternative power of command, and alternative criteria for social practice) lie primarily with labour, labour in its broad generic sense, i.e. as people in their associated productive and deliberative capacity.²⁷ So long as capital rules the world, 'the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class'²⁸; by the same token, from a Marxist perspective 'the working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.'²⁹

If it is to be conceived and respected as absolute, i.e. as actually commanding, sovereign power can only be understood in one of two ways – as transcendent, or as immanent. Either sovereignty in some sense descends from on high, from God or its equivalent, or from some remote ancestral past, and thus commands respect precisely as remote, and unchallengeable; or else, it emanates from the assembled body of the people themselves, as a body that in some more or less literal sense might be understood as having its own needs, wants, and will. Despite the best efforts of the Stuarts in England, of the post-Napoleonic Bourbons in France, and of Metternich and his ilk in Restoration Europe, the struggle between these two conceptions of sovereignty was decided irreversibly, in the two hundred years that separate the 1640s from 1848, in favour of the immanent or popular alternative. In England the narrow door that was prised open by Parliamentary victory in the

²¹ Spinoza 2007, p. 202. 'The person possessing the sovereign power to compel all men by force [...] has sovereign right over all men', Spinoza continues, but 'will retain this right, though, for only so long as he retains this power of doing whatever he wishes' (p. 199).

²² Hobbes 1994, p. 165; cf. Hobbes 1998, p. 153.

²³ Hobbes 1998, p. 85. Pufendorf makes a similar argument. 'No man can say, *Sic volo, Sic jubeo* – so I will, and so I command – unless ... *Stet pro ratione voluntas* – his will is his reason. We obey laws therefore, not principally upon account of the matter of them, but upon account of the legislator's will' (Pufendorf 1729, p. 59).

²⁴ Marx 1990, p. 672; cf. pp. 424-5.

²⁵ Marx 1991, p. 927.

²⁶ Marx 1993, p. 107.

²⁷ Marx 1991, ch. 7.

²⁸ Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, in Marx 2000, p. 253.

²⁹ Marx, letter to Engels, 18 February 1865 (citing a letter to Schweitzer of 13 February), in Marx 1987, p. 96.

civil war widened a little more with the new constitutional arrangements of 1688 and then 1832; in France the principle (if not its consequences) was conceded when in 1830 Louis-Philippe replaced the hopelessly autocratic Charles X to become the first ‘king of the French’, and accepted his coronation not as a gift from God but as an ‘expression of the national will’. Louis-Philippe’s own fall, eighteen years later, confirmed the fact that ultimately there is no middle ground, and that a sovereign who foregoes the legitimacy granted by divine right or immemorial custom cannot rely merely on the grudging support of a small fraction of the population. Once top-down autocracy no longer commands obedience, there is nothing for it: the only stable government will be one that at least appears to respect the will of the people it rules. If henceforth it’s the people’s will that is to be recognised as the ultimate source of authority, there will be only two broad ways of over-ruling the people – either by controlling the conditions that decide who might belong to them, and how much they might matter; or by shaping what they might want.

The second feature, then, that characterises these two modern forms of command is their relative reliance on consensual or voluntary obedience. It’s essential to stress right away the *relative* and partial quality of this reliance. The ultimate sanction of a commanding power remains fear, and the authority of both state and capital rest, in the final analysis, on coercive force. This obvious point is dramatised in any revolutionary or near-revolutionary sequence, and any uncertainty on this score can be quickly dispelled by a brief review of the foreign policy of the state that, after the UK, took on the role of the chief agent and enforcer of capital’s global domination – there is nothing subtle about the pattern of US intervention in places like Mexico, Haiti, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Iraq... As a wide range of thinkers from Hobbes and Locke to Hume and Smith recognised, however, a government that relies primarily on terror cannot profitably command the workings of a complex commercial society: a prosperous liberal commonwealth is one whose members are better motivated by greed than fear. A population that consents to its taxation, and that agrees to work off its debts, can generate more revenue for its rulers and creditors than one that is merely compelled to supply tribute. By the time England’s Charles I tried to tax his subjects without parliamentary approval, the principle that property-owning men could only be required to give up some of their wealth with their consent was well established – and also securely limited, by centuries of reinforcement, to the wealthiest fraction of the male population, excluding women, servants, the poor, the criminal, the colonised, the ‘unfit’, and so on. When the Leveller spokesman Thomas Rainsborough made the case for universal male suffrage during the Putney Debates of October 1647 (whereby ‘every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government’), Henry Ireton countered him with the time-honoured argument aligning political representation with the ownership of private property, the argument that would prevail for the next couple of centuries, and that in most respects still prevails: ‘no person hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom [...] that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom.’³⁰ John Locke combined both lines of argument when he concluded that since people are ‘by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of his estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent.’³¹

So long as the interests of property were not seriously contested, nor its unequal distribution challenged, so then it became safe to recognise, across a wide spectrum, that a legitimate government is one that derives its ‘just powers from the consent of the governed’ (Jefferson) and that all ‘sovereignty is based on human consent’ (de Maistre).³² Since as Hegel recognised ‘it is inherent in the principle of the modern state that all of an individual’s

³⁰ *The Putney Debates* (1647), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/1647-the-putney-debates>.

³¹ Locke 1988, *Second Treatise of Government*, §95.

³² Jefferson, The United States Declaration of Independence, 1776; De Maistre: ‘Sovereignty is based on human consent, for, if a given people were suddenly to agree that they would not obey, then sovereignty would disappear; it is impossible to imagine the establishment of sovereignty without imagining a people that agrees to obey’ (De Maistre 1884, pp. 312-13).

actions should be mediated by his will’, so then ‘only he who wills to be coerced can be coerced into anything.’³³ ‘External domination can accomplish nothing in the long run.’³⁴ In the wake of the religious wars that ravaged Europe after the Reformation, even an arch-authoritarian Richelieu could see that ‘reason’ is a more effective way of securing obedience than naked violence: ‘it is much more fitting to conduct men by measures that insensibly win over their wills, than by means that usually make them act only when they are forced to do so.’³⁵ By the time they had won their independence from a Britain that had seemed determined (as the rather aspirational Declaratory Act of 1766 phrased it) to assert its ‘full power and authority [...] to bind the colonies and people of America [...] in all cases whatsoever’, the newly United States of America even went so far as to promise their indigenous neighbours, in the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, that ‘their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent.’

Observing the remarkable ‘easiness with which the many are governed by the few’, Hume’s reflections on ‘the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers’ have remained pertinent for subsequent generations of rulers.

When we enquire by what means this wonder is brought about, we shall find, that as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. ‘Tis therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.’³⁶

Since Hume knows as well as Machiavelli that virtually every government we know anything about was ‘founded originally either on usurpation nor conquest, or both, without any pretence of a fair consent, or voluntary subjection of the people,’³⁷ so then the essential art of government is simply to present and preserve itself as securely *established*, i.e. as founded upon an opinion that has over time come to be reliably shaped by custom and habit, and on repeated experiences of acquiescence and submission. From this perspective, the people can be trusted to defer to established power, so long as it appears to remain securely established.

The great question then becomes, what does it take to secure established power in the minds and wills of the governed? There is a qualitative difference, of course, between acknowledging the need to harness a sufficient degree of popular consent, in the sense of acquiescence with government proposals, and encouraging active participation in a will to work out what the people themselves might want their government to do. How best to secure the former while discouraging the latter? Given his essentially mechanical and simplistic conception of the will, along with his acceptance of the apparent inability of coercive power to affect a person’s inward beliefs or ‘secret thoughts’, Hobbes had remained satisfied that overt forms of intimidation could reliably ‘form the wills’ of those subjected to sovereign authority.³⁸ But this is the limitation of Hobbes’ absolutism. Reluctant and inwardly ‘involuntary’ obedience is still obedience, but it offers a state threatened by seditious subjects (or capitalists threatened by unruly workers) a less stable foundation than one populated by ‘sincerely’ deferential citizens. The sort of brazenly authoritarian power justified by Hobbes wasn’t powerful enough actually to allow England’s Charles I to impose unpopular religious forms or to extract the payment of unauthorised taxes; Louis XVI and Charles X of France and then Nicholas II of Russia would likewise discover, in turn, the futility of declaring ‘it is legal because I will it,’ once this autocratic ‘I’ cannot actually command either financial credit on the one hand or a loyal army on the other.

³³ Hegel 1991, §299A, §91.

³⁴ Hegel 1999, p. 220.

³⁵ Richelieu, *Testament politique* II, 2, cited in Keohane 1980, p. 177.

³⁶ Hume, ‘Of the First Principles of Government’, in Hume 1994, p. 16.

³⁷ Hume, ‘Of the Original Contract’, in Hume 1994, pp. 188-89.

³⁸ Hobbes 1994, p. 109; cf. Koselleck 2000.

Over the long revolutionary era that begins in the 1640s, more actively *willing* obedience becomes the great object of modern statecraft, just as capital's particular concern is with the exploitation, in Frédéric Lordon's apt formulation, of 'willing slaves'. By creating a desperate and dependent workforce, capital's originary accumulation paved the way for newly 'voluntary' means of exploitation. 'Hunger will tame the fiercest animals', noted Joseph Townsend with satisfaction in 1786, in a suggestive tract condemning his contemporaries' version of welfare. The repeated and inescapable experience of need teaches 'obedience and subjection' to even the most resistant labourers. Whereas the kind of overt coercion required to sustain chattel slavery is expensive and risky, 'hunger is not only peaceable, silent, unremitting pressure, but, as the most natural motive to industry and labour, it calls forth the most powerful exertions.' Best of all, the kind of 'free labour' undertaken to stave off hunger is precisely willed from within, rather than imposed from without. 'The slave must be compelled to work but the free man should be left to his own judgment and discretion', and allowed to enjoy the comforts of his inner citadel – so long as he remains firmly confined within its limits, and deprived of any possibility of acting or combining to change the relations of production themselves.³⁹ Free workers can be trusted to submit to what are quite properly called 'market forces', 'market imperatives', or 'market discipline', so long as they can do nothing to protect themselves collectively from their consequences. Building on the conditions established by its originary accumulation, capital does everything necessary to ensure that the direct pressures of need and scarcity become quasi-ontological conditions of working class life.

The imposition of such imperatives across all sectors of society was one of the epochal achievements of that 'great transformation' which, as Karl Polanyi demonstrated in his landmark study of Victorian political economy, enabled the enduring triumph of market mechanisms at the expense of quasi-Jacobin projects of collective action and social change.⁴⁰ The great virtue of market forces as understood by the classical political economists is precisely the way they appear to generate unwilled or 'spontaneously ordered' outcomes as not only necessary but as justifiably or 'providentially' necessary. They determine not only what happens but what should happen, and it is then left to consumers and producers to follow the Stoic emperor's advice, and to 'teach yourself to be at one with the things ordained for you.'⁴¹

If capital too operates essentially as a form of sovereign power, if it is 'essentially command over unpaid labour', then as Marx understood with particular clarity, properly enforced and supervised voluntary subjection can be more efficient and reliable and thus more profitable than reluctant compliance with brute force. Again, it's essential to stress that coercive power remains essential to capital's exploitation of labour, as the blood-soaked history of its originary and ongoing accumulation demonstrates all too well, and as the deployments of state power in the service of capital confirm to this day. As Winstanley could see well before Marx, when workers 'dare to work for hire' they enrich those who use or employ them, and thereby 'lift up Tyrants and Tyranny' (and by the same token, 'by denying to labour for hire, they shall pull them down again').⁴² Established on the twin pedestals of patriarchy and slavery, far-reaching mechanisms of divide and rule continue to differentiate working populations by race, gender, and nation, and Marx recognised that any direct challenge to capital's rule would always be met by one version or another of a 'slave-owner's revolt'. 'Free labour' is most profitably and 'competitively' employed when it is disciplined by exposure to the full coercive force of what Heide Gerstenberger calls 'market violence', and long-standing comparisons between 'wage slavery' and chattel slavery remained routine well into the nineteenth century.⁴³ Abraham Lincoln still spoke for many of his

³⁹ Townsend 1786; cf. Polanyi 2001, pp. 118-21.

⁴⁰ Polanyi 2001; see also McNally 1993.

⁴¹ Marcus Aurelius 2002, book 6, §39.

⁴² Winstanley, 'The True Levellers Standard Advanced' (1649), <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/winstanley/1649/levellers-standard.htm>.

⁴³ Gerstenberger 2014.

contemporaries when he condemned the loss of independence associated with working for someone else.

Once securely in place, however, i.e. once fully internalised and normalised within the bounds of that civic body whose consent capital deems essential to its operation, the ‘invisible threads’ and ‘golden chains’ of waged employment can begin to bind ‘free workers’ more securely than the blatant shackles of plantation slavery or colonial expropriation. If appropriately managed, the ‘silent compulsion of economic relations’ proves more difficult to resist than overt reliance on soldiers and police.⁴⁴ So does a suitable combination of apparently arcane financial pressures and credit mechanisms, provided by a deliberately under-regulated banking industry. The more powerful states may retain nominal control over sovereign currencies and national fiscal policies, but as everyone knows the international financial markets are allowed to operate with supra-sovereign authority and with supra-national impunity. Left unchecked, the omnipresent threat of capital flight, and of downward pressure on credit ratings or currency evaluations, serves not only to foreclose the sort of left-reformist policies associated with figures like Corbyn and Mélenchon but even to discipline overly reckless lurches to the right, like that briefly attempted by the UK’s hapless Truss and Kwarteng double-act in the autumn of 2022. To talk of ‘taking back control’ while bond markets are left to govern governments is an exercise in distraction pure and simple.

As Chomsky and many others have repeatedly pointed out, corporate leaders have long understood the need to win ‘the everlasting battle for the minds of men’ by ‘indoctrinating citizens with the capitalist story’ and inoculating them against the dangerous lures of socialism or collectivism.⁴⁵ The ideal employee of a capitalist employer, like the ideal citizen of a modern state, is one who is willing not only to enforce its rules but to internalise its values, to fight for its interests, to fund its expenses, and to pay off its debts. Best of all would be citizen-employees who do these things in the earnest belief that they are doing them on the basis of their own free will, and who remain fully invested in the relative advantages they enjoy, as citizens, and as salaried, by comparison with all those who are deprived of citizenship or employment or both.⁴⁶ The supplementing of familiar kinds of labour-disciplining machinery and automation with newly artificial forms of both intelligence and volition, meanwhile, seem to herald further forms of social control whose implications may defy prediction until the very moment they are imposed.

After Hobbes, Rousseau and then Hegel mark clear stages along the path towards more penetrating forms of psychic power, culminating in those myriad projects (deployed in prisons, armies, factories, corporations, advertising strategies, social media platforms...) to engineer or ‘manufacture’ consent that continue to accelerate. Since a law is the expression of a will, and since ‘morals alone penetrate internally and direct wills,’⁴⁷ so then Rousseau understood that the real foundations of political power rest on the available means of directing wills – whether it’s to the advantage of a privileged few, or in favour of the common good. ‘While it is good to know how to use men as they are’, he insists, ‘it is much better still to make them what one needs them to be; the most absolute authority is that which penetrates to man’s inmost being, and affects his will no less than it does his actions.’⁴⁸ At the limit, the most effective forms of subjection would be those sustained by the energies and enthusiasms of the very people subjected to them, with a minimum of resistance or critical distance. As for those who might be seen to lack a will of their own, like the ‘lunatics and idiots’ evoked in Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* (and by implication, like all those ‘savages’ that Locke and then Mill’s compatriots would colonise in the Americas, Asia, and Africa), their consent can be taken for granted, as directed by their guardians and overseers.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Marx 1990, pp. 719, 769, 899; cf. Leipold 2022; Lordon 2014; Mau 2022; Wood 2005.

⁴⁵ Chomsky 2014; cf. Chomsky and Waterstone, 2021.

⁴⁶ Cf. Byung-Chul Han 2017.

⁴⁷ Rousseau 1994b, p. 71.

⁴⁸ Rousseau, 1997b, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Locke 1988, *Second Treatise of Government*, §60; cf. Chatterjee 2004.

Capital's unprecedented hegemony rests on the way its powers of command draw both on unprecedented means of coercion and on unprecedented means of manufacturing consent. The more fully its neoliberal agenda is implemented, the more any given government's options are decided by whether global investors and lenders have confidence in its credit or 'credibility'. Authoritarian neoliberalism will remain hegemonic, all over the world, for as long as it can persuade a sufficient number of people that there is still no alternative. It's becoming increasingly difficult, however, to disguise what this hegemony involves, and to deflect attention from what it is and what it seeks, as the power that one class wields over others. Its power to command rests in the end, no less than that of Charles Stuart or Louis Capet, on the willing obedience of its people. But who are these people? And what is their will?

