There Never Was a West:
Democracy as Interstitial Cosmopolitanism

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What follows emerges largely from my own experience of the alternative globalization movement, where issues of democracy have been very much at the center of debate. Anarchists in Europe or North America, indigenous organizations in the Global South, have all found themselves locked in remarkably similar arguments. Is "democracy" an inherently Western concept? Does it refer a form of governance (a mode of communal self-organization), or a form of government (one particular way of organizing a state apparatus)? Does democracy necessarily imply majority rule? Is representative democracy really democracy at all? Is the word permanently tainted by its origins in Athens, a militaristic, slave-owning society founded on the systematic repression of women? Or does what we now call "democracy" have any real historical connection to Athenian democracy in the first place? Is it possible for those trying to develop decentralized forms of consensus-based direct democracy to reclaim the word? If so, how will we ever convince the majority of people in the world that "democracy" has nothing to do with electing representatives? If not, if we instead accept the standard definition and start calling direct democracy something else, how can we say we're against democracy—a word with such universally positive associations?

These are arguments are about words much more than they are arguments about practices. On questions of practice, in fact, there is a surprising degree of convergence; especially within the more radical elements of the movement. Whether one is talking with members of Zapatista communities in Chiapas, unemployed piqueteros in Argentina, Dutch squatters, or anti-eviction activists in South African townships, almost everyone agrees on the importance of horizontal, rather than vertical structures; the need for initiatives to rise up from relatively small, self-organized, autonomous groups rather than being conveyed downwards through chains of command, the rejection of permanent, named leadership structures, and the need to maintain some kind of mechanism—whether these be North American style "facilitation", Zapatista-style women's and youth caucuses, or any of an endless variety of other possibilities—to ensure that the voices those who would normally be expected to find themselves marginalized or excluded from traditional participatory mechanisms are heard. Some of the bitter conflicts of the past, for example, between partisans of majority voting versus partisans of consensus process, have been largely resolved, or perhaps better said seem increasingly irrelevant, as more and more social

movements use full consensus only within smaller groups and adopt various forms of "modified consensus" for larger coalitions. Something is emerging. The problem is what to call it. Many of the key principles of the movement (self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the refusal of state power…) derive from the anarchist tradition; still, many who embrace these ideas are reluctant, or flat-out refuse, to call themselves "anarchists". Similarly with democracy. My own approach has normally been to openly embrace both terms, to argue, in fact, that anarchism and democracy are—or should be—largely identical, but as I say, there is no sort of consensus on this issue, nor even a clear majority view.

It seems to me these are tactical, political questions more than anything else. The word "democracy" has meant any number of different things over the course of its history. When first coined, it referred a system in which the citizens of a community made decisions by equal vote in a collective assembly. For most of its history, it referred to political disorder, rioting, lynching, and factional violence (in fact, the word had much the same associations as "anarchy" does today). It is only quite recently it has become identified with a system in which the citizens of a state elect representatives to exercise state power in their name. Clearly there is no true essence to be discovered here. About the only thing all these different referents have in common, perhaps, is that they involve some sense that political questions which are normally the concerns of a narrow elite are here thrown open to everyone, and that this is either a very good thing, or a very bad one.[1] Either way, the term has always been so morally loaded that to write a dispassionate, disinterested history of democracy would almost be a contradiction in terms. Most scholars who want to maintain an appearance of disinterest avoid the word. Those who do make generalizations about democracy inevitably have some sort of axe to grind.

I certainly do. That is why I felt it only fair to the reader to make my own axes evident from the start. It seems to me that there's a reason why the word "democracy", no matter how consistently it is abused by tyrants and demagogues, still maintains its stubborn popular appeal. For most people, democracy is still identified with some notion of ordinary people collectively managing their own affairs. It already seems to have done so in the 19th century, and it was for this reason that 19th century politicians, who had earlier shunned the term, reluctantly began to adopt it and to refer to themselves as "democrats"—and gradually, to patch together a history by which they could represent themselves as heirs to a tradition that harkened back to ancient Athens. But in doing so, I will also assume—for no particular reason, or anyway, no particular scholarly reason, since these are not scholarly questions but moral and political ones—that the history of "democracy" should be treated as more than just the history of the word "democracy". If

[1] Hence Ranciere's argument that democracy is a matter of those excluded from the official order of allocating rights and resource bursting in, and demanding a voice, does make a certain historical sense.

democracy is simply a matter of communities managing their own affairs through an open and relatively egalitarian process of public discussion, there is no reason why egalitarian forms of decision-making in rural communities in Africa or Brazil should not be at least as worthy of the name as the constitutional systems that govern most nation-states today—and in many cases, probably a good deal more so.

In doing so I will be making a series of related arguments and perhaps the best way to proceed would be to just set out them all out right away.

1) Almost everyone who writes on the subject assumes “democracy” is a "Western" concept begins its history in ancient Athens, and that what 18th and 19th century politicians began reviving in Western Europe and North America was essentially the same thing. Democracy is thus seen as something whose natural habitat is Western Europe and its English or French-speaking settler colonies. Not one of these assumptions is justified. "Western civilization" is a particularly incoherent concept, but insofar as it refers to anything it refers to an intellectual tradition. This intellectual tradition is, overall, just as hostile to anything we would recognize as democracy as the Indian, Chinese, or Mesoamerican.

2) Democratic practices—processes of egalitarian decision-making—however occur pretty much anywhere, and are not peculiar to any one given "civilization", culture, or tradition. They tend to crop up wherever human life goes on outside systematic structures of coercion.

3) The "democratic ideal" tends to emerge when under certain historical circumstances, intellectuals and politicians, usually navigating their way in some sense or another between states and popular movements and popular practices, interrogate their own traditions—invariably, in dialogue with other ones—pulling on cases of past or present democratic practice to argue that their tradition has a fundamental kernel of democracy. I call these moments of “democratic refoundation.” From the perspective of the intellectual traditions they are also moments of recuperation, in which ideals and institutions that are often the product of incredibly complicated forms of interaction between people of very different histories and traditions come to be represented as emerging from the logic of that intellectual tradition itself. Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries especially, such moments did not just occur in Europe but actually, almost everywhere.

4) The fact that this ideal is always founded on (at least partly) invented traditions does not mean it is inauthentic or illegitimate, or at least, more inauthentic or illegitimate than any other. The contradiction, however, is that this ideal was always based on the

impossible dream of marrying democratic procedures or practices with the coercive mechanisms of the state. The result are not "Democracies" in any meaningful sense of the world but Republics with a few, usually fairly limited, democratic elements.

5) What we are experiencing today is not a crisis of democracy but rather a crisis of the state. In recent years there has been a massive revival of interest in democratic practices and procedures within global social movements, but this has proceeded almost entirely outside of statist frameworks. The future of democracy lies precisely in this area.

Let me take these up in roughly the order in which I presented them above. I'll start with the curious idea that democracy is somehow a "Western concept".

PART I
ON THE INCOHERENCE OF THE NOTION OF THE "WESTERN TRADITION"

Let me begin, then, with a relatively easy target: Samuel P. Huntington's famous essay on the "Clash of Civilizations". Huntington is a professor of International Relations at Harvard, a classic Cold War intellectual, beloved of right-wing think tanks. In 1993 he published an essay arguing that, now that the Cold War was over, global conflicts must inevitably come to center on clashes between ancient cultural traditions. The argument was notable for promoting a certain notion of cultural humility. Drawing on the work of Arnold Toynbee, he urged Westerners to understand that theirs is just one civilization among many, that its values should in no way be assumed to be universal. Democracy in particular, he argued, is a distinctly Western idea and the West should abandon its efforts to impose it on the rest of the world.

At a superficial level, much of Western culture has indeed permeated the rest of the world. At a more basic level, however, Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures. Western efforts to propagate such ideas produce instead a reaction against "human rights imperialism" and a reaffirmation of indigenous values, as can be seen in the support for religious fundamentalism by the

> younger generation in non-Western cultures. The very notion that there is a 'universal civilization' is a Western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies and their emphasis on what distinguishes one people from another. (1993:120)

This list of Western concepts is fascinating from any number of angles. If taken literally, for instance, it would mean that "the West" only really took any kind of recognizable form in the nineteenth or even twentieth centuries, since in any previous century the overwhelming majority of "Westerners" would have rejected just about all these principles out of hand—if, indeed, they would have been able even to conceive of them. One can, if one likes, scratch around through the last two or three thousand years in different parts of Europe and find oneself plausible forerunners to most of them. Many try. Fifth century Athens usually provides a useful resource in this regard, provided one is willing to ignore or at least skim over almost everything that happened between 325 BC and perhaps 1215 AD, or maybe 1776. This is roughly the approach taken by most conventional textbooks. Huntington is a bit more subtle. He treats Greece and Rome as a separate, "Classical Civilization", which then splits off into Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) Christianity—and later, of course, Islam. When Western Civilization begins, it is identical to Latin Christendom. After the upheavals of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, however, Huntington argues that the civilization loses its religious specificity and transforms into something broader and essentially secular. The results, however, are much the same as in conventional textbooks, since Huntington also insists that the Western tradition was all along "far more" the heir of the ideas of Classical civilization than its Orthodox or Islamic rivals.

Now there are a thousand ways one could attack Huntington's position. His list of "Western concepts" seems particularly arbitrary. Any number of concepts were adrift in Western Europe over the years, and many far more widely accepted. Why choose this list rather than some other? What are the criteria? Clearly, Huntington's immediate aim was to show that many ideas widely accepted in Western Europe and North America are likely to be viewed with suspicion in other quarters. But even on this basis, could one not equally well assemble a completely different list: say, argue that "Western culture" is premised on science, industrialism, bureaucratic rationality, nationalism, racial theories, and an endless drive for geographic expansion, and then argue that the culmination of Western culture was the Third Reich? (Actually, some radical critics of the West would probably make precisely this argument.) And in other contexts (1996) Huntington insists on reproducing a very similar list.

It seems to me the only way to understand why Huntington creates the list he does is to examine his use of the terms "culture" and "civilization". In fact, if one reads the text carefully, one finds that the phrases "Western culture" and "Western civilization" are used pretty much

interchangeably. Each civilization has its own culture. Cultures, in turn, appear to consist, in Huntington, primarily of "ideas", "concepts", and "values". In the Western case, these ideas appear to have once been tied to a particular sort of Christianity, but now to have developed a basically geographic or national distribution, having set down roots in Western Europe and it's English and French speaking white settler colonies.[2] The other civilizations listed are—with the exception of Japan—not defined in geographic terms. They are still religions: the Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Orthodox Christian civilizations. This is already a bit confusing. Why should the West have stopped being primarily defined in religious terms around 1517 (despite the fact that most Westerners continue to call themselves 'Christians'), while the others all remain so (despite the fact that most Chinese, for example, would certainly not call themselves 'Confucians')? Presumably because for Huntington to be consistent in this area, he would either have to exclude from the West certain groups he would prefer not to exclude (Catholics or Protestants, Jews, Deists, secular philosophers...) or else, provide some reason why the West can consist of a complex amalgam of faiths and philosophies while all the other civilizations cannot: despite the fact that if one examines the history of geographical units like India, or China (as opposed to made-up entities like Hinduism or Confucianism), a complex amalgam of faiths and philosophies is precisely what one finds.

It gets worse. In a later clarification called "What Makes the West Western" (1996), Huntington actually does claim that "pluralism" is one of the West's unique qualities:

> Western society historically has been highly pluralistic. What is distinctive about the West, as Karl Deutsch noted, "is the rise and persistence of diverse autonomous groups not based on blood relationship or marriage." Beginning in the sixth and seventh centuries these groups initially included monasteries, monastic orders, and guilds, but afterwards expanded in many areas of Europe to include a variety of other associations and societies (1996:234).

He goes on to explain this diversity also included class pluralism (strong aristocracies), social pluralism (representative bodies), linguistic diversity, and so on. All this gradually set the stage, according to Huntington, for the unique complexity of Western civil society. Now, it would be easy to point out how ridiculous all this. One could, for instance, remind the reader that China and India in fact had for most of their histories a great deal more religious pluralism than Western

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[2] But not those that speak Spanish or Portuguese. It is not clear if Huntington has passed judgment on the Boers. Huntington being a modern author is too delicate to mention race, but the end result is suspiciously similar to those derived from racial classifications.

Europe;[3] that most Asian societies were marked by a dizzying variety of monastic orders, guilds, colleges, secret societies, sodalities, professional and civic groups; that none ever came up with such distinctly Western ways of enforcing uniformity as the war of extermination against heretics, the Inquisition, or the witch hunt. But the amazing thing is that what Huntington is doing here is trying to turn the very incoherence of his category into its defining feature. First, he describes Asian civilizations in such a way they cannot, by definition, be plural; then, if one were to complain that people he lumps together as "the West" don't seem to have any common features at all—no common language, religion, philosophy, or mode of government—Huntington could simply reply that this pluralism *is* the West's defining feature. It is the perfect circular argument.