IV Who are the people?

'The people' as a term can mean anything from a rigidly defined ethnic community to a seething mob of the resentful poor, and as a result the phrase 'popular sovereignty' itself remains equivocal. The ambiguities of usage (*peuple*, *populus*, *demos*, etc.) go back to antiquity, and have only multiplied over the past two centuries, and especially the past several decades, with the remarkable consolidation of 'democracy' as a globally recognised (and thus utterly vacuous) criterion of any legitimate form of government.⁵⁰ I propose here to simplify this semantic diversity by naming its two poles as starkly as possible, with labels that may sound rather forced or artificial but that should at least help to reduce equivocation – 'realm' on the hand, and 'mass' on the other. Popular sovereignty (to say nothing of 'populism') has become almost as empty a phrase as 'representative democracy'; the implications of mass sovereignty should offer less scope for evasion.

By *realm* I mean the people treated as an object or observable domain mediated by order, hierarchy, balance, and place. Some of the great thinkers of the realm include Aristotle, Hume, and Hegel. If Hegel remains an especially important philosopher of the realm it's not only because his account of estates and corporations provides most members of civil society with a well-defined place: his great contribution is to have developed a rationalising account of 'free will', precisely, that presents it as actualised only through the 'disposing' of citizens via institutions and practices that fully align their wills with their position in the state.

The term's archaic connotations are helpful. Drawing on its regal etymology, the realm should simultaneously evoke the people in two overlapping dimensions. They appear here first and foremost as the subjects of a kingdom or its post-monarchical substitute, i.e. a differentiated domain in all its localised and geographic complexity, one grounded in the established distribution of property and especially (drawing on further regal associations) of 'real estate', and in the obligations associated with it. Although the implications were perhaps most explicit in legal frameworks that treated serfs as an integral part of the land they worked, as Douglass and then Du Bois pointed out the practice of treating slaves first and foremost as real estate (to be followed by treating them as the targets of redlining, school segregation, urban 'renewal', mass incarceration...) continues to shape the social fabric of a country like the United States to this day.⁵¹ The people appear here, second, as classified members of a social 'pyramid' that is ordered from the top down, a model exemplified (not least for Madison, Hamilton and their fellow 'founding fathers') by the Rome's SPQR, in which a sprawling *populus* is mediated and led by a senate staffed solely by members of a tiny patrician or patriarch class.

The recurring norms and values of the realm, whatever its specific form, are those of harmony, stability, security, integration, and so on, on the model of an organic unity. A stable realm is one sustained by balanced interests and 'suitable' expectations. The realm is most fundamentally a place of inheritance and succession, the domain of a properly habitual if not

⁵⁰ Cf. Dunn 2018.

⁵¹ Cf. Kolchin 2009.

involuntary reproduction, facilitated on the one hand by positive appeals to proximity, nostalgia, mythology, ‘culture’, and so on, and on the other, by negative strategies of scapegoating, fear-mongering, victim-blaming, etc.⁵² The full psycho-political resources of a realm are most obviously put to the test when it embraces a state of war, and never more so than during the extraordinary imperialist rallying of populations to wage the war to end all wars.⁵³

A suitably secured realm can accommodate a wide range of subjects and interests, so long as they each occupy a well-defined place in the established order of things, and stick to it. In broad terms, these strategies of accommodation might again be analysed in terms of a spectrum drawn between two poles, one rigid, the other more flexible. The most obviously rigid realms, of course, are those that differentiate themselves along the caste-like logics characteristic of *ancien-régime* France, or of the racialised settler or *criollo* hierarchies adopted in Europe’s colonies in the Americas, Asia, and Africa.⁵⁴ Think of *la casta* that prevailed in the Spanish Americas, or of Saint-Domingue’s apparent determination, in the last decades of colonial rule, to differentiate between 128 degrees of whiteness. As Tocqueville understood better than many of his Orléaniste contemporaries, however, overly brazen and inflexible forms of class privilege, and excessively unequal distributions of property, offer the privileged little promise of long-term security.⁵⁵

Overt reliance on apartheid-style forms of discrimination is obviously hard to reconcile with even the flimsiest appeals to popular consent, and can endure only as long as such appeals can be dismissed with impunity – this is a condition that for the time being may still apply in territories occupied by Israel, for instance, but it’s one that mass mobilisation eroded in the US in the 1960s, and in Southern Africa over the 1970s and 80s.

A more flexible realm is more amenable to the kind of cautious reforms that capital requires of its state. It is better able to incorporate and pacify a wider range of interests, and to address ‘legitimate’ grievances, notably by tweaking its mechanisms of representation to become more inclusive, more diverse, more respectful of different perspectives, and so on, while leaving the essential class dynamics of the situation untouched. A more flexible and accommodating realm is less liable to the sorts of succession crises that can expose more narrowly hierarchical régimes to revolutionary pressures – think for instance of the way Mexico’s Porfiriato died along with its founder, or of how no-one could be found to succeed the last Romanov. By contrast, the pattern of English reforms from 1688 through 1832 and 1867 remains exemplary here. The persistence of the UK’s rentier-capitalist order is paradigmatic of a more flexible conception of the realm that grounds itself, in keeping with the principles of Hume or Burke, in the continuity of its settled prejudices and established customs. Sovereign authority in a realm ruled by King, Lords and Commons flows down monarch and aristocracy through the lesser propertied classes and on to the ‘deserving poor’ or ‘hard-working families’ – always excluding, of course, those who fall into the place-less and right-less category of the undeserving and the un-integrated, that ‘rabble’ or ‘surplus population’ destined, one way or another, for expulsion from the realm. The fascination that the English model held for Voltaire, Montesquieu and other Enlightenment thinkers is well known, and suitably institutionalised respect for the tradition and ‘spirit of the laws’ endures as an essential part of broadly neo-Burkean conservatism that played such a key role in countering the emphatically ‘un-English’ democratic revolutions that began in earnest in 1789, and that recurred through the long nineteenth-century.

Lacking time-sanctioned roots in an old-world social hierarchy, American settler colonies were free to experiment with still more fluid configurations of the realm, so long as these could contain the sort of threats posed by indigenous peoples, slaves, and the disaffected poor. Madison and the other framers did everything necessary, as they designed their

⁵² On this point see Kotsko 2018.

⁵³ Cf. Hedges 2014.

⁵⁴ See Simon 2017.

⁵⁵ Tocqueville 2016.

constitution, to ‘guarantee the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity, from any share’ in government.⁵⁶ The checks and balances urged by advocates of a mixed constitution from Polybius to Montesquieu would help to disarm any tyrannical majority that might threaten the interests of the ‘opulent minority’ whose ownership of the country entitles them to rule it. The size and diversity of the new American republic, furthermore, would happily make it ‘less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive’ to oppress others, and in particular to challenge the interests of the elite few – ‘or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.’⁵⁷ Above all (and this is a point that Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips arguably understood better than Frederick Douglass), by sanctioning the principle of slavery in its opening article, the US Constitution endorsed a means of social control and division that might compensate for the new country’s relative lack of old-style mechanisms of differentiation. Back in a more custom-bound Europe, at least before the mass dispossession of peasants led to widespread vagrancy in the countryside, the social equivalent of a visible ‘brand’ was usually an unnecessary supplement to perfectly adequate means of discerning status and rank, grounded in inheritance, property, occupation, demeanour, and so on.⁵⁸ In a new world edged by its apparently mobile ‘frontier’, however, and in which mass combinations of the labouring poor could lead to unrest on the scale of Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia (1676), recourse to the ‘psychological wage’ or ‘poisoned bait’ of white supremacy soon proved an invaluable means of dividing and ruling the working population. In addition to its service as ‘pedestal’ of capitalism, racialised slavery and its legacy provided a bulwark of order solid enough to withstand, two centuries later, the greatest challenge yet faced by the rulers of the American realm – the onslaught of civil war and the ensuing attempt at a genuinely democratic reconstruction.⁵⁹ To be held as a ‘prisoner of the American dream’, as so much of Mike Davis’ work has shown, is to remain caught in a uniquely resilient set of psycho-political constraints.

By ‘*mass*’ I mean the gathering and combining of anyone and everyone in a common cause, a converging of interests and purposes that proceeds as far as possible by means subtracted from the differentiating categories of the realm and its criteria of distinction and ‘refinement’. This is broadly what Rousseau or Robespierre mean by a *peuple*, and what Blanqui or Marx mean by the proletariat. Badiou’s formulation is ‘generic humanity’.

From a Jacobin perspective, a people is in no sense reducible to a population, i.e. to the inhabitants of an established realm, with its spread of particular interests and divergent opinions. ‘People’ is rather the name given to a collective actor that emerges only with the invention of ways of transcending such differences of interest and opinion.⁶⁰ For Rousseau’s revolutionary followers, the word *peuple* thus remains a semi-technical label, one that becomes meaningless or deceptive once isolated from the generalising exercise of its *volonté*. If a *peuple* is to prevail ‘we need a united will [*il faut une volonté une*]’,⁶¹ and a people is an actor whose very existence can only be clarified through the expression and assertion of its collective aims. This is why someone like Robespierre can observe in passing that while modern ‘Athens still has as many inhabitants as in the time of Miltiades and Aristides, there are no Athenians among them’; likewise ‘Rome persists only in Brutus.’⁶² This is also why Robespierre will so often insist on ‘this incontestable maxim that the people is good, that its

⁵⁶ Madison 1987, §63.

⁵⁷ Madison 1987, §10.

⁵⁸ On this point see Foucault’s suggestive discussion of the Physiocrat Guillaume-François Le Trosne’s considerations (in his *Mémoire sur les vagabonds et sur les mendiants* of 1764) on the use of branding, as part of a disciplinary response to the rise of rural vagrancy in mid-eighteenth-century France (Foucault 2015, pp. 50-51).

⁵⁹ I draw here on Du Bois’ path-breaking work *Black Reconstruction*, as well as on the complementary studies undertaken by followers like Theodore Allen (2012) and Noel Ignatiev (2022).

⁶⁰ Robespierre, ‘Sur l’appel au peuple’ (28 December 1792), in Robespierre 1958, pp. 198-9.

⁶¹ Robespierre 1828, p. 15.

⁶² Robespierre, ‘On the Principles of Political Morality’ (5 February 1794), in Robespierre 2007, p. 113.

delegates are corruptible, and that a safeguard against the vices and despotism of government must be found in the virtue and sovereignty of the people'⁶³ – the point was less to uphold some naïve faith in the intrinsic decency of ordinary residents of the realm, so much as to embrace the quasi-tautological idea that *if* and where one exists then by definition a people can be trusted to want what they see as their common good.

There are four things to emphasise about this conception of the people, which is so starkly at odds with today's reactionary populisms.

First, the term mass or massing refers here to an actor rather than a thing. What's at issue isn't the classic spectacle of the 'crowd' as an object seen from the perspective of an observer, or from the perspective of the realm (an object that, thus seen, can only seem like an irrational, impulsive and fearsome mob) but rather the massing together of all those who come to share in a common purpose. It is an action-centred category that is grasped better through participation than through observation, condemnation, or sympathy. In each case the participants, needless to say, are and remain individuals in the fully egalitarian sense of the term – one person, one voice. 'Sovereignty resides in the people', Robespierre repeatedly insists, i.e. 'in every member of the populace. Each individual therefore has the right to a say in the laws by which he is governed and in the choice of the administration which belongs to him; otherwise it is not true to say that all men are equal in rights, or that all men are citizens.'⁶⁴ 'Let us make no mistake', Blanqui adds, 'if everything must be done in the interest of the collective, nevertheless everything must be done by the individual. The individual is the element of humanity, like the stitch in a piece of knitting.'⁶⁵ There can be no other foundation for any collective voluntary project.

Having said that, there's an essential difference between atomised and organised collections of individuals. There's an essential difference between a merely numerical preponderance of opinions (a 'will of all') and a collectively organised determination to pursue a particular goal. For reasons Rousseau helps to explain, 'what generalizes the will is not so much the number of voices as it is the common interest which unites them,'⁶⁶ an interest which *may*, if it proves strong enough, come to win over a majority of all the voices in the situation. The only mass worthy of the name results from the converging of individuals who each come to want what any and all others also want, and who understand that determined solidarity alone offers a chance of achieving it. Only such a converging can generate the centripetal force required to keep a multitude of actors on the same page.

Second, a massing of people is something that takes place, in a specific situation at a specific time and for specific reasons, through forms of association that it finds or invents. It may begin in fits and starts, as hesitant or confused, as scattered or dispersed, but a mass action is one that acquires the means of overcoming the barriers that normally keep realm-abiding people apart. In addition to the revolutionary mobilisations in Paris and Petrograd that I'll mention in a moment, and to collective efforts epitomised for instance by the French *levée en masse* of 1793 or the Cuban literacy drive of 1961, paradigmatic examples include the general or mass strikes that loomed so large in the socialist imaginary and experience of the early twentieth century, and that remained paradigmatic for the poor people's movements discussed by Piven and Cloward in their landmark study.⁶⁷ Only actions on such a scale can acquire the 'critical mass' needed to overcome the realm's resistance to change. This is precisely why Hegel, no less than Burke or Hume, despised and feared any conception of the people understood in broadly Jacobin terms as the combining of 'many single individuals [...], i.e. as a formless mass whose movement and activity can consequently only be elemental, irrational, barbarous, and terrifying.'⁶⁸

⁶³ Robespierre, 'Sur la constitution' (10 May 1793), in Robespierre 1958, p. 498.

⁶⁴ Robespierre, cited in Dunn 2018, p. 115.

⁶⁵ Blanqui, 'The Sects and the Revolution' (1866), <https://blanqui.kingston.ac.uk/texts/the-sects-and-the-revolution-19-october-1866/>.

⁶⁶ Rousseau 1997c, p. 62 [SC 2:4].

⁶⁷ Piven and Cloward 1979; cf. Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, in Luxemburg 2008.

⁶⁸ Hegel 1991, §303.

Third, in the bald notion of ‘mass’ there are no criteria for exclusion or difference or rank. Reference to a massing or to ‘the masses’ prepares for a shift in reference from ‘a’ people or ‘the’ people to *people* pure and simple. The sole criterion for membership in the mass is humanity itself, in the sense that (as for Winstanley, Rousseau or Robespierre) ‘birth-rights’ are those that apply to all without exception or qualification. Like John Brown’s egalitarian God, the mass is ‘no respecter of persons.’ A mass cause is one that concerns anyone and everyone in the same way, to the exclusion only of those who remain stubbornly attached to the particular benefits that they may enjoy as a result of their place in the realm. This further distinguishes the category of the proletariat in its distinctively generic and revolutionary sense from merely sociological or non-Marxist conceptions of the ‘working class’ or the ‘working man’; the latter is a dimension of the realm, the former is an avatar of mass. Occupation and status and the colours of a collar are concerns of the realm. Again, it’s essential to take into account the full implications of Marx’s insistence that, as a political actor, ‘the working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.’

Fourth, and most important, there is also nothing in the bald notion of ‘mass’ that can itself hold a people together, for the simple reason that political actors are moral as well as natural figures. Although in their zeal to distance themselves from ‘utopian’ alternatives some scientific socialists might occasionally succumb to this temptation, a popular movement should never be understood as exerting a kind of ‘gravitational mass’. In the sense of the term affirmed here, when a mass hold together, what holds it is just the purposeful and deliberate converging of its participants in a common cause – in other words, its will. But what is a will?

V What is the will?

No less than the people, the concept of ‘the will’ – when it isn’t simply dismissed as ignorant ‘folk psychology’ on determinist or allegedly scientific neuro-biological grounds – is notoriously contested and ambiguous. It has been understood as either conscious or unconscious, as appetite or as reason, as compatible with freedom (Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel) or incompatible with it (Hobbes, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Deleuze...), and so on. It is hard to think of any canonical notion in the whole philosophical lexicon that has been more thoroughly disputed.

My own working definition here prioritises simplicity and familiarity over complex arguments in the history of philosophy, and draws on nuances that are captured perfectly well by ordinary English usage, not least those evoked by the truism ‘where there’s a will there’s a way’. At least seven synthetic or linking qualities are essential to this familiar conception of the term:

(1) Like desiring or wanting or wishing, like consciousness in general, willing is always intentional. Willing always involves willing *something*. To will is to will an end that is always more or less distinct, more or less clearly understood, more or less remote, more or less feasible with the available means and in the face of existing constraints, etc. A will links specific means to specific ends.