In most ways Huntington's argument is just typical, old-fashioned Orientalism: European civilization is represented as inherently dynamic, "the East", at least tacitly, as stagnant, timeless, and monolithic. What I really want to draw attention to however is just how incoherent Huntington's notions of "civilization" and "culture" really are. The word "civilization" after all can be used in two very different ways. It can be used to refer to a society in which people live in cities, in the way an archeologist might refer to the "Indus Valley civilization". Or it can mean refinement, accomplishment, cultural achievement. Culture has much the same double meaning. One can use the term in its anthropological sense, as referring to structures of feeling, symbolic codes that members of a given culture absorb in the course of growing up and which inform every aspect of their daily life: the way people talk, eat, marry, gesture, play music, and so on. To use Bourdieu's terminology one could call this culture as habitus. Alternately, one can use the word to refer to what is also called "high culture": the best and most profound productions of some artistic, literary, or philosophical elite. Huntington's insistence on defining the West only by its most remarkable, valuable concepts—like freedom and human rights—suggests that in either case it's mainly the latter sense he has in mind. After all, if "culture" were to be defined in the anthropological sense, then clearly the most direct heirs to ancient Greeks would not be modern Englishmen and Frenchmen, but modern Greeks. Whereas in Huntington's system, modern Greeks parted company with the West over 1500 years ago, the moment they converted to the wrong form of Christianity.

In short, for the notion of "civilization" in the sense used by Huntington to really make sense, civilizations have to be conceived basically as traditions of people reading one another's books. It is possible to say Napoleon or Disraeli are more heirs to Plato and Thucydides than a Greek shepherd of their day for one reason only: both men were more likely to have read Plato and

[3]It was utterly unremarkable, for example, for a Ming court official to be a Taoist in his youth, become a Confucian in his middle years, and a Buddhist on retirement. It is hard to find parallels in the West even today.

Thucydides. Western culture is not just a collection of ideas; it is a collection of ideas that are taught in schoolbooks and discussed in lecture halls, cafes or literary salons. If it were not, it would be hard to imagine how one could end up with a civilization that begins in ancient Greece, passes to ancient Rome, maintains for a while a kind of half-life in the Medieval Catholic world, revives in the Italian renaissance, and then passes mainly to dwell in those countries bordering the North Atlantic. It would also be impossible to explain how for most of its history, "Western concepts" like human rights and democracy existed only in potentia. We could say: this is a literary and philosophical tradition, a set of ideas first imagined in ancient Greece, then conveyed through books, lectures and seminars over several thousand years, drifting as they did westward, until their liberal and democratic potential was fully realized in a small number of countries bordering the Atlantic a century or two ago. Once they became enshrined in new, democratic institutions, they began to worm their way into ordinary citizens' social and political common sense. Finally, their proponents saw them as having universal status and tried to impose them on the rest of the world. But here they hit their limits, because they cannot ultimately expand to areas where there are equally powerful, rival textual traditions—based in Koranic scholarship, or the teachings of the Buddha—that inculcate other concepts and values.

This position, at least, would be intellectually consistent. One might call it the Great Books theory of civilization. In a way it's quite compelling. Being Western, one might say, has nothing to do with habitus. It is not about the deeply embodied understandings of the world one absorbs in childhood—that which makes certain people upper class Englishwomen, others Bavarian farm boys, or Italian kids from Brooklyn. The West is, rather, the literary-philosophical tradition into which all of them are initiated, mainly in adolescence—though, certainly, some elements of that tradition do, gradually, become part of everyone's common sense. The problem is that if Huntington applied this model consistently, it would destroy his argument. If civilizations are not deeply embodied, why, then, should an upper class Peruvian woman or Bangladeshi farm boy not be able to take the same curriculum and become just as Western as anyone else? But this is precisely what Huntington is trying to deny.

As a result, he is forced to continually slip back and forth between the two meanings of "civilization" and the two meanings of "culture". Mostly, the West is defined by its loftiest ideals. But sometimes it's defined by its ongoing institutional structure—for example, all those early medieval guilds and monastic orders, which do not seem to be inspired by readings of Plato and Aristotle but cropped up all of their own accord. Sometimes Western individualism is treated as an abstract principle, usually suppressed, an idea preserved in ancient texts but occasionally poking out its head in documents like the Magna Carta. Sometimes it is treated as a deeply embedded folk

understanding, which will never make intuitive sense to those raised in a different cultural tradition.

Now, as I say, I chose Huntington largely because he's such an easy target. The argument in "the clash of civilizations" is unusually sloppy.[4] Critics have duly savaged most of what he's had to say about non-Western civilizations. The reader may at this point feel justified to wonder why I'm bothering to spend so much time on him. The reason is that, in part because it is so clumsy, Huntington's argument brings out the incoherence in assumptions that are shared by almost everyone. None of his critics, to my knowledge, have challenged the idea that there is an entity that can be referred to as "the West", that it can be treated simultaneously as a literary tradition originating in ancient Greece, and as the common sense culture of people who live in Western Europe and North America today. Or even the assumption that concepts like individualism and democracy or are somehow peculiar to it. All this is simply taken for granted as the grounds of debate. Some proceed to celebrate the West as the birthplace of freedom. Others denounce it. But it's almost impossible to find a political, or philosophical, or social thinker on the left or the right who doubts one can say meaningful things about "the Western tradition." Many of the most radical, in fact, seem to feel it is impossible to say meaningful things about anything else.[5]

parenthetical note: on the slipperiness of the Western eye

What I am suggesting is that the very notion of the West is founded on a constant blurring of the line between textual traditions and forms of everyday practice. To offer a particular vivid example: In the 1920s, a French philosopher named Lucien Levy-Bruhl wrote a series of books proposing that many of the societies studied by anthropologists evinced a "pre-logical mentality" (1926, etc). Where modern Westerners employ logico-experimental thought, he argued, primitives employ profoundly different principles. The whole argument need not be spelled out. Everything Levy-Bruhl said about primitive logic was attacked almost immediately and his argument is now considered entirely discredited. What his critics did not, generally speaking point out is that Lévy-Bruhl was comparing apples and oranges. Basically, what he did was to assemble the most puzzling ritual statements or surprising reactions to unusual circumstances he could cull from the observations of European missionaries and colonial officials in Africa, New Guinea, or South America, and tried to extrapolate the logic. He then compared this material, not with similar

[4]Some of his statements are so outrageous (for example, the claim that the West alone claims its ideas are universal truths (unlike say Buddhists) or that the West is unique in its obsession with the rule of law (unlike, say, Islam) that one wonders how any serious scholar could possibly make them,

[5] Actually, one often finds some of the authors who would otherwise be most hostile to Huntington going even further, and arguing that love, for example, is a "Western concept" and therefore cannot be used when speaking of people in Indonesia or Brazil.

material collected in France or some other Western country, but rather, with a completely idealized conception of how Westerners ought to behave, based on philosophical and scientific texts (buttressed, no doubt, by observations about the way philosophers and other academics act while discussing and arguing about such texts). The results are manifestly absurd—we all know that ordinary people do not in fact apply Aristotelian syllogisms and experimental methods to their daily affairs—but it is the special magic of this style of writing is that one is never forced to confront this.

How does this magic work? Largely, by causing the reader to identify with a human being of unspecified qualities who's trying to solve a puzzle. This style of writing is extremely common. One sees it from very early on in the Western philosophical tradition, especially in the works of Aristotle, works that (especially compared with similar works in other philosophical traditions, which rarely start in nearly such decontextualized ways) give us the impression the universe was created yesterday, suggesting no prior knowledge is necessary. Even more, there is the tendency to present the reader with a common sense narrator confronted with some kind of exotic practices—this is what makes it possible, for example for a contemporary German to read Tacitus' *Germania* and automatically identify with the perspective of the Italian narrator, rather than with his own ancestors, or an Italian athiest to read an Anglican missionary's account of some ritual in Zimbabwe without ever having to think about that observer's own dedication to bizarre tea rituals or the doctrine of transubstantiation. Hence, the entire history of the West can be framed as a story of "inventions" and "discoveries". Most of all, there is the fact that it is precisely when one actually begins to write a text to address these issues, as I am doing now, that one effectively becomes part of the cannon and the tradition most comes to seem overwhelming and inescapable.

The "Western individual" in Levy-Bruhl, or for that matter, most contemporary anthropologists, is more than anything else, precisely that featureless, rational observer, carefully scrubbed of any individual or social content, that we are supposed to pretend to be when writing in certain genres of prose. It has little relation to any human being who has ever existed, grown up, had loves and hatreds and commitments. It is a pure abstraction. Recognizing all of this creates a terrible problem for anthropologists: after all, if the "Western individual" doesn't exist, then what precisely is our point of comparison?

It seems to me though that it creates an even worse problem for anyone who wishes to see this figure as the bearer of "democracy". If democracy is communal self-governance, the Western individual is an actor already purged of any ties to a community. While it is possible to imagine this relatively featureless, rational, observer as the protagonist of certain forms of market economics, to make him (and he is, unless otherwise specified, presumed to be male) a democrat seems possible only if one defines democracy as itself a kind of market, that actors enter with little

more than a set of economic interests to pursue. This is of course the approach promoted by rational-choice theory, and in a way you could say it is already implicit in the predominant approach to democratic decision-making in the literature since Rousseau, which tends to see "deliberation" merely as the balancing of interests rather than a process through which subjects themselves are constituted, or even shaped (Manin 1994). It is very difficult to see such an abstraction, divorced from any concrete community, entering into the kind of conversation and compromise required by anything but the most abstract form of democratic process, such as the periodic participation in elections.

world-systems reconfigured

The reader may feel entitled to ask: if "the West" is a meaningless category, how *can* we talk about such matters? It seems to me we need an entirely new set of categories. While this is hardly the place to develop them, I've suggested elsewhere (Graeber 2004) that there are a whole series of terms—starting with the West, but also including terms like "modernity"—that effectively, substitute for thought. If one looks either at concentrations of urbanism, or literary-philosophical traditions, it becomes hard to avoid the impression that Eurasia was for most of its history divided into three main centers: an Eastern system centered on China, a Southern one centered on what's now India, and a Western civilization centered on what we now call "the Middle East", extending sometimes further, sometimes less, into the Mediterranean.[6] In world-system terms, for most of the Middle Ages Europe and Africa both seem to have almost precisely the same relation with the core states of Mesopotamia and the Levant: they were classic economic peripheries, importing manufactures and supplying raw materials like gold and silver, and, significantly, large numbers of slaves. (After the revolt of African slaves in Basra from 868-883 CE, the Abbasid Caliphate seems to have shifted to importing Europeans instead, as they were considered more docile.) Europe and Africa were for most of this period cultural peripheries as well. Islam resembles what was later to be called "the Western tradition" in so many ways—the intellectual efforts to fuse Judeo-Christian scripture with the categories of Greek philosophy, the literary emphasis on courtly love, the scientific rationalism, the legalism, puritanical monotheism, missionary impulse, the expansionist mercantile capitalism…—even the periodic waves of fascination with "Eastern mysticism"—that only the deepest historical prejudice could have blinded European historians to the conclusion that in fact this *is* the Western tradition; that Islamicization was and continues to be a form of Westernization; that those who lived in the

[6] This conclusion is in world-systems terms hardly unprecedented: what I am describing corresponds to what DavidWilkinson (1987) for example calls the "Central Civilization".

barbarian kingdoms of the European Middle Ages only came to resemble what we now call “the West” when they themselves became more like Islam.

If so, what we are used to calling “the rise of the West” is probably better thought of, in world-system terms, as the emergence of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) has called the “North Atlantic system”, which gradually replaced the Mediterranean semi-periphery, and emerged as a world economy of its own, rivaling, and then gradually, slowly, painfully, incorporating the older world economy that had centered on the cosmopolitan societies of the Indian Ocean. This North Atlantic world-system was created through almost unimaginable catastrophe: the destruction of entire civilizations, mass enslavement, the death of at least a hundred million human beings. It also produced its own forms of cosmopolitanism, with endless fusions of African, Native American, and European traditions. Much of the history of the seaborne, North Atlantic proletariat is only beginning to be reconstructed (Gilroy 1993, Sakolsky & Koehnline 1993, Rediker 1981, 1990, Linebaugh and Rediker 2001, etc), a history of mutinies, piracy, rebellions, defections, experimental communities, and every sort of Antinomian and populist idea, largely squelched in conventional accounts, much of it permanently lost, but which seems to have played a key role in many of the radical ideas that came to be referred to as “democracy.” But this is jumping ahead. For now I just want to emphasize that rather than a history of “civilizations” developing through some Herderian or Hegelian process of internal unfolding, we are dealing with societies that are thoroughly entangled.