(2) Again like wanting, willing is bound up with both lack and desire. A will links biological needs and socially variable wants on the one hand with voluntarily assumed reasons and principles on the other. It would be as absurd to deny the natural foundations of faculties like volition or speech⁶⁹ as it would be to seek to reduce what they are capable of to some kind of reflection or mirroring of these foundations.

(3) Unlike futile wishing or yearning, however, willing involves the *capacity* to achieve what is willed, along with the effort of pursuing it. (The question of whether this effort might be successful, in any given case, is a separate issue). In this sense every exercise of will is relative to its acquired will-power. To be willing is always to be both willing and able. By comparison with French (which has only the one verb *vouloir* to express both want and will), the English language helpfully recognises a qualitative difference between a mere ‘I

⁶⁹ On this regularly contested point, see for instance Kenneth Miller 2019.

want' (with its dual connotations of 'I lack' and 'I would like...') and an active 'I will' or 'we will' (with its connotations of commitment, promise, project, plan, resolve, the future, and so on). The will is a relative and relational faculty, and it is relative, first and foremost, to its capacity for achieving what it might will. It isn't reducible to the blind pressures of impulse or appetite, as neo-Hobbesian reductionists like to argue – but nor can it be absolutely free and self-aware, as punitive theologians and public prosecutors like to argue, for reasons that have little to do with freedom.

(4) One of the capacities that's essential to sustaining a voluntary commitment is the capacity to will itself into the future, without thereby losing its self-determining autonomy in the present. If it a will is to persevere *as a will*, i.e. as voluntary, it must find ways to resist the tendencies and the inertia that will always encourage it to develop into its opposite, and to become merely habitual, or routine, or dogmatic. A will must remain self-critical and self-renewing. I'll come back to the challenge posed by this 'dialectic of the will' in the final section of this article.

(5) Unlike a person's vital needs or instinctual drives, an exercise of will is always more or less voluntary and thus more or less conscious. A will is more considered, more conscious and deliberate, than a mere want. Once again the 'more or less' is essential here, and given the way infants are raised and socialised, the unconscious is of course an irreducible dimension of human experience. To affirm the primacy of a rational will is not to downplay the pressures of desire and need. It should go without saying that there can be no perfectly conscious line of thought or course of action, no more than there can be any absolutely free will. It should also go without saying, however, that it's impossible to do justice to what political actors say and do on the assumption that actors are primarily driven by unconscious fantasy. Any exercise of volition is oriented by more or less informed deliberation, i.e. more or less adequate forms of knowledge, self-awareness, anticipation of likely consequences, etc. There is no stark dualism of will and intellect, any more than there a sharp break between will and desire. To characterise the will as the 'higher faculty of desire' is only fruitful if height remains a thoroughly relative and relational term.

(6) Insofar as a decision remains willed or voluntary rather than compelled, it also remains, right down to the final instant of its execution, more or less contingent or non-necessary. A willed decision is one that always *could* have gone the other way – not because of an ultimately indifferent 'free whim', but because actors have an irreducible degree of discretion as they weigh up values and priorities, means and ends, outcomes and consequences, and so on. Actors are sometimes faced with genuine decisions. No amount of rationalisation after the fact, no appeals to the sort of retrospective necessity that may sometimes seem so clear in the *wake* of a decision ('it was inevitable', 'there was never really a choice', etc.), can ever minimise the anguished searching involved in the actual first-person making of a decision, in the present. Should we go this way or that way? Sometimes it is up to us, and so depends on how we are organised, how we are informed and educated, what our priorities and expectations are, how these might change under pressure, and so on.

(7) Since it varies with capacity and resolve any exercise of willing thus varies with the character and scope of the actor involved. For a whole host of psychological, social, and thus psycho-social reasons, an actor can become more or less resolute or committed, more or less ready for action, and more or less lucid about what that action involves. This actor, in particular, can be more or less extended or expansive, more or less buoyed by relations of solidarity and reinforcement with others. Again, it is thoroughly unhelpful to conceive of the will as an essentially inward and isolated faculty, one that operates in the absence of all 'external' motivations, indeed in the absence of all relations *tout court*.

Unfortunately, the most familiar and influential conceptions of the will embrace versions of such introversion as an essential aspect of its freedom. As briefly anticipated above, the Stoic investment in an inner or attitudinal freedom remains paradigmatic here, and it's surely no accident that echoes of Stoic wisdom have become so prominent in today's self-help marketplace. Rational actors are always free to accept or to resent what happens to them, the

Stoics maintain, so long they can also accept that they can have no significant influence upon what happens to them. A disciplined mind is free to decide whether to accept or regret what happens because its essential activity remains aloof from involvement in what happens. A true sage knows, as Marcus Aurelius puts it, that ‘every event is the right one’, and ‘whatever happens at all happens as it should.’⁷⁰ ‘Let man be pleased with whatever has pleased God’, says Seneca; true virtue is ‘pleased with what it has, and does not lust after that which it has not.’⁷¹ So long as we manage to adjust or ‘incline our will’ to accept whatever occurs as both necessary and right, then we can affirm our assent to what happens as itself free rather than forced. ‘Do not seek to have things happen as you wish’, adds the former slave Epictetus, ‘but wish them to happen as they actually do happen, and all will be well with you.’⁷² The general approach is summed up in a recurring image, attributed to Chrysippus:

When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow, it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity. But if the dog does not follow, it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they don’t want to, they will be compelled to follow what is destined.⁷³

Our will may be thoroughly free to affirm or to bemoan our destiny, in short, but only because it is just as thoroughly powerless to change it. If the sage ‘escapes necessity’ this is only ‘because he wills what necessity is about to force on him’, and since ‘fate leads the willing and drags along the unwilling’, so then ‘noble spirits’ should always ‘let fate find us ready and eager’, rather than defiant or unreconciled.⁷⁴ Revived with particular force by Nietzsche and then Deleuze, the logic of such *amor fati* further resonates with the ruthless equanimity of liberalism’s *laissez faire*, and thus with the common sense that orients our era.

The most influential and canonical accounts of the will generally conform to this neo-Stoic script, in a trajectory marked, among others, by Augustine, Scotus, Malebranche, and Edwards. As traced over the history of philosophy, it’s a trajectory whose destination is most often oriented towards Kant on the one hand or Hegel on the other.

Kant’s unqualified affirmation of moral autonomy pushes neo-Stoic introversion to its limit.⁷⁵ According to Kant, we are always free and thus able to do the right thing, i.e. to obey the moral law that our reason prescribes for us as for all other rational beings, so long as we cultivate the strength of character required to master our appetites and fears. Kant’s moral law is a law in the strongest and mostly implacably commanding sense of the term. ‘In order for it to have a sovereign authority over us, we must give morality the supreme power over ourselves, so that it rules over our sensibility’ and our other faculties. If we are willing to do everything necessary to cultivate such an ‘autocracy of freedom’, we can overcome all ‘pathological’ and heteronomous influences.⁷⁶ On this condition, it lies within ‘the power of the mind [*der Macht des Gemüths*] to master its morbid feelings by sheer resolution.’⁷⁷ Kant absolutises the power of such moral resolution, however, while at the same time depriving it of any political and indeed ‘worldly’ purchase altogether. He affirms an unconditional freedom of the will while simultaneously rendering opaque and indeterminate its material effects on the world we live in. There is no contradiction, then, between the moralising-individualist Kant who recognises freedom’s ‘power to pass beyond any and every specified

⁷⁰ Marcus Aurelius 2002, book 4, §10.

⁷¹ Seneca, Letter to Lucilius LXXIV.19-21, 12, in Seneca 1989b.

⁷² Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, ch. 8, Epictetus, *Discourses* II 14, §7, in Epictetus 2008.

⁷³ Hippolytus [citing Zeno and Chrysippus], *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.21, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 386.

⁷⁴ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* LIV.7; CVII.11, in Seneca 1989a.

⁷⁵ This is a point emphasised in Vetö 2002.

⁷⁶ Kant, ‘Moral Philosophy: Collins’s Lecture notes’ [1784], in Kant 1997, pp. 137-44 [AK 27:361-8]; cf. Baxley 2010, pp. 54-5, 83-4.

⁷⁷ Kant, ‘Conflict of the Faculties’, in Kant 1992, p. 175 [AK 7: 97].

limit' and the politically powerless neo-Stoic Kant who insists that 'a people has a duty to put up with even what is held to be an unbearable abuse of supreme authority.'⁷⁸

By contrast, Hegel's emphatically anti-Kantian form of neo-Stoicism seeks to align a person's free will directly with the worldly realm they inhabit. A legal person's 'initially' abstract and indeterminate will gains actual freedom via all the practices (their disposal of property, their engagement in lawful contracts, their familial obligations, their moral purposes, their roles in civil society, their religious commitments...) that dispose them to be a patriotic and dutiful member of a modern state. If Hegel notoriously presents the modern state as 'the march of God in the world', it is because such a state bases itself on 'the power of reason actualising itself as will,'⁷⁹ i.e. as 'the actuality of concrete freedom'. In Europe's post-Reformation context such freedom demands that 'personal individuality and its particular interests should reach their full development', ensuring the 'complete freedom of particularity and the well-being of individuals' – and also, that these individuals freely 'pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal', i.e. that they align themselves with the interests of the state as a whole, and 'knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own substantial spirit, and actively pursue it as their ultimate end' (§260). The upshot is a united body of patriotic citizens who voluntarily and indeed zealously devote their energies to the good of the state, and who (no less than the deferential citizens evoked by Hume, Burke, or Bagehot) accept its essential configuration or constitution without questioning or investigating it, as effectively 'divine and enduring, and as exalted above the sphere of all manufactured things' (§273).

Kant and Hegel offer alternative means of depriving the will of any consequential political capacity. Understood à la Kant as a wholly introspective and thus indifferently individual or universal exercise, withdrawn from any constitutive interaction with other individuals or with the world in general, the will is equipped with absolute power over its own exercise and domain – and stripped of any power over anything else. For his part, by folding the actualisation of the will into the established continuum of the realm, Hegel divests it of any capacity for collective self-determination, or at least for any sort of self-determination that involves dissent or change. Neither account can prepare the ground for an actively political or general conception of the will. For that we need to turn first to Rousseau, for the theory, and to the Jacobins, for the practice.

VI Rousseau

For Robespierre and his most committed associates, the great effort of the French revolution was to impose upon 'the government of nations' the 'morality [that] used to be only in philosophers' books.'⁸⁰ The most important of these books, without a doubt, were those written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau's general importance for this project is twofold. First of all, his point of departure is an unequivocal rejection of any form of sub-voluntary determinism or necessity, in favour of an expressly voluntarist account of political action. His famous counter-factual evocation of a pre-historical or pre-social state of nature characterised by solitude and sufficiency, sketched at the beginning of his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, serves to preclude recourse to any supposedly 'innate' conceptions of a general interest or to an instinctive i.e. *involuntary* orientation to a common good – for example, the sort of orientation claimed by those who defend hierarchical social orders by analogy with actually-existing patriarchal family models. The transformative association or 'act by which a people is a people' is itself 'the most voluntary act' in the world,⁸¹ for nothing that precedes it also orients or determines it. In the rare cases where one exists, a common interest shared by a

⁷⁸ Kant 1999, A317/B374; Kant 1996, p. 463 [AK 6:320-321]; cf. 'On the Common Saying, that may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice', in Kant 1996, p. 297 [AK 8:297-298].

⁷⁹ Hegel 1991, §258A.

⁸⁰ Robespierre, 'Response of the National Convention' (5 December 1793), in Robespierre 2007, pp. 93-4.

⁸¹ Rousseau 1997c, p. 49 [SC 1:5]; Rousseau, 1997c, p. 123 [SC 4:2].

gathering of people can only arise as something that they themselves have deliberately willed and consciously instituted, and not as something they need simply recognise or receive, on the basis of instinct or inheritance, or as the gift of a benevolent ruler. If an association comes to value equality, for instance, it's because its participants have chosen to do so, pure and simple.

Rejecting natural forces or sub-voluntary pressures that might orient political actors, Rousseau thus affirms that 'there is no true action without will. This is my first principle.' Furthermore, 'there is no true will without freedom. Man is therefore free in his actions.'⁸² Or again, since 'one has to be free in order to will [...], if someone can compel my will it's certain that I am no longer free.'⁸³ As actors we are free in an immediately and sufficiently practical sense, even if Rousseau (no less than Kant) readily accepts that we remain incapable of knowing theoretically the nature and scope of such freedom. Taking these points together, Rousseau concludes that 'the principle of every action is in the will of a free being. One cannot go back beyond that. It is not the word freedom which means nothing; it is the word necessity.'⁸⁴

Although he rarely mentions him, Gramsci writes in the spirit of Rousseau more than that of Marx when he immediately welcomes the insurrection of October 1917 as the opening of an era in which a people's 'collective will becomes the driving force of the economy, the force which shapes reality itself,'⁸⁵ or when he later recognises, more generally, that 'one can "foresee" to the extent that one acts, to the extent that one applies a voluntary effort and therefore contributes concretely to creating the result "foreseen" [...]. 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.'⁸⁶

Second of all (and this is his great virtue relative to Kant, and to the whole neo-Stoic individualist tradition), Rousseau emphasises the many ways that willing is bound up with acting or doing, or more precisely with the *capacity* to act. As Descartes had recognised we may be free to wish for whatever we want, but Rousseau understands that we can only properly *will* those ends that we may in principle achieve. Rousseau knows as well as Trotsky or Gramsci that 'whoever wills the end cannot refuse the means.'⁸⁷ The scope of any *vouloir* or will varies directly with its *pouvoir* or power, and Rousseau distils the relation between the two in what he calls his 'fundamental maxim': 'the truly free man wills only what he can do [*ne veut que ce qu'il peut*], and he does what he pleases.'⁸⁸

It's this essentially relational quality of the will, its variable will-power, that explains why we can never 'know what our nature permits us to be.'⁸⁹ It's our willing and doing, and not our being or nature, that establishes what is possible or 'permitted', and that tests it in practice. Rousseau underlines the fact that 'the limits of the possible in moral matters are less narrow than we think. It is our weaknesses, our vices, our prejudices that shrink them.'⁹⁰ Again, 'it is only our lukewarm will which causes all of our weakness' and the power of a will is never set in advance. 'We are always strong enough to do what we strongly will. *Volenti nihil difficile* – nothing is difficult for those who will.' Nothing is difficult, in particular, for those whose will is 'de-natured' and expanded via voluntary association with others.⁹¹ A person who commits to such an association finds that 'his faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas enlarged, his sentiments ennobled, his entire soul is elevated to such an extent' that his capacities are thoroughly transformed. From a 'stupid and bounded animal' he is converted into an actor equipped with 'moral freedom, which alone makes man truly the

⁸² Rousseau 2010, p. 434, p. 442.

⁸³ Rousseau 1997b, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Rousseau 2010, p. 442.

⁸⁵ Gramsci 1994, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Gramsci 1971, pp. 438, 172.

⁸⁷ Rousseau 1997b, p. 23; cf. Trotsky 2017, p. 25; Gramsci 1994, p. 99.

⁸⁸ Rousseau 2010, p. 215.

⁸⁹ Rousseau 2010, p. 190.

⁹⁰ Rousseau 1997c, p. 110 [SC 3:12].

⁹¹ Rousseau, 2010, p. 494, p. 164.

master of himself.’⁹² As the Irish revolutionary James Connolly put it in another context, ‘our curse is our belief in our weakness’ – but once organised and united, ‘we are not weak, we are strong.’⁹³

Rousseau’s abiding concern, then, is with this question that is so basic but also so far-reaching: what makes a will strong enough to accomplish what it wants? As we have seen, the strength of a political will varies directly with its generality or extensivity on the one hand, and its intensity or concentration on the other. The tension between these two conditions is irreducible, and it informs Rousseau’s two main pieces of practical advice for future revolutionaries. First, do not confuse sovereignty and government; the one is a function of will, the other of its execution. The people are sovereign to the extent they retain a capacity to assemble as an inclusive and egalitarian mass, as a ‘free community of equals’, committed to a common will. Sovereign command and general will are one and the same. ‘The mainspring of public authority is in the hearts of the citizens’, and a law is only lawful if it’s a direct expression of the people’s will.⁹⁴ The derivative and quite separate role of government is simply to follow orders and to do what the people commands of it. Though secondary in relation to the sovereign, the government’s role too is essential, and Rousseau (for some of the same sorts of reasons that Frédéric Lordon has begun to stress in his recent work⁹⁵) would have no truck with those who yearned for a day when the need for a centralised and imposing executive power might somehow ‘wither away’. The real challenge is posed by the opposite tendency: since government is essential in any complex society, and since the members of a government have their own priorities and share in their own corporate will, a government strong and concentrated enough to do its job effectively will also soon try to usurp sovereign authority, and to position itself over and above the people it should serve.⁹⁶ The least that can be said is that Rousseau’s repeated warnings about this danger lost none of their pertinence over the twentieth century.

Rousseau’s other piece of advice follows on from this warning. Only the unflagging efforts of organised association and oversight allow a people to retain control over its government and to pre-empt the formation of any would-be ruling class. The general name that Rousseau gives to such efforts is ‘virtue’. Virtue is literally a matter of political ‘will-power’ in the sense that virtuous practices and institutions lend the will the various powers it needs to overcome the obstacles posed by both social corruption and ‘natural’ temptation. To be virtuous, for Rousseau as then for Robespierre or Saint-Just, is to put the common good – the good consistent with the equality, freedom and interests of *every* member of the situation – before any partial or personal interests. As ‘the goal of the government is the realization of the general will’, what most directly threatens to ‘prevent it from achieving this goal is the obstacle of private wills.’⁹⁷ So then, since ‘virtue is only the collection of the most general wills’, and since every person is ‘virtuous when their particular will conforms in all things to the general will’, if we want to ensure that our general will prevails our task is simply ‘to make virtue reign.’⁹⁸

Rousseau concedes that contemporary social conditions make vigorous mass association difficult, but as a matter of both principle and practice, ‘where right and freedom are everything, inconveniences are nothing.’ In a virtuous state ‘everyone flies to the assemblies’ as a matter of course; by contrast, ‘as soon as someone says about affairs of state, What do I care? the state has to be considered lost.’⁹⁹

⁹² Rousseau 1997c, pp. 53-4 [SC 1:8].

⁹³ James Connolly, ‘Speech on War’s Outbreak’, 30 August 1914, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/09/wrsotbrk.htm>.

⁹⁴ Rousseau 1997b, p. 13; cf. Rousseau 1997c, p. 81 [SC 2:12].

⁹⁵ Cf. Toscano 2022.

⁹⁶ Rousseau, 1997c, p. 106 [SC 3: 10]; p. 119 [3:18].

⁹⁷ Rousseau 1994, p. 24 [*Fragments* 3:12].

⁹⁸ Rousseau 1994, p. 22 [*Fragments* 3:6]; Rousseau 1997b, p. 15, p. 13.

⁹⁹ Rousseau, 1997c, p. 114 [SC 3:15].

VII The French Revolution

The French revolutionaries who read Rousseau so carefully, and who maintained remarkable forms of oversight over their governments through to their defeat in 1794, took unprecedented steps to make mass assembly one of the great priorities of the day. Though its impact shouldn't be under-estimated, American independence had marked only a partial change in the ruling personnel; the post-colonial realm's essential class and racialising dynamics were preserved and intensified. The collective and wide-ranging assault on the *ancien régime* that began in earnest in the summer of 1789, by contrast, rightly deserves acknowledgement as the beginning of 'serious' i.e. mass politics.¹⁰⁰ At its most schematic, the basic story of the French Revolution can be told in terms of the series of steps whereby a people organised themselves to wrest sovereignty away from their king, i.e. to replace his will with theirs, as the new basis of political authority.¹⁰¹ There is space here only to list several of the most striking and most familiar of these steps.

Once it became undeniably clear that if the king continued to try to govern the realm by royal fiat he would bankrupt it, his ministers reluctantly agreed to summon the Estates General to approve a new set of taxes. After debating how they should be constituted and what they should be called, in June 1789 the deputies of the Third Estate effectively laid an abrupt claim to sovereign power when they appropriated the role and powers of a 'National Assembly,' and insisted that 'the interpretation and presentation of the general will belong to it' and to it alone.¹⁰² A couple of days later, locked out of their usual meeting place (and bringing to completion a collective transformation that would fascinate Sartre and then Tackett when they came to reflect on how groups can acquire a shared sense of purpose and solidarity), these deputies affirmed their 'unshakeable resolution' to draw up a new constitution, announcing that 'nothing can stop the National Assembly from continuing its deliberations in whatever place it may be obliged to establish itself.'¹⁰³ When in a further *séance royale* of 23 June Louis again insisted on his right to 'act alone for the good of my peoples', he was immediately confounded when the deputies he ordered to disperse instead stood their ground, with Mirabeau declaring that 'we are here by the will of the people, and that we shall retire only at the point of the bayonet.'¹⁰⁴

A couple of weeks after the confrontation in Versailles, the events that led to the destruction of the Bastille further demonstrated that the king's government could no longer rely on the loyalty of either the professional army or the newly improvised civilian militias that were in the process of constituting themselves as a National Guard. It also demonstrated a remarkable, new-found though long-cultivated confidence among the mass of Parisians themselves, who proved themselves capable of rapidly organising, arming and deploying a force too strong for the old régime to contain, thereby lending a new material basis to the equation of the people's will and sovereign power.¹⁰⁵ The 'great fear' that swept much of the countryside in the summer of 1789 further confirmed the scale and strength of the insurgency, compelling the Assembly to make a dramatic series of concessions in early August that abolished much of the legal basis for feudal privileges and hierarchies almost overnight.

The balance of forces underlying this new reality received its most striking early confirmation when on 5 October 1789 a huge gathering of women, frustrated by months of food shortages and ministerial inactivity, took matters into their own hands and decided quite literally to show their government who was in charge. Massing themselves into a force too large and too resolute to deflect, they won over the support of thousands of National Guards and marched on Versailles in order to force the king and his family to relocate to Paris, where they would spend the rest of their lives exposed more directly to popular oversight.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Mariegaard 2016.

¹⁰¹ For a good recent overview of the following sequence see Hazan 2014.

¹⁰² McPhee 2016, p. 69

¹⁰³ Cited in McPhee 2016, 69-70. Cf. Sartre 2008; Tackett 1996.

¹⁰⁴ McPhee 2016, p. 70.

¹⁰⁵ See in particular Alpaugh 2014; Wahnich 2008, p. 186; Godechot 1970.

I don't think it would be too reductive to characterise the years between the forced relocation of the monarchy in October 1789 and its eventual overthrow in August 1792 as a prolonged battle of political wills, pitting the masses who embraced this new landscape with enthusiasm against those who sought to preserve what they could of the old realm and their privileged place in it. The latter desperately tried to bring the revolution to a close, by mixing recourse to repression with the passage of moderate reforms; one way or another the former insisted that the revolution should continue through to the consolidation of more far-reaching changes. The revolutionary camp would divide, at each of the turning points that defined the next few years, over the question of just how far things had to change, from the admission of a merely civic equality for the more cautious (like Pétion or Brissot) to the assertion of a full social equality for the most radical (like Maréchal or Babeuf). If in 1792-93 it was figures like Robespierre and Marat who emerged as leading voices at a national level (while Parisian militants like Antoine Santerre and Sulpice Huguenin became prominent at a municipal level) it's because they were the most emphatic and consistent defenders of mass sovereignty, in both theory and practice. Surely no one did more than Robespierre, during these tumultuous years, to try to establish a 'reign of virtue' – with all of its force, and all of its dangers.

The most important step in this sequence, of course, and the last that we have space to mention here, is the most far-reaching and most carefully prepared assertion of popular sovereignty in French history: the overthrow of the monarchy on 10 August 1792, and its replacement by a democratic republic.¹⁰⁶ If the great mobilisations or *journées* of 1789 had been hastily improvised, the massing that toppled the régime was many months in the making. By June, with the country threatened by invasion and its armies undermined by treason, the Assembly was flooded by petitions from all over the country. The prevailing message was unambiguous, as illustrated by this address from citizens of Marseilles, which was read out in the Assembly on 19 June:

French liberty is in danger, and the free men of the South have all risen to defend it. The day of the people's anger has come [*loud applause on the left of the Assembly and in the public galleries...*]. It is the people's strength that makes up all of your strength; you have it in your hands, now use it. [...] The people want to save themselves, and to save you as well; should you try to prevent this sublime movement? Are you capable of it?¹⁰⁷

The following day, the spokesman for the crowds who invaded both the Assembly and the royal chamber gave the people's representatives clear instructions: 'Execute, then, the will of the people who sustain you, and who will die to defend you. Unite, act, it is time. It is time, [...] and nothing must stop you.'¹⁰⁸ The Assembly preferred to prevaricate, however, until eventually a critical mass of people were prepared to force the issue.

In the bloody show-down that took place on 10 August 1792, the king was driven from his palace and into prison. A further message delivered to the Assembly, by the victorious leaders of this insurrection, made the transfer of sovereignty explicit:

It is the new magistrates of the people who present themselves at your bar. The new dangers to the country provoked our election; the circumstances counselled it and our patriotism will render us worthy of it. [...]. Legislators: all that is left is to back up the people [*seconder le peuple...*]. The people who have sent us to you [...] recognizes only the French people, your sovereign and ours, gathered in primary assemblies, as fit to judge the extraordinary measures which necessity and resistance to oppression have led it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ The most thorough and illuminating account remains Reinhard 1969.

¹⁰⁷ *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 45, pp. 397-8.

¹⁰⁸ Antoine Santerre, in *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 45, p. 411.

¹⁰⁹ Sulpice Huguenin, cited in Jaurès 2015, p. 106.

When he came to defend these measures from attacks levelled by his Girondin opponents several months later, Robespierre likewise sought to balance defence of mass or general sovereignty with its necessarily concentrated exercise. ‘While it is true that a great nation cannot rise in a simultaneous movement, and that tyranny can only be struck by the portion of citizens that is closest to it’, this most concentrated portion should ‘be regarded as justified by tacit proxy for the whole of society.’ The mass of Parisians that overthrew the monarchy acted ‘in the name of all the departments. They should either be approved or repudiated entirely.’¹¹⁰ The insurgents had cleared the way for a new assembly, a new constitution, and a newly egalitarian and participatory conception of citizenship. ‘The reign of equality begins’, Robespierre enthused to his constituents in late September, and no-one can now delimit ‘the extent of the glorious path the human spirit opens before you.’¹¹¹

It didn’t take long for those opposed to this glorious path first to tip the country into civil war, and then to devise, after Thermidor, a suitably post-feudal constitution to remake the realm. As Sieyès and his *modéré* allies had anticipated back in the summer of 1789, this constitution would rest on new mechanisms of representation, i.e. new ways of filtering popular participation in politics according to ‘competence’ and wealth. Recourse to representation is the anti-Rousseauist move par excellence, for if ‘sovereignty is nothing is nothing but the exercise of the general will [...], it] can only be represented by itself; power can well be transferred, but not will.’¹¹² Rousseau had insisted that ‘sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated; it consists essentially in the general will, and the will does not admit of being represented: either it is the same or it is different; there is no middle ground.’ A person either actively wills something or they don’t. A people can appoint deputies or agents, but so long as they are sovereign no-one can will or legislate in their place. On these grounds, Rousseau concluded that ‘the instant a people gives itself representatives it ceases to be free; it ceases to be.’¹¹³ Following the restoration of 1815, it took Guizot and the *doctrinaires* a few years to get the country used to the routines and priorities of ‘representative government’, but once new habits of law and order had been acquired the stage was set for the long triumph of ‘liberal democracy’ – a triumph that is still celebrated, in its essential principles, by the most recent generation of Thermidorians, led in France by the likes of Furet, Gauchet, and Rosanvallon.

VIII Marx

Marx is famously critical of the sort of merely ‘political will’ he associates, in different places, with Robespierre and Blanqui. As illustrated by the Jacobins in particular, ‘the more one-sided’ and exclusive ‘political intelligence’ becomes, ‘the more it believes in the omnipotence of the will, the blinder it is to the natural and intellectual limits of the will, and thus the more incapable it is of discovering the sources of social evils.’¹¹⁴ Analysis of these sources should instead pay more attention to those economic factors that are precisely ‘independent of the will’ of the actors they constrain. From his first ventures into political journalism, Marx stressed the importance of objective ‘relationships which determine both the actions of private persons and of individual authorities, and which are as independent of the will as breathing.’ Analysis of these relations allows some forms of behaviour ‘to be determined with almost the same certainty as a chemist determines the external conditions under which given substances will form a compound.’¹¹⁵ Factors like the division of labour and resulting forms of cooperation that people experience ‘not as voluntary [...], not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them’, impose themselves in ways

¹¹⁰ Robespierre, ‘Answer to Louvet’s Accusation’, in Robespierre 2007, p. 43.

¹¹¹ Robespierre, *Lettres à ses commettants* (September 1792) cited in McPhee 2013, pp. 134-5.

¹¹² Rousseau 1997c, p. 57 [SC 2:1].

¹¹³ Rousseau 1997c, p. 115 [SC 3:15].

¹¹⁴ Marx, ‘Critical Remarks on the Article “The King of Prussia and Social Reform”’ (1844), in Marx 2000, pp. 134-5.

¹¹⁵ Marx 2000, p. 30; cf. Marx 1998, p. 348, p. 99.

that are ‘independent of the will and the action of man, nay even being the prime governor of these.’¹¹⁶

It’s an illusion, as Marx will conclude over the tumultuous course of the year 1850, to believe that ‘revolutions are not the product of the realities of the situation but the result of a mere *effort of will*.’¹¹⁷ To understand modern economic development in particular means grasping the objective or sub-voluntary laws that govern commodification and the monetarised forms of ‘general equivalence’ that enable commodity exchange. As Marx’s most widely discussed formulations have it, it is people’s ‘social being that determines their consciousness’ rather than the reverse,¹¹⁸ and from his scientific or anti-utopian perspective communism is not a mere ‘ideal’ to be pursued but ‘the real movement’ already shaping the emergent order of things.¹¹⁹ Since ‘no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed,’ so then from this perspective any attempt at political revolution made prior to capital’s exhaustion can be condemned in advance as ‘quixotic’.¹²⁰

Along these lines, it would be hard to deny that Marx’s materialist approach often encourages him to downplay questions of proletarian agency and purpose in favour of an analysis of what proletarians apparently *are*, or are tending to become. Since Marx believes that ‘capitalist production begets its own negation with the inexorability of a natural process,’¹²¹ so then what most matters, at least in the general development of the class struggle, is not ‘what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do.’¹²² Forced by ‘radical chains’ to reproduce and intensify the conditions that immiserate it, the proletariat is a class ‘driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity’ by an ‘urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need* – the practical expression of *necessity*.’¹²³ Understood in this way, the proletariat is both the embodied anticipation of communism and the emergence of a class that *must* dissolve all classes, or rather it *is* a ‘social group that is the dissolution of all social groups.’ When then ‘the proletariat proclaims the dissolution of the hitherto existing world order, it merely declares the secret of its own existence, since it *is* in fact the dissolution of this order.’¹²⁴ Recognition of what it is and so must do is certainly ‘conscious’, Marx adds, but it is the consciousness of a necessity which itself ‘emanates’ from proletarianisation itself. The proletariat develops as a class ‘which has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which, ousted from society, is forced into the most decided antagonism to all other classes; a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness.’¹²⁵

On the other hand, however, and complicating this seemingly unilateral account of historical progression, Marx also consistently insists on the primacy of revolutionary practice, and on treating social transformation as an emphatically practical question. The young Marx insists on the distinctive way that, unlike other animals, ‘man makes his life activity itself an

¹¹⁶ Marx 1998, p. 53-54.

¹¹⁷ Marx 2000, p. 326 [‘Speech to the Central Committee of the Communist League’, September 1850].

¹¹⁸ Marx, 2000, p. 425 [Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*].

¹¹⁹ Marx 1998, p. 57; Marx 2000, p. 590 [*The Civil War in France*].

¹²⁰ Marx, 2000, p. 426 [Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*]; Marx, 1993, p. 159. The broadly Menshevik implications of this aspect of Marx’s work are explored in detail by Chattopadhyay 2019 and 2021.

¹²¹ Marx 1990, p. 929.

¹²² Marx 1975b, p. 37.

¹²³ Marx 1975b, p. 37. ‘So where is the real possibility of a German emancipation? We answer: in the formation of a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not a class of civil society, of a social group that is the dissolution of all social groups [...] This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the proletariat’ (Marx 2000, p. 81 [‘Towards a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction’]). Cf. David James 2021, ch. 6.

¹²⁴ Marx 2000, p. 81 [‘Towards a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction’].