PART II:
DEMOCRACY WAS NOT INVENTED

I began this essay by suggesting that one can write the history of democracy in two very different ways. Either one can write a history of the word “democracy”, beginning with ancient Athens, or one can write a history of the sort of egalitarian decision-making procedures that in Athens came to be referred to as “democratic”.

Normally, we tend to assume the two are effectively identical because common wisdom has it that democracy—much like, say, science, or philosophy—was invented in ancient Greece. On the face of it this seems an odd assertion. Egalitarian communities have existed throughout human history—many of them far more egalitarian than fifth century Athens—and they all had some kind of procedures for coming to decisions in matters of collective importance. Often this involved

assembling everyone for discussions in which all members of the community, at least in theory, had equal say. Yet somehow, it is always assumed that these procedures could not have been, properly speaking, "democratic."

The main reason this argument seems to make intuitive sense is because in these other assemblies, things never actually came to a vote. Almost invariably, they used some form of consensus-finding. Now this is interesting in itself. If we accept the idea of a show of hands, or having everyone who supports a proposition stand on one side of a the plaza and everyone against stand on the other, are not really such incredibly sophisticated ideas that some ancient genius had to "invent" them, then why are they so rarely employed? Why, instead, did communities invariably prefer the apparently much more difficult task of coming to unanimous decisions?

The explanation I would propose is this: it is much easier, in a face-to-face community, to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not to go along with it. Consensus decision-making is typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision; either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has no interest in or does not tend to intervene in local decision-making. If there is no way to compel those who find a majority decision distasteful to go along with it, then the last thing one would want to do is to hold a vote: a public contest which someone will be seen to lose. Voting would be the most likely means to guarantee the sort of humiliations, resentments, and hatreds that ultimately lead the destruction of communities. As any activist who has gone through a facilitation training for a contemporary direct action group can tell you, consensus process is not the same as parliamentary debate and finding consensus in no way resembles voting. Rather, we are dealing with a process of compromise and synthesis meant to produces decisions that no one finds so violently objectionable that they are not willing at least assent. That is to say two levels we are used to distinguishing—decision-making, and enforcement—are effectively collapsed here. It is not that everyone has to agree. Most forms of consensus include a variety of graded forms of disagreement. The point is to ensure that no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored, and therefore, that even those who think the group came to a bad decision are willing to offer their passive acquiescence.

Majority democracy, we might say, can only emerge when two factors coincide:

> (1) a feeling that people should have equal say in making group decisions, and
> (2) a coercive apparatus capable of enforcing those decisions.

For most of human history, it has been extremely unusual to have both at the same time. Where egalitarian societies exist, it is also usually considered wrong to impose systematic

coercion. Where a machinery of coercion did exist, it did not even occur to those wielding it that they were enforcing any sort of popular will.

It is of obvious relevance that Ancient Greece was one of the most competitive societies known to history. It was a society that tended to make everything into a public contest, from athletics to philosophy or tragic drama or just about anything else. So it might not seem entirely surprising they made political decision-making into a public contest as well. Even more crucial though was the fact that decisions were made by a populace in arms. Aristotle, in his Politics, remarks that the constitution of a Greek city-state will normally depend on the chief arm of its military: if this is cavalry, it will be an aristocracy, since horses are expensive. If hoplite infantry, it will have an oligarchic, as all could not afford the armor and training. If it's power was based in the navy or light infantry, one can expect a democracy, as anyone can row, or use a sling. In other words if a man is armed, then one pretty much has to take his opinions into account. One can see how this worked at its starkest in Xenophon's Anabasis, which tells the story of an army of Greek mercenaries who suddenly find themselves leaderless and lost in the middle of Persia. They elect new officers, and then hold a collective vote to decide what to do next. In a case like this, even if the vote was 60/40, everyone could see the balance of forces and what would happen if things actually came to blows. Every vote was, in a real sense, a conquest.

In other words, here too decision-making and the means of enforcement were effectively collapsed (or could be), but in a rather different way.

Roman legions could be similarly democratic; this was the main reason they were never allowed to enter the city of Rome. And when Machiavelli revived the notion of a democratic republic at the dawn of the "modern" era, he immediately reverted to the notion of a populace in arms.

This in turn might help explain the term "democracy" itself, which appears to have been coined as something of a slur by its elitist opponents: it literally means the "force" or even "violence" of the people. Kratos, not archos. The elitists who coined the term always considered democracy not too far from simple rioting or mob rule; though of course their solution was the permanent conquest of the people by someone else. And ironically, when they did manage to suppress democracy for this reason, which was usually, the result was that the only way the general populace's will was known was precisely through rioting, a practice that became quite institutionalized in, say, imperial Rome or eighteenth century England.

One question that bears historical investigation is the degree to which such phenomena were in fact encouraged by the state. Here I’m not referring to literal rioting, of course, but to what I would propose to call the “ugly mirror” phenomenon: institutions promoted or supported by elites that reinforced the sense that popular decision-making could only be violent, chaotic and arbitrary

"mob rule". I suspect that these are quite common to authoritarian regimes. Consider for example that while the defining public event in democratic Athens was the agora, the defining public event in authoritarian Rome was the circus, assemblies in which the plebs gathered to witness races, gladiatorial contests, and mass executions. Such games were either sponsored directly by the state, or more often, by particular members of the elite (Veyne 1976; Kyle 1998; Lomar and Cornell 2003). The fascinating thing about gladiatorial contests in particular, is that they did involve a kind of popular decision-making: lives would be taken, or spared, by popular acclaim. However, where the procedures of the Athenian agora were designed to maximize the dignity of the demos and the thoughtfulness of its deliberations—despite the underlying element of coercion, and its occasional capability of making terrifyingly bloodthirsty decisions—the Roman circus was almost exactly the opposite. It had more the air of regular, state-sponsored lynchings. Almost every quality normally ascribed to "the mob" by later writers hostile to democracy—the capriciousness, overt cruelty, factionalism (supporters of rival chariot teams would regularly do battle in the streets), hero worship, mad passions—all were not only tolerated, but actually encouraged, in the Roman amphitheatre. It was as if an authoritarian elite was trying to provide the public with constant nightmare images of the chaos that would ensue if it were to take power into its own hands.[7]