¹²⁵ Marx 1998, p. 60.

object of his will and consciousness’;¹²⁶ in a crucial chapter of *Capital* the older Marx insists in 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.¹²⁷ The young Marx, furthermore, foregrounds ‘the self-determination of the people’, and emphasizes the unique virtues of democracy as the political form of a fully ‘human existence’, one in which ‘the law exists for the sake of man’ rather than vice versa,¹²⁸ and is formulated as ‘the conscious expression of the popular will, and therefore originates with it and is created by it.’¹²⁹ The older Marx will likewise embrace the Paris Commune of 1871 as an exemplary instance of precisely this sort of democracy in action, and an illustration of our capacity to invent a political lever that can wedge its way *underneath* the ‘material’ base of social being – ‘a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule.’¹³⁰ It’s essential to remember that this material base itself, furthermore, 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. Especially during periods of revolutionary opportunity, as briefly in 1871, or in 1848-50, what takes pride of place in Marx’s political perspective isn’t any sort of inexorable historical determinism so much as a strategic need for vigorous and lucid action, carried out by an independent, resolute and fully conscious political actor.¹³¹

The chief target of Marx’s critique of bourgeois ideology in general and of bourgeois political economy in particular is precisely the way it discourages proletarian resolution and consciousness, by disguising as natural and inevitable capitalist forms of compulsion and command. Early and late, Marx understands communism as a definitive end to all such compulsion and dependence, and thus as ‘the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man’, ‘the true resolution of the conflict [...] between freedom and necessity.’¹³² What is at stake in the revolutionary transition from capitalism to communism is nothing other than the ‘development of all human powers as such,’¹³³ 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.’¹³⁴ Once we understand the ways we determine our social relations, Engels will add in a quasi-Rousseauist vein, ‘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.’¹³⁵

It would be a great mistake, therefore, to assume that Marx’s critique of narrowly political will, and his insistence on objective constraints, necessarily implies a rejection of deliberate and voluntary action in general, let alone of proletarian political action in particular. If Marx draws out the very real effects of capitalist compulsion, which individuals subjected to capital can only experience as operating with a force comparable to that of a natural law, he also and more fundamentally aims to show that there can be nothing actually natural or transhistorical about any such laws. On the contrary, what should be stressed is instead the way Marx and Engels, and then also Kautsky, Lenin, Gramsci and many others, see the ‘necessitarian’ and ‘emancipatory’ dimensions of proletarian practice as complementary

¹²⁶ Marx 1992, p. 329 [*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*].

¹²⁷ Marx 1990, pp. 283-4.

¹²⁸ Marx 1992, pp. 89, 88 [*Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*].

¹²⁹ Marx, ‘The Divorce Bill’ [1842], in Marx 1975a, p. 309.

¹³⁰ Marx 2000, p. 589 [*Class Struggles in France*].

¹³¹ See in particular Marx et al., ‘Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League’ (March 1850), in Marx 2000, pp. 303-12.

¹³² Marx 1992, p. 348 [*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*]; cf. Marx 1991, p. 959.

¹³³ Marx 1993, p. 488.

¹³⁴ Marx 1998, p. 59.

¹³⁵ Engels 1987, pp. 266, 270.

facets of one and the same political project. Writing in 1850, Marx knew perfectly well that since the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie ‘will as long as possible remain hesitant, undecided, and inactive’, so then ‘in the impending bloody conflicts, as in all earlier ones, it is the workers who, in the main, will have to win the victory by their courage, determination, and self-sacrifice.’¹³⁶ It is this *political* and activist determination that is determinant in the first instance. Anticipation of ‘inevitable’ historical outcomes is not meant to inhibit forceful political action in the present and near future but rather to encourage it.

The more daunting the task, the bigger the role for such encouragement. If in Germany the rapid growth of the SPD allowed many of its members to hope for a ‘peaceful transition to socialism’ in the years that preceded the first world war, in a political situation like the one confronting Lenin, Trotsky and their contemporaries in Tsarist Russia – a situation shaped by draconian police repression and contested only by tiny groups of isolated activists – any talk of ‘inevitable victory’ was clearly as much a matter of boosting political morale as it was of historical prediction. The Russian revolutionaries especially ‘needed a world-embracing hope to accomplish the world-shaking deed.’¹³⁷

Lenin, in particular, isn’t only the hard-nosed materialist who analyses the remorseless development of capitalism in Russia and who emphasises how the ‘human will and mind’ are ‘necessarily and inevitably’ obliged to ‘adapt themselves to [...] the necessity of nature.’¹³⁸ If he emerged as the undisputed leader of his party after years of bitter polemics it’s first and foremost because of his indomitable *confidence* and resolve, and his emphatic faith in the power of ideals to win over sceptics, pessimists and ‘philistines’. Lenin is carried, and carries others, by his faith in the transformative power of conscious awareness and purpose, and by his faith in the proletariat as an actor inspired by the grandeur of its historic mission to free itself and the world as well.¹³⁹ It’s this side of Lenin that evokes Rousseau and Robespierre no less than Marx. ‘The time has come’, as he puts it in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), ‘when Russian revolutionaries, guided by a genuinely revolutionary theory, relying upon the genuinely revolutionary and spontaneously awakening class, can at last – at long last! – rise to full stature in all their giant strength.’¹⁴⁰ Rather than settle for limited reforms or pursue narrowly economic questions, Lenin stakes everything on a mass willingness to engage in full political struggle, on a proletarian determination to settle for nothing less than revolutionary change. What matters more than any immediate improvement in working conditions are the ‘miracles for the revolutionary cause’ that even a lone individual can achieve, if determined to do so.¹⁴¹ In this as in so many of his other polemics, Lenin reserves his most bitter scorn for those who remain sceptical of such miracles, and who thereby stand condemned of ‘a libel on Marxism.’ Such scepticism

means belittling the initiative and energy of class-conscious fighters, whereas Marxism, on the contrary, gives a gigantic impetus to the initiative and energy of the Social-Democrat, opens up for him the widest perspectives and (if one may so express it) places at his disposal the mighty force of millions and millions of workers ‘spontaneously’ rising for the struggle!¹⁴²

Although Bolshevik priorities shift a good deal during the tumultuous years between 1902 and 1917, of course, Lenin’s fundamentally Promethean project remains broadly consistent all through his political life. As Lars Lih summarises it, the most concise version of Lenin’s ‘heroic scenario’ runs something like this: ‘the Russian proletariat carries out its world historical mission by becoming the *vozhd* [leader] of the *narod* [people], leading a revolution

¹³⁶ Marx 2000, p. 308 [‘Address to the Communist League’ (March 1850)].

¹³⁷ Deutscher 1954, p. 293.

¹³⁸ Lenin 1962, p. 187-88, cf. p. 325.

¹³⁹ Cf. Lih 2005, Lih 2011; Bensaïd 2007, pp. 150-53.

¹⁴⁰ Lenin 1960b, p. 448.

¹⁴¹ Lenin 1960b, p. 447.

¹⁴² Lenin 1960b, p. 392.

that overthrows the tsar and institutes political freedom, thus preparing the ground for an eventual proletarian *vlast* [sovereign power] that will bring about socialism. What propels this drama forward is inspired and inspiring class leadership. The party activists inspire the proletariat who inspire the Russian narod who inspire the whole world with their revolutionary feats.’¹⁴³ It is this confidence in the power of political inspiration that accounts for Lenin’s revolutionary eminence, rather than a proto-Stalinist insistence on historical necessity.

A peripheral but striking expression of a similar confidence is provided by Trotsky’s fascination with Calvinism and the radical Puritans of the English Revolution, whose apparently ‘fatal’ belief in Providence only served to invigorate their determination to act. ‘The ascendant bourgeoisie felt that the laws of history were behind it, and this awareness they shrouded in the form of the doctrine of predestination. Calvin’s denial of free will in no way paralyzed the revolutionary energy of the Independents, on the contrary it powerfully reinforced it. The Independents felt themselves to be summoned to accomplish a great historical act’, and ‘God’s Englishmen’ strained every sinew to see it through.¹⁴⁴ Gramsci soon arrived at a similar conclusion for similar reasons, recognising that ‘out of Calvinist predestination there arose one of the greatest impulses to practical initiative the world has ever known. Similarly, every other form of determinism has at a certain point developed into a spirit of initiative and into an extreme tension of collective will.’ Even ‘fatalism’ itself, Gramsci could see, may be ‘nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position [...]. When you don’t have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance.’¹⁴⁵ In the context of their formative debates, what most sharply separates a ‘scientific’ from a ‘utopian’ socialist is above all their relative degrees of commitment and resolve; what might remain merely wishful thinking for the one has become a matter of willed practice for the other.

In other words, and even in such extreme cases, the key question doesn’t so much concern the making of this or that ‘objective’ prediction as it does the perfectly ‘subjective’ choice between deciding whether to wait and see whether such prediction might come true, or whether to act in such a way as to *make* it come true. It’s the determination to resolve in practice this particular struggle, the one that engages its actors in the here and now, that underlies Marx’s repeated insistence that human beings ‘make their own history’ and that ‘the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.’

IX The Russian Revolution

As Marx’s most militant followers never tired of insisting, in the generation after his death, it was precisely his scientific credentials, his demonstration of the apparently inevitable collapse of a capitalism propelled by its own ‘laws of motion’, that secured his initial following in revolutionary circles. As Lenin stressed, Marx ‘was the first to transform socialism from a Utopia into a science, to lay a firm foundation for this science, and to indicate the path that must be followed in further developing and elaborating it in all its parts’¹⁴⁶ – ‘the Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true.’¹⁴⁷ No less than Lenin or Trotsky, Luxemburg saw no tension let alone contradiction between demonstrations of capital’s imminent demise and

¹⁴³ Lih 2011, p. 192.

¹⁴⁴ Trotsky 1975 [*Where is Britain Going?* [1925], ch. 3]. Victor Serge too was struck by a similar insight during a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet in 1919: ‘A humble crowd, they have the faith, the will, the indomitable inner energy of masses who have discovered spiritual life. Cromwell’s Roundheads who founded the English republic [...], the enthusiastic and stoical Calvinists who attempted, in the sixteenth century, throughout Europe, to achieve a moral and social revolution, must have been like this’ (Serge 1998, pp. 56-57).

¹⁴⁵ Gramsci 1971, p. 369, pp. 336-7.

¹⁴⁶ Lenin 1960a, p. 210 [‘Our Programme’, 1899].

¹⁴⁷ Lenin 1977a, p. 23

exhortations to make every effort to hasten the process and to lessen its ‘birth pangs’. The same can be said of Martov, Pannekoek, or Mattick. After all, notes Walter Rodney, both proletarian and bourgeois actors share the same ‘objective reality’: what distinguishes them is precisely their political perspective on it, and consequently their priorities, their aims, and their means of achieving them, i.e. their class interests or ‘subjective’ concerns.¹⁴⁸ It is the scope of these *aims* or ends and the viability of their various means that is ‘scientifically’ illuminated by Marx, with a view to making the choice between socialism or barbarism as transparent as possible.

The complication of the Russian Revolution, if considered from this perspective, is that its leading actors proposed a somewhat different choice – a choice that, in its making, was as much reminiscent of the Jacobins’ revolutionary example as it was an anticipation of Marx’s post-capitalist alternative. The political question that quickly opened up with the suicidal collapse of the Tsarist régime in the first months of 1917 was less that of socialism in the future than of mass sovereignty in the present. As Lih has shown in convincing detail, to argue as did Lenin and the Bolsheviks in favour of ‘all power to the Soviets!’ was to argue in favour of a single and unified *narodovlastie* or mass power. It was to argue in favour of ‘all power to the people! [*Vsya vlast’ narodu*],’ nothing more or less.¹⁴⁹ Positively, it was to argue in favour of a government that would immediately obey mass commands on peace, land, and workers’ control. Negatively, it was to argue consistently against Lvov and then Kerensky and all the other ‘compromisers’ who sought to preserve what could be salvaged of the old régime, who sought to share power with its more progressive representatives, and who sought to persist with the prosecution of its disastrous war.

When with its dramatic ‘Order number one’ of 1 March 1917 the new Petrograd Soviet laid explicit claim to command the armed forces it issued a challenge that would define the trajectory of the next six months. As Lenin could see right away, the unprecedented ‘dual power’ or split sovereignty that arose through coexistence of the Soviet on the one hand and the bourgeoisie’s Provisional Government on the other created an untenable situation. It led to the temporary ‘interlocking’ of two competing authorities, only one of which could claim to express the ‘will of the people’. Sooner or later one power would have to submit to the other. ‘Two powers *cannot exist* in a state’, Lenin again argued in September. ‘One of them is bound to pass away; and the entire Russian bourgeoisie is already trying its hardest everywhere and in every way to keep out and weaken the Soviets, to reduce them to nought, and to establish the undivided power of the bourgeoisie.’¹⁵⁰ The Soviet leadership, for its part, continued to hesitate, torn between those favoured the broadest possible coalition government and those growing more ready to rely on the massed workers, soldiers and peasants alone.

The months between February and October tell the story of how this hesitation was resolved. What drives the story forward to its resolution, as John Reed was especially well-placed to see, is the transformation of an initially ‘shapeless will of the proletariat’ into something altogether more shaped and more forceful.¹⁵¹ In early July, Viktor Chernov and the other moderates who still led the Petrograd Soviet famously refused the offer urged by impatient protestors to ‘take power, you son of a bitch, when it is handed to you!’¹⁵² By early October, the Bolshevik leaders who had helped to organise these and other protestors into a militant majority in the soviets were in a position to make a different choice. That they made this choice in circumstances that they most certainly did not choose is a point that should be too obvious to mention, if it weren’t for the fact that historical judgement of such choices is so profoundly coloured by the judge’s expectations.

Again there is space only to sketch the barest outlines of the familiar sequence. Inspired by the courage of the many thousands of women and then men who defied the Tsar’s soldiers as they demonstrated on the International Women’s Day of 23 February 1917, over

¹⁴⁸ Rodney, 2022, p. 45.

¹⁴⁹ Lih 2012.

¹⁵⁰ Lenin 1964, p. 61.

¹⁵¹ Reed 1977, p. 51.

¹⁵² Cited in Steinberg 2017, p. 77; Miéville 2017, epub 364/654.

the following days and weeks a wave of protests, strikes and demonstrations swept across the country. All over Russia, in factories, army barracks, and rural communities, ordinary people gathered and deliberated, and began to seize, in unprecedented numbers and with unprecedented force, this opportunity to set their own political agenda.¹⁵³ The ‘spirit of mutiny’ and ‘revolutionary élan’¹⁵⁴ that had briefly seized many parts of Russia in 1905 returned with a vengeance, in a context now defined by life-and-death struggles for peace, land, and more tolerable working conditions. In the form of hundreds of improvised councils or *soviets*, along with factory committees and soldiers’ committees, many of the mechanisms for such control were constituted in the spring of 1917, and the pressure for radical change quickly began to mount. Like the Jacobins in 1792, the basic Bolshevik approach in 1917 can be summarised by the formula: trust the people and the emancipatory momentum of their *élan*, rather than a government whose priority is to limit and delay the damage to an indefensible social order. From the moment he returned to Petrograd from exile in Switzerland, in the spring of 1917, Lenin argued that the only way to save the country ‘from collapse and ruin’ would be to ‘imbue the oppressed and the working people with confidence in their own strength,’ to release the ‘energy, initiative, and decisiveness’ of the people, who in this mobilized condition can perform “miracles”.¹⁵⁵ As he put it in the wake of the soviets’ successful defiance of the attempted coup led by general Kornilov, in late August, ‘Don’t be afraid of the people’s initiative and independence. Put your faith in their revolutionary organisations, and you will see *in all* realms of state affairs the same strength, majesty and invincibility of the workers and peasants as were displayed in their unity and their fury against Kornilov.’¹⁵⁶

What then decides the course of 1917 is that a majority of the masses who organised themselves through the soviets came to believe, as the collapse of the realm grew irreversible, that the best of the available options were offered by the Bolshevik party and its allies among the Left SRs. As Stephen Smith explains, over the months initially moderate investments in the conciliatory ‘discourse of citizenship [...] quickly ceded to a discourse of class’, as old constraints on political participation were exploded. The dominant frame of reference shifted from realm to mass. A new outpouring of socialist pamphlets, newspapers all

addressed ordinary people in the language of class, and strikes and demonstrations, red flags, banners and images, the singing of revolutionary songs, the election of representatives, meetings in the workplace and on street corners, the passing of a resolution, the raising of funds for a political cause, all served to entrench this discourse, so that ordinary folk began to see themselves and the world around them in class terms.

This rapid ‘success of the discourse of class’, Smith continues, ‘derived less from its accuracy in describing social relations than from the fact that it played upon a deep-seated division in Russian political culture between “them” and “us”, upon a profound sense of the economic and cultural gulf between the *nizy*, that is, those at the bottom, and the *verkhi*, those at the top’, and more than anything this sense contributed to the ‘huge popularity of socialism.’¹⁵⁷ This shift in orientation from civic unity to class struggle, as historians like Smith and Steinberg make clear, was not an alternative to affirmations of the people and of popular sovereignty but rather a way of making such affirmations stick, of giving them a sharper political edge – i.e. a way of providing the *narod* with the only available means for imposing its will.

Although a premature rising in early July gave the Provisional Government an opportunity to crack down on the Bolshevik leadership, Kerensky and his dwindling clutch of followers were unable to find a durable political base for their régime. Improvised attempts at

¹⁵³ See e.g. Smith 2018, pp. 124-5; Smith 1983.

¹⁵⁴ Trotsky 1972, ch. 18.

¹⁵⁵ Lenin, cited in Steinberg 2017, p. 92.

¹⁵⁶ Lenin 1977b.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, 2018, pp. 133-35.

a ‘Democratic Council’ and a ‘Pre-Parliament’ failed to rally significant support. In the end, once the army’s high command and the most reactionary segments of the old régime had proved themselves incapable of regaining power by an outright coup, it would come down to a contest between those moderate socialists who still supported compromise and those who did not. Over the course of September, the uncompromising Bolsheviks gained majority support in most of the key soviets. Trotsky’s history of the revolution includes arresting descriptions of the atmosphere of those decisive days, during which

all Petrograd, with the exception of its upper strata, was one solid meeting. In those auditoriums, continually packed to the doors, the audiences would be entirely renewed in the course of a few hours. Fresh and ever fresh waves of workers, soldiers and sailors would roll up to the buildings and flood them full. [...] The people of the slums, of the attics and basements, stood still by the hour in threadbare coat or grey uniform, with caps or heavy shawls on their heads, the mud of the streets soaked through their shoes, an autumn cough catching at their throats. They stood there packed shoulder-to-shoulder, and crowding even closer to make room for more, to make room for all, listening tirelessly, hungrily, passionately, demandingly, fearing lest they miss a word of what it is so necessary to understand, to assimilate, and to do. [...] The experience of the revolution, the war, the heavy struggle of a whole bitter lifetime, rose from the depths of memory in each of these poverty-driven men and women, expressing itself in simple and imperious thoughts: this way we can go no further; we must break a road into the future.¹⁵⁸

Working class neighbourhoods of Petrograd and Moscow now teemed with tens of thousands of armed volunteers or ‘red guards’. On 9 October, the Petrograd Soviet set up a Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) to organise and deliver the final blow; led by Trotsky, it began planning, quite openly, an insurrection to topple the discredited régime. A few days later, on 13 October, the soldiers organised through the Petrograd Soviet voted by a majority of 283 to 1 to accept the MRC as their commanding authority, and the de facto transfer of power was already underway.¹⁵⁹ Things came to head on the morning of 24 October when Kerensky tried to pre-empt the coming showdown by raiding the Bolshevik party headquarters and by trying to reassert control of the Petrograd garrison; this allowed the MRC in turn to present a call to arms made to the garrisons, to the workers’ Red Guards, and to sailors of the Baltic Fleet, as a defensive operation designed to preserve Soviet power from a counter-revolutionary government. In a series of highly charged mass meetings, Trotsky and the MRC managed to win over the garrisons of the Peter and Paul Fortress and the neighbouring Kronverksky arsenal without having to fire the proverbial single shot. ‘The government is tottering’, Lenin wrote with characteristic urgency on 24 October, and ‘must be given the death blow at all costs [...]. With all my might I urge comrades to realise that everything now hangs by a thread; that we are confronted by problems which are not to be solved by conferences or congresses (even congresses of soviets), but exclusively [...] by the struggle of the armed people.’¹⁶⁰ Most of the régime’s few remaining cadets and troops slipped away from their posts. The result of the brief and almost bloodless confrontation that began that evening was a foregone conclusion, since most observers could see, then as now, that ‘in the last analysis the Provisional Government had expired even before the Bolsheviks finished it off.’¹⁶¹

The argument that then divided the brief but decisive Congress of Soviets which began its deliberations the night of 25-26 October turned essentially into a debate about how best to interpret the will of the people. Had a conspiratorial MRC pre-empted and thus usurped the people’s will, a will that only the Congress was authorised to express? Or was the

¹⁵⁸ Trotsky 1932, vol. 3, ch. 41.

¹⁵⁹ Faulkner 2017, epub 240/373.

¹⁶⁰ Lenin, note of 24 October 1917, cited in Miéville 2017, epub 511/654.

¹⁶¹ Smith 2018, p. 151

transfer of sovereign power ‘based upon the will of the great majority of the workers, soldiers and peasants’, as claimed by the first resolution to be passed by the Congress itself?¹⁶² Trotsky distilled the logic of what had already happened in a famously cutting retort to Martov and other Menshevik critics on the floor of the Congress, as they again hesitated about how best to respond to a *fait accompli*. ‘What has taken place is an insurrection, not a conspiracy. An insurrection of the popular masses needs no justification. [...]. When the downtrodden masses revolt, it is their right.’ Having embraced Bolshevik leadership, the soviet and its MRC ‘have tempered and hardened the revolutionary energy of the Petrograd workers and soldiers. We have openly forged the will of the masses to insurrection, and not conspiracy [...] The masses gathered under our banner, and our insurrection was victorious.’ The time for compromise had come to an end.¹⁶³

The enduring and eventually tragic drama of the Russian Revolution, however, is that the clear victory in October of Bolshevik arguments about mass sovereignty in the present did not by itself refute Menshevik arguments about the conditions and future of socialism. These arguments drew on the expressly sub-voluntary dimension of Marx’s scientific socialism.

It’s certainly true that Menshevik adherence all through 1917 to Plekhanov’s two-stage model of the revolution (first bourgeois then proletarian) – a model that had appeared especially compelling back when the prospect of mass political mobilisation seemed remote – prevented them from grasping what needed to be done now that such mobilisation dominated the present. Against all those who urged the *narod* to wait for the bourgeoisie to fulfil their historical role, and to mark time until their appointed historical hour might come, Lenin and Trotsky were surely right to press for the final transfer of sovereign authority from Kerensky’s isolated palace to the soviets’ turbulent Congress. To condemn *this* transfer as premature is essentially to condemn the assertion of mass sovereignty itself. Given the existing balance of class power, as Luxemburg recognised in another context, the proletariat is never likely to be ‘in a position to seize political power in any other way than “prematurely” [...] so] the objection to the “premature” conquest of power is at bottom nothing more than a general opposition to the aspiration of the proletariat to possess itself of state power.’¹⁶⁴ Possession of state power is one thing, however; its use to compel a transition to socialism from the top down is another.

On the one hand, then, the decisive fact of October is that, as Rabinowitch shows in compelling detail, ‘the goals of the Bolsheviks, as the masses understood them, had strong popular support.’¹⁶⁵ John Reed was especially well-placed to appreciate that

if the masses all over Russia had not been ready for insurrection it must have failed. The only reason for Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the vast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old, and afterward, in the smoke of falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the frame-work of the new.¹⁶⁶

Far from being a mere putsch or conspiracy, October confirmed at the level of national government a transfer of mass sovereignty that was already well under way all across the country, in villages, regiments, and workplaces. Sensitive to the words and deeds of the actors themselves, Reed’s account resounds with the repeated appeals to the people’s will that characterised the first months of the new régime. In one domain after another, commissars and councils voiced resolutions undertaken ‘in realisation of the will of the revolutionary people’, whether this be a will to abolish inequality in the army, to establish ‘workers’ control over mills and factories’, to redistribute land to the peasants, to establish a system of mass

¹⁶² Reed 1977, epub, 263/768.

¹⁶³ Trotsky, speech of 25 October 1917, in Trotsky 1932, vol. 3, ch. 47; cf. Miéville 2017, epub 545/654.

¹⁶⁴ Luxemburg 2008, pp. 95-6 [‘Reform or Revolution’].

¹⁶⁵ Rabinowitch 1976, p. xvii. ‘Everywhere in the provinces at this time there were Soviet congresses, and almost everywhere they gave predominance to the Bolsheviks’ (Sukhanov 1962, p. 577).

¹⁶⁶ Reed 1977, p. 254.

education, and so on.¹⁶⁷ Even the most prominent Menshevik historian of the revolution, Nikolai Sukhanov, soon recognised that ‘to talk about military conspiracy instead of national insurrection, when the [Bolshevik] party was followed by the overwhelming majority of the people, when the party had already *de facto* conquered all real power and authority – was clearly an absurdity.’¹⁶⁸ Massed in their councils, the people considered their options and made their choice. However contorted the path that led to it, Lih notes, ‘this choice was an inevitable implication of the more fundamental decision to keep soviet power in existence, since the Bolsheviks were the only organized political force willing and able to do this.’¹⁶⁹

As Lenin’s lucid critic Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, a year after the insurrection, the ‘burning question of our time’ is precisely not a matter of short-term tactics but the general

capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with [Ulrich von] Hutten: ‘I have dared!’. This is the essential and *enduring* in Bolshevik policy. In *this* sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism.

Luxemburg could see, as well as Martov, that given current conditions, ‘in Russia the problem could only be posed, it could not be solved.’ Reliance on revolutionary developments elsewhere, notably in Luxemburg’s own adopted country, would certainly impose fateful constraints on the new Russian government. But given this premise she doesn’t simply condemn the Bolshevik initiative so much as call to rework, extend, and generalise it. ‘And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to “Bolshevism.”’¹⁷⁰

In this sense too, what happened on 25 October 1917 invites comparisons with 10 August 1792. Its patience exhausted, a newly massed sovereign authority overthrew a discredited government and replaced it with one it seemed better placed to command. The great Robespierriste historian Albert Mathiez was perfectly right, during his brief period as a member of the French Communist Party in the early 1920s, to draw attention to some of the many striking parallels between the emergency measures taken in 1917-18 and in 1792-94.

Jacobinism, Bolshevism – these words sum up the desire for justice by an oppressed class which is freeing itself from its chains. The strength of Robespierre and Lenin results from their understanding of their troops, their ability to discipline, and satisfy, and inspire confidence in them. In spite of appearances, [such] dictators do not base their power on an authority above the people, on torture and constraint. No! Their strength and prestige arise from public opinion. Lenin [...] has erected a statue to Robespierre. He knows what he owes to him.¹⁷¹

Along these lines, if anything can justify the Bolshevik’s fateful and much-debated decision to dismiss the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 – the Assembly that they themselves had convened, and had so long called for – it’s their charged appeal to mass sovereignty and the people’s will. In a speech he gave to defend this decision, Lenin reiterated the zero-sum quality of the underlying conflict. ‘As long as the slogan “All power to the Constituent Assembly” conceals the slogan “Down with Soviet power”, civil war is inevitable’ and must be waged and won accordingly. Since mass councils ‘created solely by

¹⁶⁷ Reed 1977.

¹⁶⁸ Sukhanov 1962, p. 576

¹⁶⁹ Lih 2017a.

¹⁷⁰ Luxemburg 1918.

¹⁷¹ Mathiez 1920b, p. 429; cf. Mathiez 1920a.

the initiative of the people are a form of democracy without parallel,' any rival vehicle for the people's will is not only redundant but seditious. It's true, Lenin concedes, that 'the people wanted the Constituent Assembly summoned, and we summoned it. But they sensed immediately what this famous Constituent Assembly really was. And now we have carried out the will of the people, which is – All power to the Soviets!' Since only one will can rule, so 'by the will of Soviet power the Constituent Assembly, which has refused to recognise the power of the people, is being dissolved.'¹⁷²

On the other hand, what complicates the picture, of course, is that neither the Jacobin nor the Bolshevik stories end with the triumph of mass sovereignty. They end, as Rousseau might have predicted, with its usurpation. The Bolsheviks fulfilled mass demands actually to transfer 'all power to the people', and by doing so set a precedent that would resound all through the rest of the revolutionary twentieth century.¹⁷³ But at the same time they also claimed mass authority, in the context of international and civil war, to take the first steps of a 'transition to socialism'. This is where Menshevik arguments about the premature and thus utopian quality of Bolshevik assumptions about world socialist revolution retain all their pertinence. After reluctantly accepting the fact of the October insurrection and of its mass basis, Martov quickly despaired of the way Lenin's commissars seemed determined to pursue a socialist programme based less on a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the properly 'advanced' and majoritarian (i.e. Marxist) sense of term, and more as an agenda driven by a small group of leaders working together with a disorganised conglomeration of 'peasants in uniform'. Animated more by a spirit of exasperated revolt than by the principles of scientific socialism, and hardened by years of exposure to the relentless violence of world war, Martov feared that the soldiers' 'pseudo-socialism of "trenches and barracks"' lacked the material and psycho-political foundations essential to Marx's anticipation of the exhaustion of capitalism. Russia as a whole was far from ready for a transition to a new mode of production. Absent a massed and conscious proletariat determined to pursue it, the Bolshevik path to socialism could only be decreed above, and thus forced through by terror and clientelism.¹⁷⁴ 'One shudders to think how far the very idea of socialism will be discredited in the minds of the people', Martov confessed to a friend a couple of months after October. 'We are undoubtedly moving through anarchy towards some sort of Caesarism, founded on the entire people's having lost confidence in their ability to govern themselves.'¹⁷⁵

Martov's great rival Trotsky had himself long ago anticipated the likely dangers run by an organisation that centralised too much power in the hands of its leadership, allowing each higher rung on the ladder to 'substitute itself' for those lower down.¹⁷⁶ In 1924, only a few short years after he had helped to eliminate the political freedoms that were once so essential to the Bolshevik project, Trotsky could only preface his own imminent expulsion from the organisation with an admission that 'none of us desires or is able to dispute the will of the party', for 'in the last analysis the party is always right.'¹⁷⁷

X History does nothing

No discussion of 1917 can avoid considering how far Stalin's eventual despotism was anticipated by Lenin and Trotsky's voluntarism. Accounts that seek to derive the former directly from the latter continue to inform condemnation not only of Russia's revolution but

¹⁷² Lenin 1972b, pp. 440-41. As Victor Serge subsequently noted in his history of the first year of the revolution, 'the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly made a great sensation abroad. In Russia, it passed almost unnoticed' (Serge 2015, p. 135). Cf. Radkey 1989, p. 101-102.

¹⁷³ Cf. Badiou 2007.

¹⁷⁴ Martov develops these points in his debate with Zinoviev in Halle in October 1920 (Martov 2011, pp. 167-180).

¹⁷⁵ Martov, letter to Nadezhda Kristi, 30 December 1917, in Getzler 1967, p. 172. Cf. Martov 2021, pp. 43-5; Savel'ev and Tiutiukin 2006, pp. 69-70.

¹⁷⁶ Trotsky 1904, part 2, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch03.htm>; cf. Deutscher 1954, p. 90.

¹⁷⁷ Trotsky, cited in Cliff 1960.

of all subsequent revolutions too, if not of the exercise of any transformative political will *tout court*.

Now everyone knows that the party which emerged victorious from Russia's brutal civil war quickly deteriorated over the course of several years into a bureaucratic monolith, and there is no need here to go back over the grim path that led through the militarisation of labour, the taming of the soviets, the assault on Kronstadt, etc., to the disastrous ban on intra-party factions and on extra-party dissent adopted at the same time as the 'new economic policies' of 1921. Nevertheless, as even so staunch a critic of Stalin as Victor Serge wondered in a frequently cited text of 1939, 'what greater injustice can be imagined towards the Russian revolution than to judge it in the light of Stalinism alone?'¹⁷⁸ For my part I'm persuaded by the arguments made by sympathetic critics like Serge, and by later analysts like Rabinowitch, Lih, and Miéville, that show how the party that took power in 1917 was an essentially different sort of actor than the one that exercised it in the 1920s.¹⁷⁹ The one helped to organise a mass sovereign and to arm it with commanding power; the other usurped sovereignty to the advantage of a new governing class. The one sought to concentrate and impose the people's will; the other came to rely on mechanisms of representation that centralised authority in the hands of a tiny clique. The one recruited activists who were thoroughly committed to a daunting and dangerous project; the other was swollen with recruits who sought material advantages in a new régime. The one understood very well that 'only if power is based, obviously and unconditionally, on a majority of the population can it be stable during a popular revolution,'¹⁸⁰ and scoffed at the very idea of 'establishing socialism against the will of the majority'¹⁸¹; the other seemed to know what the people wanted without needing to ask them. The one seemed willing in principle to submit to a higher sovereign authority concentrated in a Constituent Assembly; the other came to see the prospect of such an assembly as nothing but a threat to its own hold on power. And so on.