My emphasis on the military origins of direct democracy is not meant to imply that popular assemblies in, say, Medieval cities or New England town meetings were not normally orderly and dignified procedures; though one suspects this was in part to fact that here too, in actual practice, there was a certain baseline of consensus-seeking going on. Still they seem to have done little to disabuse members of political elites that popular rule would more resemble the circuses and riots of imperial Rome and Byzantium. The authors of the Federalist Papers, like almost all other literate men of their day, took it for granted that what they called "democracy"—by which they meant, direct democracy, "pure democracy" as they sometimes put it—was in its nature the most unstable, tumultuous form of government, not to mention one which endangers the rights of minorities (the specific minority they had in mind in this case being the rich). It was only once the term "democracy" could be almost completely transformed to incorporate the principle of representation—a term which itself has a very curious history, since as Cornelius Castoriadis liked to point out (1991), it originally referred to representatives of the people *before* the king, internal ambassadors in fact, rather than those who wielded power in any sense themselves—that it was rehabilitated, in the eyes of well-born political theorists, and took on the meaning it has today. In the next section let me pass, however briefly, to how this came about.

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[7] Ironically, though, as Muhlenberger notes (1998) the first evidence of voting in England comes in the form of ballots found at the site of a Roman arena.

PART III:
ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE "DEMOCRATIC IDEAL"

The remarkable thing is just how long it took. For the first three hundred years of the North Atlantic system, democracy continued to mean “the mob”. This was true even in what we like to call the “Age of Revolutions”. In almost every case, the founders of what are now considered the first democratic constitutions in England, France, and the United States, rejected any suggestion that they were trying to introduce “democracy”. As Francis Dupuis-Deris (1999, 2004) has observed:

> The founders of the modern electoral systems in the United States and France were overtly anti-democratic. This anti-democratism can be explained in part by their vast knowledge of the literary, philosophical and historical texts of Greco-Roman antiquity. Regarding political history, it was common for American and French political figures to see themselves as direct heirs to classical civilization and to believe that all through history, from Athens and Rome to Boston and Paris, the same political forces have faced off in eternal struggles. The founders sided with the historical republican forces against the aristocratic and democratic ones, and the Roman republic was the political model for both the Americans and the French, whereas Athenian democracy was a despised counter-model (Dupuis-Deri 2004:120).

In the English-speaking world, for example, most educated people in the late eighteenth century were familiar with Athenian democracy largely through a translation of Thucydides by Thomas Hobbes. Their conclusion, that democracy was unstable, tumultuous, prone to factionalism and demagoguery, and marked by a strong tendency to turn into despotism, was hardly surprising.

Most politicians, then, were hostile to anything that smacked of democracy precisely *because* they saw themselves as heirs to what we now call “the Western tradition.” The ideal of the Roman republic was enshrined above all in the American system of government, whose founders were quite consciously trying to imitate Rome’s “mixed constitution”, balancing monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements. John Adams, for example, in his “Defense of the Constitution” (1797) argued that truly egalitarian societies do not exist; that every human society has had a supreme leader, an aristocracy (whether an aristocracy of wealth or a “natural

aristocracy" of virtue), and a public, and that the Roman Constitution was the most perfect in balancing the powers of each. The American constitution was meant to reproduce this balance by creating a powerful presidency, a senate to represent the wealthy, and a congress to represent the people—though the powers of the latter were largely limited to ensuring popular control over the distribution of tax money. This republican ideal lies at the basis of all "democratic" constitutions and to this day many conservative thinkers in America like to point out that "America is not a democracy: it's a republic".

On the other hand, as John Markoff notes, "those who called themselves democrats at the tail end of the eighteenth century were likely to be very suspicious of parliaments, downright hostile to competitive political parties, critical of secret ballots, uninterested or even opposed to women's suffrage, and sometimes tolerant of slavery" (1999:661)—again, hardly surprising, for those who wished to revive something along the lines of ancient Athens.

At the time, outright democrats of this sort—men like Tom Paine, for instance—were considered a tiny minority of rabble-rousers even within revolutionary regimes. Things only began to change over the course of the next century. In the United States, as the franchise widened in the first decades of the 19th century, and politicians were increasingly forced to seek the votes of small farmers and urban laborers, some began to adopt the term. Andrew Jackson led the way; he started referring to himself as a democrat in the 1820s; within twenty years, almost all political parties, not just populists but even the most conservative, began to follow suit. In France, socialists began calling for "democracy" in the 1830s, with similar results: within ten or fifteen years, the term was being used by even moderate and conservative republicans forced to compete with them for the popular vote (Dupuis-Deris 1999, 2004). The same period saw a dramatic reappraisal of Athens, which—again starting in the 1820s—began to be represented as embodying a noble ideal of public participation, rather than a nightmare of violent crowd psychology (Saxonhouse 1993). This is not, however, because anyone, at this point, was endorsing Athenian-style direct democracy, even on the local level. (In fact, one rather imagines it was precisely this fact that made the rehabilitation of Athens possible.) For the most part, politicians simply began substituting the word "democracy" for "republic", without any change in meaning. Myself, I suspect the new positive appraisal of Athens had more to do with popular fascination with events in Greece at the time than anything else: specifically, the war of independence against the Ottoman Empire between 1821 and 1829. It was hard not see it as modern replay of the clash between the Persian Empire and Greek city states narrated by Herodotus, a kind of founding text of the opposition between freedom-loving Europe and despotic East; and of course changing one's frame of reference from Thucydides to Herodotus could only do Athens' image good.

When novelists like Victor Hugo and poets like Walt Whitman began touting democracy as a beautiful ideal—as they began to do soon after—they were not, however, referring to word-games on the part of elites but the broader popular sentiment that caused small farmers and urban laborers to look with favor on the term to begin with—even back when the political elite was still largely using it as a term of abuse. The "democratic ideal", in other words, did not emerge from the Western literary-philosophical tradition. It was, rather, imposed on it. In fact, the notion that democracy was a distinctly "Western" ideal only came much later. For most of the 19th century, when Europeans defined themselves against "the East" or "the Orient", they did so precisely as "Europeans"—not "Westerners".[8] With few exceptions, "the West" referred to the Americas. It was only in the 1890s, when Europeans began to see the United States as part of the same, coequal civilization, that many started using the term in its current sense (GoGwilt 1995, Martin & Wigan 1997:49-62). Huntington's "Western civilization" comes even later: this notion was first developed in American universities in the years following World War I (Federici 1995:67), at a time when German intellectuals were already locked in debate about whether they were part of the West at all. Over the course of the twentieth century, the concept of "Western civilization" proved perfectly tailored for an age that saw the gradual dissolution of colonial empires, since it managed to lump together the former colonial metropoles with their wealthiest and most powerful settler colonies, at the same time insisting on their shared moral and intellectual superiority, and abandoning any notion that they necessarily had a responsibility to "civilize" anybody else. The peculiar tension evident in phrases like "Western science", "Western freedoms" or "Western consumer goods"—do these reflect universal truths that all human beings should recognize? or are they the products of one tradition among many?—would appear to stem directly from the ambiguities of the historical moment. The resulting formulation is, as I've noted, so riddled with contradictions that it's hard to see how it could have arisen except to fill a very particular historical need.