To take stock of what happened after 1917, as after 1792, it's essential to resist the temptation to read history back to front. It's also important to recognise, however, that the Marxian readiness to align political will with historical necessity which had seemed so encouraging when socialism was on the march did the cause no favours once it fell prey to confusion and retreat. In this respect too, the full arc of Cromwell's career is not irrelevant for those who study the trajectory of scientific socialism. Following Marx's emphasis on the inevitable growth and revolt of the proletariat as a class 'trained, united and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production,'¹⁸² and guided by the indisputable 'fact of increasing impoverishment and proletarianisation', Lenin had always insisted on demonstrating socialism's 'necessity and inevitability from the point of view of the materialist conception of history.'¹⁸³ Through to the end of his life, he remained confident that 'the outcome of the struggle as a whole can be forecast only because in the long run capitalism itself is educating and training the vast majority of the population of the globe for the struggle.' He was convinced that this was enough to guarantee that, in time, the 'complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured.'¹⁸⁴ But once you accept, as Lenin still did in 1918, that the initial success of Russia's revolution 'is not due to any particular merit of the

¹⁷⁸ 'It is often said', Serge continues, 'that "the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning." Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs, a mass of other germs, and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious socialist revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in the corpse – and which he may have carried in him since his birth – is that very sensible?' (Serge 1939).

¹⁷⁹ Rabinowitch's landmark study of the way the Bolsheviks actually came to power in 1917 stresses 'the party's relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character', one that left plenty of space for divergent views, even on issues as urgent and divisive as October's call to arms (Rabinowitch 1976, p. 311).

¹⁸⁰ Lenin 1977b.

¹⁸¹ Lenin, 'A Basic Question', 17 April 1917, cited in Lih 2017b.

¹⁸² Marx 1990, p. 929.

¹⁸³ Lenin 1960b, p. 353.

¹⁸⁴ Lenin 1965, p. 500.

Russian proletariat but to the general course of historical events, which by the will of history has temporarily placed that proletariat in a foremost position and made it for the time being the vanguard of the world revolution,¹⁸⁵ then you should also accept that ‘the will of history’ may also place you, at least temporarily, in more compromised and more compromising positions.

We would do better to abandon all talk of a will of history. Rousseau’s pessimistic assessment of historical momentum is more of a political asset than a liability. History by itself, after all, ‘does nothing and wages no battles’. If one day we finally manage to replace capital’s command with a form of ‘association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ this will be because enough of us were determined to make this happen, and for no other reason.

By contrast, what for a long time was widely taken to be the great strength of Marx’s scientific socialism, its conviction that the ‘the will of the proletariat’ must be determined by ‘what the proletariat is’ and shall thus be ‘compelled to do’, is in reality simplistic and evasive. It is evasive because it offloads much of the sheer effort of organising and empowering a collective purpose – the work that Rousseau and the Jacobins foregrounded as the deliberate practice and laborious cultivation of ‘virtue’ – to the immanent unfolding of historical development, in the naïve hope that capital must find itself compelled, willy-nilly, to exploit its workers in ways that also serve to concentrate, educate and motivate them. And it’s simplistic because, unlike those ‘virtuous’ patriots or partisans of a general will, the scientific socialist on the Leninist model tends to downplay the ever-present risk of differences and divisions that might emerge from within the revolutionary class itself, starting with the division between the rank and file and their own leadership.

The orthodox Marxist wager on world revolution stands or falls on the assumption that proletarianisation must indeed develop and ‘mature’ as a homogenising force, one that will more or less automatically erode all distinctions based on occupation, status, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and so on. What Rousseau and the Jacobins contribute to this picture is a frank recognition that such egalitarian erosion will only proceed if enough people will it so, and do what is required to overcome the compensating particularisms (patriarchal reactions, ethnic chauvinisms, imperialist predations...) that our ruling classes will always foster in order to resist it.

XI Challenging conditions

Any generalisations about the kinds of capacities required to sustain and to impose a political will must remain very broad-brush, but in this final section I can at least point briefly to the four main challenges involved.

(a) The first challenge is to develop the means of association, organisation and leadership required to formulate and sustain a collective purpose. As we have seen, such means must find a way of simultaneously expanding or extending their scope, the ‘generality’ of their will, while also concentrating and directing its exercise. The need to get this balance right is what’s at stake in the endless debates about the relative merits of ‘horizontal’ as opposed to ‘vertical’ models of organisation,¹⁸⁶ about the difficulties of clarifying and sustaining a ‘mass line’, of upholding the conflicting tendencies of a ‘democratic centralism’, and so on. Trotsky’s formulation of 1904 might be taken as representative of a widely shared approach to mass organisation in pre-war social democratic circles:

The Party is not only the *consciousness* of the organised class, but also its organised *will*. The Party begins to exist where, on the basis of a given level of consciousness, we organise the political will of the class by using tactical methods corresponding to the

¹⁸⁵ Lenin 1972b, p. 423.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Nunes 2021.

general goal. The Party is only able to grow and progress continually by means of the interdependence of ‘will’ and ‘consciousness’ if every tactical step, carried out in the form of some manifestation of the political ‘will’ of the most conscious elements of the class, inevitably raises the political sensitivity of these elements which yesterday were not involved, and thus prepares the material and ideological basis for new tactical steps, which will be more resolute, and of greater political weight and a more decided class character.¹⁸⁷

The more fraught the situation and the more hesitant the members of such an organisation, the more its leaders are likely to stress that ‘a firm party line, its unyielding resolve, is also a mood-creating factor.’¹⁸⁸

Needless to say, charges of ‘vanguardism’ remain a familiar component of the wider aversion to the whole lexicon of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘mastery’, and especially to voluntarist accounts of sovereignty. These charges tend to combine a perfectly legitimate warning (following Trotsky’s own example) about the dangers of usurpation or substitution on the one hand with far more ambiguous worries about decisive leadership on the other. The real issue concerns the pros and cons of participation in combative organisations altogether. What sort of army, after all, can function without a vanguard? As soon as any group masses together, it also begins to differentiate itself into parts – into left and right wings, into a centre, a rear, and a leading edge, etc. All these parts have essential roles to play. For Luxemburg or Martov no less than for Lenin or Robespierre, a determined ‘front line’ is a crucial part of any mass organisation that aims to challenge the status quo; a combative mass party *is* a vanguard party, or must rapidly become one, if it means to prevail.

The Jacobin club that evolved from a small gathering of like-minded delegates to the Estates General of 1789 into an extraordinary network of many thousands of coordinated affiliates is an arresting case in point, and its operations anticipated some of the confederating structures that would become routine in the formation of mass political parties a century later. The worker’s councils or soviets that were improvised during the Russian revolution of 1905, and then their subsequent reinvention and multiplication all across the Russian empire in 1917, combining local participation with national or congressional coordination, is a still more remarkable example of a genuinely mass organisation. The soviet model adopted in 1905, Trotsky observed soon after the fact,

was an organization which was authoritative and yet had no traditions; which could immediately involve a scattered mass of hundreds of thousands of people while having virtually no organizational machinery; which united the revolutionary currents within the proletariat; which was capable of initiative and spontaneous self control [... and of acquiring] authority in the eyes of the masses on the very day it came into being.¹⁸⁹

Reflecting on the ‘astoundingly effective’ operations of the Soviets that he observed at work in 1917, and noting the way that all sorts of groups were accorded delegates on the basis of proportional representation and remained ‘subject to recall at any time’, John Reed concluded that ‘no political body more sensitive and responsive to the popular will was ever invented.’¹⁹⁰

In addition to parties, clubs, and councils (and also: schools, churches, mosques, trade unions, militias, national guards...), much of the organising work that has proved so consequential over the past couple of centuries has been mediated through the basic social forms of city and nation. Close-knit working class districts like the Vyborg in Petrograd played an essential role in the massing and mobilising of popular pressure in 1917, just as the *sans-culotte* faubourgs of Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marcel played a pivotal role in the great

¹⁸⁷ Trotsky 1904, part 2.

¹⁸⁸ Lenin 1972a, p. 209.

¹⁸⁹ Trotsky 1972, ch. 8.

¹⁹⁰ Reed 1918; cf. Reed 1977, p. 11.

jours of 1792 and 1793.¹⁹¹ One of the main things that distinguished Marat, Danton and Robespierre from their Feuillant and then Girondin opponents was their commitment to Paris as the ‘boulevard of liberty’. As Robespierre put it, ‘the people is sublime, but individuals are weak; during a political tumult, in a revolutionary tempest, we need a rallying point’, and ‘this rallying point must be Paris.’ Only the nation’s capital or ‘head’ can rally the people in general.¹⁹² Blanqui would repeatedly emphasise the same point. The French revolution continued for as long as a sufficiently mobilised Paris could pursue demands that resonated across most of the nation as a whole, just as the Bolshevik project of proletarian hegemony retained mass support for so long as the peasantry could see, in the cities’ red guards, the best available means for achieving their ends. In other contexts, like those investigated by Mao or Fanon, an insurgent peasantry has been better placed than more heavily policed urban workers to wage and win a national struggle.¹⁹³

Either way, the nation itself remains both the most important and most problematic vehicle for organising a will of the people. It remains the most important, because the formulation of mass demands at an international level is still largely a matter of wishful thinking; socialist internationalism has never yet recovered from the disaster of 1914, and a project like the European Union, though in some ways an improvement over its member states, is equally constituted in ways that insulate the prevailing realm from mass pressure. The national liberation movements that won independence from European powers in the middle decades of the past century, and the related contributions towards the tricontinental or Third World project of the 1960s and 70s, were arguably the last great achievements of emancipatory politics on a world scale, and their legacy remains a force to be reckoned with, not least in Cuba. If the Third World project failed, as Vijay Prashad has shown, it wasn’t because it was too utopian, or anachronistic, but rather because, in the face of its adversaries and their combined military and economic power, it was too divided and too weak.¹⁹⁴ In the late 70s and 80s the fate of Third World internationalism was settled temporarily on the field of class struggle; it failed during those years, in other words, for the same reason that organised labour failed everywhere else as well, and for the same reason that emancipatory projects all over the world have largely failed – for the time being.

Very much for both good and ill, the nation endures as the most consequential horizon of a people’s will, furthermore, because for lack of compelling alternatives it continues to provide the main way of addressing the unavoidable question of what makes a people *a* people – and unless this question is resolved in an egalitarian and inclusive way, any reference to a generic ‘will of people’ will likewise remain empty or wishful thinking. Hence the familiar tension between the particular and the universal that runs through every nationalising project. How far should distinct popular interests be addressed through convergent but separate forms of organisation, and how far should they be integrated as part of a single synthetic project? There can be no a priori answers to such questions. This is the sort of question that divided Luxemburg from Lenin on the issue of national self-determination, for instance, or from her comrade Clara Zetkin on the question of women’s organisation, and it’s one that would recur in the arguments around competing conceptions of national autonomy all through the twentieth century, not least in the segregated USA.¹⁹⁵ If by the end of his life Lenin’s approach might have appeared to have more to show for it, Luxemburg’s repeated warnings about the pitfalls of national consciousness have too often gone unheeded, and should continue to haunt our political imaginary. Meanwhile the pitiless logic of ‘international competition’ remains the only game in town. The richer nations have already

¹⁹¹ See in particular Burstin 2005.

¹⁹² Robespierre 1958, p. 559. ‘*Que tout Paris s’arme, que les sections et le peuple veillent, que la Convention se déclare peuple*’ (p. 359). Blanqui will likewise celebrate Paris as the ‘capital of intelligence and of work, the true national representation, the concentrated essence of the country [...]’. Confronted with Paris, the Assembly is nothing. And Paris in turn will abdicate when France grows of age’ (Blanqui MSS 9581, f. 93, 7 Feb 1856).

¹⁹³ Cf. Hallward 2011.

¹⁹⁴ Prashad 2008; cf. Getachew 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Singh 2004; Haider 2017.

converted themselves into fortresses garrisoned by chauvinism and greed; the poorer ones, as always, still suffer as they must. Capital itself, needless to say, continues to operate as a global force, and to generate calamities that only transnational solidarity could address. Everyone knows that the challenges posed by exploitation, climate, inequality, migration, and so on, cannot possibly be overcome within national boundaries. A future will of the people must find new ways to organise and impose itself on an international scale.

(b) The second challenge concerns education and the sharing of knowledge. Only informed and critical deliberations can prepare the way for convincing decisions and sustained commitments. Since inhabitants of the realm are systematically mis-educated and mis-informed, all mass education begins with re-education. Each of the great modern revolutions is marked by an outpouring of pamphlets, newspapers, debates, meetings, and on, seeking to set the record straight and to reframe the terms of discussion. The eager reception of Tom Paine's *Common Sense* or the abbé Sieyès *What is the Third Estate?* is exemplary of the way a hitherto seething but dispersed public opinion can crystallise into a shared determination. So is the production and distribution of a party newspaper, on the model of *Iskra* and its many emulations. John Reed again helps to make a wider point when he observes how, in the autumn of 1917,

all Russia was learning to read, and *reading* – politics, economics, history – because the people wanted to *know* –. In every city, in most towns, along the Front, each political faction had its newspaper – sometimes several. Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets were distributed by thousands of organisations, and poured into the armies, the villages, the factories, the streets. The thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute alone, the first six months, went out every day tons, car-loads, train-loads of literature, saturating the land. Russia absorbed reading matter like hot sand drinks water, insatiable. And it was not fables, falsified history, diluted religion, and the cheap fiction that corrupts – but social and economic theories, philosophy, the works of Tolstoy, Gogol, and Gorky... Then the Talk, beside which Carlyle's 'flood of French speech' was a mere trickle. Lectures, debates, speeches – in theatres, circuses, school-houses, clubs, Soviet meeting-rooms, Union headquarters, barracks –. Meetings in the trenches at the Front, in village squares, factories –. What a marvellous sight to see the Putilov factory) pour out its forty thousand to listen to Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, anybody, whatever they had to say, as long as they would talk! For months in Petrograd, and all over Russia, every street-corner was a public tribune. In railway trains, street-cars, always the spurting up of impromptu debate, everywhere...

Every upsurge in mass education and mass argument foregrounds at least two related questions about authority that are ordinarily dismissed by inhabitants of the realm. The first concerns the apparently hierarchical relation between educator and educated, famously evoked by Marx's third fragment on Feuerbach. Marx's own appeal to 'revolutionary practice' goes some way towards resolving the issue, but is incomplete, from a voluntarist perspective, without some reference to the figure or learning that can help people to make the transition from 'want' to 'will.' Knowledge is power but it must be acquired, and the truths that matter most in both science and politics cannot be grasped solely on the basis of one's own lived experience or observations. Emancipation is a process, and it's easy to see why Robespierre lingered on the fact that 'we poor devils are building the temple of liberty with hands still scarred by the fetters of servitude.'¹⁹⁶ The masses 'spontaneously' searching for knowledge who are evoked in Reed's account of 1917, or in Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, are actively looking for something they don't yet have – not in order to perpetuate their subordination to a teacher, but to supersede it. Rousseau's evocation of a *législateur* is one

¹⁹⁶ Robespierre, 'Gouverner la République' (10 May 1793), in Robespierre 1958, p. 497.

way of framing this transitional and vanishing pedagogical relation; Kautsky's influential account of the 'merging' of scientific socialism with the workers' movement is another. In a more recent context, if Rancière is right to worry about the inequalities perpetuated by any teacher-student relation, Althusser and Badiou are also right to remember that demands for empowering theory or science originate with those who most want them.

The second question compensates for the first, and validates a version of the majority principle as a basic normative dimension of collective action. Any mass is made up only of individuals, and as Blanqui reminds us, 'if everything must be done in the interest of the collective, nevertheless everything must be done by the individual.' Only individuals can will and act, and inclusive mass deliberations can only proceed on the basis of one person one vote. Here the distinction between mass and realm is especially stark. There is only a will of the people to the extent that its every participant has an equal say in its determination – an egalitarian principle excluded as non-sensical in the realm-bound deliberations that preside over business as usual.