If you examine these terms more closely, however, it becomes obvious that all these "Western" objects are the products of endless entanglements. "Western science" was patched together out of discoveries made on many continents, and is now largely produced by non-Westerners. "Western consumer goods" were always drawn from materials taken from all over the world, many explicitly imitated Asian products, and nowadays, most are produced in China. Can we say the same of "Western freedoms"?

The reader can probably guess what my answer is likely to be.

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[8] One reason this is often overlooked is that Hegel was among the first to use "the West" in its modern sense, and Marx often followed him in this. However, this usage was, at the time, extremely unusual.

PART IV:
RECUPERATION

In debates about the origins of capitalism, one of the main bones of contention is whether capitalism—or, alternately, industrial capitalism—emerged primarily within European societies, or whether it can only be understood in the context of a larger world-system connecting Europe and its possessions, markets and sources of labor overseas. It is possible to have the argument, I think, because so many capitalist forms began so early—many could be said to already be present, at least in embryonic form, at the very dawn of European expansion. This can hardly be said for democracy. Even if one is willing to follow by-now accepted convention and identify republican forms of government with that word, democracy only emerges within centers of empire like England and France, and colonies like the United States, after the Atlantic system had existed for almost three hundred years.

Giovanni Arrighi, Iftikhar Ahmad and Min-wen Shih (1997) have produced what's to my mind one of the more interesting responses to Huntington: a world-systemic analysis of European expansion, particularly in Asia, over the last several centuries. One of the most fascinating elements in their account is how, at exactly the same time as European powers came to start thinking themselves as "democratic"—in the 1830s, '40s, and '50s—those same powers began pursuing an intentional policy of supporting reactionary elites against those pushing for anything remotely resembling democratic reforms overseas. Great Britain was particularly flagrant in this regard: whether in its support for the Ottoman Empire against the rebellion of Egyptian governor Muhammed Ali after the Balta Limani Treaty of 1838, or in its support for the Qing imperial forces against the Taiping rebellion after the Nanjing Treaty of 1842. In either case, Britain first found some excuse to launch a military attack on one of the great Asian ancien regimes, defeated it militarily, and imposed a commercially advantageous treaty; then, almost immediately upon doing so, swung around to prop that same regime up against political rebels who clearly were closer to their own supposed "Western" values than the regime itself. (In the first case, this took the form of a rebellion aiming to turn Egypt into something more like a modern nation-state, in the second, an egalitarian Christian movement calling for universal brotherhood.) After the Great Rebellion of 1857 in India, Britain began employing the same strategy in her own colonies, self-consciously propping up "landed magnates and the petty rulers of 'native states' within its own Indian empire" (1997:34). All of this was buttressed on the intellectual level by the development around the same

time of Orientalist theories that argued that in Asia, such authoritarian regimes were inevitable, and democratizing movements were unnatural or did not exist.[9]

> In sum, Huntington's claim that Western civilization is the bearer of a heritage of liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, and other similarly attractive ideals—all of which are said to have permeated other civilizations only superficially—rings false to anyone familiar with the Western record in Asia in the so-called age of nation-states. In this long list of ideals, it is hard to find a single one that was not denied in part or full by the leading Western powers of the epoch in their dealings either with the peoples they subjected to direct colonial rule or with the governments over which they sought to establish suzerainty. And conversely, it is just as hard to find a single one of those ideals that was not upheld by movements of national liberation in their struggle against the Western powers. In upholding these ideals, however, non-Western peoples and governments invariably combined them with ideals derived from their own civilizations in those spheres in which they had little to learn from the West (Arrighi, Ahmad and Shih 1997:25).

Actually I think one could go much further. Opposition to European expansion in much of the world, even quite early on, appears to have been carried out in the name of "Western values" that the Europeans in question did not yet even have. Engseng Ho (2004:222-24) for example draws our attention to the first known articulation of the notion of jihad against Europeans in the Indian Ocean, a book called "Gift of the Jihad Warriors in Matters Regarding the Portuguese", written in 1574 by an Arab jurist named Zayn al-Din al Malibari, and addressed to the Muslim sultan of the Deccan state of Bijapur. In it, the author makes a case that it is justified to wage war against the Portuguese, demonstrating as he did so how they destroyed a tolerant, pluralistic society in which Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Jews had always managed to coexist.

In the Muslim trading ecumene of the Indian Ocean, some of Huntington's values—a certain notion of liberty, a certain constitutionalism,[10] very explicit ideas about freedom of trade and the rule of law—had long been widely cherished. Others, such as religious tolerance, might

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[9] One should probably throw in a small proviso here: Orientalism allowed colonial powers to make a distinction between rival civilizations, which were seen as hopelessly decadent and corrupt, and "savages", who insofar as they were not seen as hopelessly racially inferior, could be considered possible objects of a "civilizing mission". Hence Britain might have largely abandoned attempts to reform Indian institutions in the 1860s, but it took up the exact same rhetoric later in Africa.

[10] As Engseng Ho points out to me (personal communication, February 7, 2005), constitutionalism in the Indian Ocean tends to first emerge in ports of trade, where merchants, with or without the help of local rulers, tended to create systems of commercial law, and written communal rules more generally, by mutual agreement. How it spreads inland is an interesting question.

well have become values as a result of Europeans coming onto the scene—if only by point of contrast. My real point is that one simply cannot lay any of these values down to the one particular moral, intellectual or cultural tradition. They arise, for better or worse, from exactly this sort of interaction.