The goal of mass deliberation is to *arrive* at a settled consensus, or at least a decision its participants can accept. Like the majorities won by the Bolsheviks over the course of 1917, a willed majority is an achievement, not a point of departure. As Rousseau explains, when support for a proposal isn't unanimous then only 'the tally of the votes yields the declaration of the general will.' If my own argument fails to carry the day, then collective responsibility requires me to admit (for the time being) 'that I made a mistake, and that what I took to be the general will was not.'¹⁹⁷ When members of a trade union deliberate about whether they should go on strike, for instance, this is the kind of decision they will need to make, and abide by. So long as commitment to the group (the union, the party, the movement...) remains sufficiently strong i.e. sufficiently 'virtuous', Rousseau is confident that 'a good plan once adopted will change the mind' even of those participants who initially opposed it, and who as individuals might have stood to gain from a different configuration of things.¹⁹⁸

Meanwhile, as long as deliberations are instead largely filtered or represented through the hierarchical distinctions of the realm, so then virtuous priorities, in Robespierre's sense of the term, will remain the province of an embattled minority.¹⁹⁹ The basic question raised in each case by 'vanguard' figures like Robespierre and Lenin – as also by Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips, or by Ella Baker, or Bob Moses, or Greta Thunberg, or Anjali Appadurai... – is whether this minority can win over a critical mass of voices and votes, or not.

(c) The third and most daunting challenge returns us to the difference between will and wish, or to the will as a practical faculty for translating intentions into actions. This is where the need for strong and coordinated executive power comes in, and with it a role for government as the people's servant. In the circumstances of France 1792-93 or of Russia 1918-20, a government that wasn't strong and indeed authoritarian enough to defend the revolution from its enemies, to requisition food for the cities, to keep anarchy at bay, etc., could not have governed at all. Engels simply had his eyes open when he acknowledged that 'a revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is', as 'the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part' by whatever means this might require.²⁰⁰ (It shouldn't be surprising, either, that an embattled anti-colonial analyst of the Russian sequence like Walter Rodney might be less condemning of government authority than his cold-war American counterparts).²⁰¹ Even if it stops well short of challenging the current mode of production, forceful executive capacity is obviously essential for responding to climate disasters, for building infrastructure, for ending the use of fossil fuels, for transforming energy grids, for regulating the financial sector, for offering universal education, providing health care,

¹⁹⁷ Rousseau 1997c, p. 124 [SC 4:2].

¹⁹⁸ Rousseau 2005, p. 239.

¹⁹⁹ Robespierre, 'Sur l'appel au peuple' (28 December 1792), in Robespierre 1958, pp. 198-9.

²⁰⁰ Engels 1872.

²⁰¹ Cf. Rodney 2018; cf. Lih 1992.

enforcing labour and environmental standards, and so on; the general erosion of trust in government and in the wider ‘public sector’ has been among the greatest of neoliberal achievements. Who now trusts government pledges more than market forces? If people have increasingly ‘lost confidence in their ability to govern themselves’, as Martov warned, the beneficiaries are those class actors who have seized the opportunity to govern government. The banking/financial and military/security sectors in particular – those two pillars of traditional state power – have over this same period established themselves as effectively supra-sovereign instances, free from all but the most superficial forms of political oversight. Who now expects them to be properly overseen?

Of course a readiness for action varies directly with an actor’s expectations. ‘One must always remember’, as Trotsky reminds us, ‘that the masses of the people have never been in possession of power, that they have always been under the heel of other classes, and that therefore they lack political self-confidence’ and are easily discouraged by compromises or hesitation.²⁰² In the routine affairs of the realm discouragement passes for realism, and we’ve all learned to appreciate that the end of the world is more easily imagined than an end to capital. The rulers of the realm can always be trusted to do everything in their power to thwart the realisation of any mass emancipatory project. What must such projects do to prevail?

Understood as a capacity that acts in pursuit of its ends, a political will begins with a choice of means. This choice itself largely depends on the kind of opposition confronting it. Many if not most of the Paris Communards of 1871, to take an especially consequential example, may have yearned for peaceful coexistence with their enemies in Versailles – but given Thiers and MacMahon’s determination to respond not only with war but with war crimes, such wishful thinking was a recipe for disaster. As both Marx and Bakunin would later acknowledge, Blanqui’s followers were proved a thousands time right when they immediately urged the Commune’s National Guard to strike at once at Versailles and to rally the wider nation; the attempt to negotiate instead was a fatal mistake. Cuba’s José Martí made the wider point very well: if ‘it is criminal to promote a war that can be avoided’, it is just as criminal ‘to fail to promote an inevitable one’, and to do everything possible to win it.²⁰³

To achieve the end of universal emancipation in Haiti, for instance, the slave insurgents of the 1790s had to fend off invasions from all of the great imperial powers of the day. Even so, Toussaint’s cautious vision of a ‘tricolour’ Saint-Domingue might still have been feasible, against the apparent odds, if his French enemies hadn’t been determined to restore slavery at virtually any cost. The atrocities committed by Leclerc and Rochambeau, during the final crazed months of French rule on the island, helps to put the American version of a slave-owners’ rebellion in perspective. There too, by the late 1850s, Harriet Tubman, John Brown and their comrades in arms had come to accept that the unavoidable price of abolition was war, and that ‘the lesson of the hour is insurrection.’²⁰⁴ By 1863, a critical mass of slaves could see that war indeed meant war, and by engaging in it decided its outcome. By 1865, even Lincoln could see that the war might need to last ‘until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.’

It is again the force of capital’s command, not the strength of labour’s resistance, that led Marx and Blanqui, and then Luxemburg or Serge, ‘to recognise the necessity for the dictatorship of the proletariat.’²⁰⁵ The total eclipse of this formulation in recent decades, along with any recognition of its ‘necessity’, is all by itself a suggestive measure of capital’s ongoing triumph. But whatever the name that labour might give to its own potential sovereignty, the question itself will return whenever labour again begins to contemplate a challenge to capital’s command: if it’s to succeed, what must such a challenge entail? A negotiated transition to socialism, or ‘despotic inroads into property’? One way or another, as Trotsky will retort to Kautsky, ‘who aims at the end cannot reject the means.’ In the context of an open clash with capital, ‘if the socialist revolution requires a dictatorship, [...] it follows

²⁰² Trotsky 1918, part 3.

²⁰³ Martí, ‘Our Ideas’ (14 March 1892), in Martí 1977, p. 272.

²⁰⁴ Phillips 2001.

²⁰⁵ Serge 1998, p. 92.

that the dictatorship must be guaranteed at all costs'; if such a clash spirals into full-scale civil war then whoever 'repudiates measures of suppression and intimidation towards determined and armed counter-revolution must [also] reject all idea of the political supremacy of the working class and its revolutionary dictatorship. The man who repudiates the dictatorship of the proletariat repudiates the Socialist revolution, and digs the grave of Socialism.'²⁰⁶ Does then this choice of ends serve to justify all feasible means? No, argues Trotsky, in his famous exchange with Dewey, in terms that again return us to the primacy of political will and the subjective factor:

Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means, we answer, which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression [...], imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation.²⁰⁷

For a long time, arguably from Cleisthenes and the Athenian Revolution of 508BC right through to the 'people's wars' that finished the campaigns against colonial rule in the 1970s, the figure of the 'people in arms' stood for the most forceful means of imposing a political will. Long after the victories of 1792-93, in the mid-nineteenth century Blanqui was still confident that 'a France bristling with workers in arms means the advent of socialism', and that 'in the presence of armed proletarians, all obstacles, resistances and impossibilities will disappear.'²⁰⁸ Around the same time, as the insurrections that began in 1848 ran out of steam, Marx was convinced that if the workers were to retain independent revolutionary initiative they 'must be armed and organized', and remain so while pursuing the ends of the revolution through to their completion.²⁰⁹ Twenty years later the same reasoning explains why 'the first decree of the [Paris] Commune [was] the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people.'²¹⁰ It also explains why Trotsky pays such careful attention to 'the psychological moment when the soldiers go over to the revolution', knowing that 'the fate of every revolution at a certain point is decided by a break in the disposition of the army.'²¹¹ For similar reasons, Fanon urges fellow writers and intellectuals to 'understand that nothing can replace the reasoned, irrevocable taking up of arms on the people's side.'²¹² Che's experience of guerrilla war in Cuba convinced him, likewise, that sufficiently determined and organised 'popular forces can win a war against the army.'²¹³

Each guerrilla fighter is ready to die not just to defend an ideal but to make that ideal a reality. This is the basis, the essence of guerrilla struggle. The miracle is that a small nucleus of men, the armed vanguard of the great popular movement that supports them, can proceed to realize that ideal, to establish a new society, to break the old patterns of the past, to achieve, ultimately, the social justice for which they fight.²¹⁴

Che's Vietnamese counterpart Võ Nguyên Giáp, to cite a final example, pushes this logic to its conclusion in the most dramatic people's war of all. 'Victory calls for something more'

²⁰⁶ Trotsky 2017, ch 2.

²⁰⁷ Trotsky 1938.

²⁰⁸ Blanqui, 'Warning to the People', February 1851, <https://blanqui.kingston.ac.uk/texts/warning-to-the-people-25-february-1851/>.

²⁰⁹ Marx 2000, pp. 308-9 ['Address to the Communist League', March 1850].

²¹⁰ Marx 2000, p. 586 [*The Civil War in France*].

²¹¹ Trotsky 1932, vol. 1, ch 7.

²¹² Fanon 1968, p. 226.

²¹³ Guevara 1998, p. 13.

²¹⁴ Guevara 1998, p. 20.

than money and weapons, and that something more, Giáp insists, is ‘the spirit of the people. When a whole people rises up, nothing can be done. [...] That’s the basis of our strategy and our tactics, that the Americans fail to understand. [...] No matter how enormous its military and economic potential, [the US] will never succeed in crushing the will of a people fighting for its independence.’²¹⁵ Summarising his explanation of the victory sometime later, Giáp stresses the point that colonial invaders so consistently fail to grasp, from the British in their thirteen colonies to the Americans in Iraq: ‘It was a war for the people by the people. FOR the people because the war’s goals are the people’s goals – goals such as independence, a unified country, and the happiness of its people.... And BY the people – well that means ordinary people – not just the army but all people. We know it’s the human factor, and not material resources, which decide the outcome of war.’²¹⁶

The binary logic of war excludes nuance, and the victors not only decide the conflict but write the history that will make sense of it. Confronting a society that he understood to be shaped by a recurring ‘war between rich and poor’, Blanqui soon realised that war means woe to the vanquished and fortune for the victors. *Vae victis* is a lesson that resounds through the ages, and its consequences can be illustrated as much by what has happened to Haiti since the overthrow of Aristide in 2004 as by what happened to Guatemala after 1954 or Chile after 1973. As Blanqui writes,

It must be stressed that it is Victory that carries glory or opprobrium, freedom or slavery, barbarism or civilisation, in a fold of its dress. We do not believe in the fatality or inevitability of progress, that doctrine of emasculation and submission. Victory is an absolute necessity for right [*le droit*], on pain of no longer being right, on pain of becoming like Satan, as he writhes under the Archangel’s talons.²¹⁷

Given what’s at stake, it’s no surprise that a long series of insurgent commanders find themselves confronted by similar problems, and resort to similar solutions. Fairfax, Washington, Carnot, Toussaint, Bolívar, Cluseret, Trotsky – each faced the challenges of organising citizen militias, and each came to prioritise ‘professional’ forms of discipline and command.

For this very reason it should also come as no surprise, however, that the old figure of people’s war has long ceased to orient the militant practice of political will. The dialectic of the will operates here with remorseless rigour. Professionalised armies are too easily co-opted by those with an interest in promoting their interests, and who either subsume the state or are subsumed it; after Fairfax there is Cromwell, after Carnot there is Napoleon, after Trotsky there is Stalin. If the US prides itself on the way its constitution promises civilian control over the armed forces, such ‘control’ has done nothing to prevent the state’s absorption in essentially uninterrupted war, and in the vast array of industries and deceptions required to sustain it.²¹⁸ A modern arms race can have only one kind of winner, and the modern equivalents of pitchforks and muskets have no role to play against states whose arsenals now stretch from nuclear weapons at one extreme to kamikaze drones at the other. Régimes ruthless enough to exploit this fact to their advantage may prevail in the short term, as the first decade to follow the Arab Spring might suggest, but coercive force alone will never be enough to secure their future.

To will the end is to will the means, but precisely for that reason, it’s now more obvious than ever that there are no longer any viable means that might allow a people to win a militarised conflict. Nor need they rely on them. When people mass together they don’t need weapons so much as the moral and numerical force that can make weapons unusable. ‘You’re kidding yourself,’ as Haiti’s deposed president Jean-Bertrand Aristide explained a few years ago, ‘if you think that the people can wage an armed struggle. We need to look the situation in

²¹⁵ Giáp 1970, pp. 330-331, p. 320.

²¹⁶ Giáp, PBS interview, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/peoplescentury/episodes/guerrillawars/giaptranscript.html>.

²¹⁷ Blanqui, ‘Introduction’, in Tridon 1871, pp. 8-9.

²¹⁸ Cf. Singh 2017.

the eye: the people have no weapons, and they will never have as many weapons as their enemies. It's pointless to wage a struggle on your enemies' terrain, or to play by their rules. You will lose.'²¹⁹ The people can only win if they impose own rules, and keep to their own terrain. As Elsa Dorlin argues in her timely book, a capacity for self-defence is as essential to emancipatory political practice today as it was during the civil rights struggles of 1960s, or the suffragette campaigns of the 1910s or indeed during the abolitionist campaigns of the 1850s – but the days when this depended on possession of a sword or a rifle or their equivalent are passed, or passing.²²⁰ In a country like the US or UK, when it comes to matters of strategy and tactics, we have more to learn from Ella Baker and Bob Moses than from Babeuf or Blanqui.²²¹ If sufficiently determined the force of non-violence can become the most imposing force of all, and Giáp's point is still true: 'when a whole people rises up, nothing can be done.'

(d) To recall the dialectic of the will is briefly to confront our fourth challenge.²²² Volition isn't exempt from contradiction. Left unchecked, the voluntary tends to the involuntary. The more successfully a will imposes itself, the more easily it can develop into a new routine, a new dogma, or a new despotism. Echoed by Luxemburg and Martov, Rousseau's warning of the dangers of usurpation has lost none of its force. If it's to continue, a will must forever renew and rework itself *as willing*.

To persevere in an ongoing exercise of political will, then, is not only to 'make virtue reign.' It's also to remain critical and questioning of every sort of reign. Permanent self-criticism is an essential exercise of political will. 'No one can rule innocently', and this insight of Saint-Just applies just as much to his colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety as it does to the king they helped to execute; it will apply to Lenin and Bukharin no less than to Kerensky or Lvov. Virtue can only rule so long as it resists trying to make its rule and its rules definitive. Volition is relative and relational or it is nothing; to absolutise the will is to negate it.

* * * * *

Back in May 1791, when the colonial lobby in the French national assembly could still argue openly for the retention of slavery, they made no attempt to defend the practice itself. 'It's not a matter of pondering whether the institution of slavery can be defended in terms of principle and right,' admitted the planters' spokesman Pierre Victor Malouet: 'no man endowed with sense and morality would profess such a doctrine.' What matters, he argued, is instead 'whether it is possible to change this institution in our colonies, without a terrifying accumulation of crimes and calamities'. What mattered is whether abolition, as the policy of sense and principle, might be adopted without disturbing the prosperity and security of the realm. As another apologist put it, slavery is undeniably 'barbaric, but it would be still more barbaric to seek to alter it.'²²³ Pitt's minister Henry Dundas struck a similar note when he assured the House of Commons, a few years later, of his full agreement 'with those who argued on the general principle of the slave trade as inexpedient, impolitic and incompatible with the justice and humanity of the British constitution' – before going on to oppose calls for its abolition, on the grounds that this would undermine British security and deliver the Caribbean colonies 'entirely into the power' of their imperial rivals.²²⁴

²¹⁹ Aristide, 'One Step at a Time', in Hallward 2010, p. 351.

²²⁰ Cf. Jackson 2020; Cobb 2015; Dorlin 2022.

²²¹ An essential point of reference here remains Charles Payne's analysis of the 'community organising tradition' that proved so resourceful in the American South in the 1950s and 60s (Payne 2007).

²²² Cf. John H. Smith 2000.

²²³ Malouet and Barnave, cited in Gauthier 1992, pp. 174-7, p. 200.

²²⁴ Dundas, February 1796, cited in James 1963, p. 200.

Though it's now rarely so explicit, such unprincipled complicity with the indefensible has become in our time, on issues too numerous to mention, the routine order of the day. It's time that we changed it.

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