I also want to make another point though. We are dealing with the work of a Muslim jurist, writing a book addressed to a South Indian king. The values of tolerance and mutual accommodation he wishes to defend—actually, these are our terms, he himself speaks of "kindness"—might have emerged from a complex intercultural space, outside the authority of any overarching state power, and they might have only crystallized, as values, in the face of those who wished to destroy that space; yet in order to write about them, to justify their defense, he was forced to deal with states and frame his argument in terms of a single literary-philosophical tradition: in this case, the legal tradition of Islam. There was an act of reincorporation. There inevitably must be, once one reenters the world of state power and textual authority. And when later authors write about such idea, they tend to represent matters as if the ideals emerged from that tradition, rather than the spaces in between.

So do historians. In a way, it's almost inevitable that they should, considering the nature of their source material. They are, after all, primarily students of textual traditions, and information about the spaces in between is often very difficult to come by. What's more, they are—at least when dealing with the "Western tradition"—writing, in large part, within the same literary tradition as their sources. This is what makes the real origins of democratic ideals—especially, that popular enthusiasm for ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty that obliged politicians to adopt the term "democracy" to begin with—so difficult to reconstruct. Recall here what I said earlier about the "slipperiness of the Western eye". The tradition has long had a tendency to describe alien societies as puzzles to be deciphered by a rational observer. As a result, descriptions of alien societies were often used, around this time, as a way of making a political point: whether contrasting European societies with the relative freedom of Native Americans, or the relative order of China. But they did not tend to acknowledge the degree to which they were themselves entangled with those societies and to which their own institutions were influenced by them. (In fact, as any student of early anthropology knows, even authors who were themselves part Native American or part Chinese, or who had never set foot in Europe, would tend to write this way for European audiences). As men or women or action, they would negotiate their way between worlds. When it came time to write about their experiences, they would become featureless abstractions; when it came time to write institutional histories, they referred back, almost invariably, to the Classical world.

the "influence debate"

To give a notorious example: during the 1980s, two revisionist historians in the United States (Johansen 1982, Grinde and Johansen 1990) wrote essays proposing that certain elements of the US constitution—particularly its federal structure—were inspired in part by the League of Six Nations of the Iroquois. They also suggested that in a larger sense, what we now would consider America's democratic spirit was inspired by the example of Native Americans. Some of the specific evidence Johansen assembled was quite compelling. The idea of forming some sort of federation of colonies was indeed proposed by an Onondaga ambassador named Canasatego, exhausted by having to negotiate with so many separate colonies, during negotiations over the Lancaster Treaty in 1744. The image he used to demonstrate the strength of union, of a bundle of thirteen arrows, still appears on the Seal of the Union of the United States. Ben Franklin, present at the event, took up the idea and promoted it widely through his printing house over the next decade, and in 1754 his efforts came to fruition with a conference in Albany, New York—with representatives of the Six Nations in attendance—that drew up what came to be known as the Albany Plan of Union. The plan was ultimately rejected both by British authorities and colonial parliaments, but it was clearly an important first step. More importantly, perhaps, proponents of what has come to be called as the "influence theory" argued that the values of egalitarianism and personal freedom that marked so many Eastern Woodlands societies served as a broader inspiration for the equality and liberty promoted by colonial rebels. When Boston patriots triggered their revolution by dressing up as Mohawks and dumping British tea into the harbor, they were making a self-conscious statement of their model for individual liberty.

That Iroquois federal institutions might have had some influence on the US constitution was considered a completely unremarkable notion, when it was occasionally proposed, in the 19th century. When it was proposed again in the '80s it set off a political maelstrom. Many Native Americans strongly endorsed the idea, Congress passed a bill acknowledging it; all sorts of right-wing commentators immediately pounced on it as an example of the worst sort of political correctness. At the same time, though, the argument met immediate and quite virulent opposition both from almost all professional historians considered authorities on the constitution, and anthropological experts on the Iroquois.

The actual debate ended up turning almost entirely on whether one could prove a direct relation between Iroquois institutions, and the thinking of the framers of the constitution. Payne (1999), for example, noted that some New England colonists were discussing federal schemes before they were even aware of the League's existence; in a larger sense, opponents argued that proponents of the "influence theory", as it came to be known, had essentially cooked the books by picking out every existing passage in the writings of colonial politicians that praised Iroquoian

institutions, while ignoring hundreds of texts in which those same politicians denounced the Iroquois, and Indians in general, as ignorant murdering savages. Their opponents, they said, left the reader with the impression that explicit, textual proof of an Iroquoian influence on the constitution existed, and this was simply not the case. Even the Indians present at constitutional conventions appear to have been there, officially, to state grievances, not to offer advice. Invariably, when colonial politicians discussed the origins of their ideas, they looked to Classical, Biblical, or European examples: the book of Judges, the Achaean League, the Swiss Confederacy, the United Provinces of the Netherlands. Proponents of the influence theory in turn replied that this kind of linear thinking was simplistic: no one was claiming the Six Nations were the only or even primary model for American federalism, just one of many elements that went into the mix—and considering that it was the only functioning example of a federal system of which the colonists had any direct experience, to insist it had no influence whatever was simply bizarre. Here they certainly had a point. Indeed some of the objections to the "influence theory" raised by anthropologists seem so odd—for example, Elisabeth Tooker's objection (1998) that since the League worked by consensus and reserved an important place for women, and the US constitution used a majority system and only allowed men to vote, one could not possibly have served as inspiration for the other, or Dean Snow's remark (1994:154) that such claims "muddle and denigrate the subtle and remarkable features of Iroquois government"—one can only conclude that Native American activist Vine Deloria was right to suggest much of this were simply efforts by scholars to protect what they considered their turf—a knee-jerk defense of intellectual property rights (in Johansen 1998:82).

The proprietary reaction is much clearer in some quarters. "This myth isn't just silly, it's destructive," wrote one contributor to *The New Republic*. "Obviously Western civilization, beginning in Greece, had provided models of government much closer to the hearts of the Founding Fathers than this one. There was nothing to be gained by looking to the New World for inspiration" (Newman 1998:18). If one is speaking of the immediate perceptions of many of the United States' 'founding fathers', this may well be true. But if we are trying to understand the Iroquois influence on American *democracy*, then matters look quite different. As we've seen, the Framers did indeed identify with the classical tradition, but they were hostile to democracy for that very reason. They identified democracy with untrammeled liberty and equality, and insofar as they were aware of Indian customs at all they were likely to see them as objectionable for precisely the same reasons.

If one reexamines some of the mooted passages, this is precisely what one finds. John Adams, remember, had argued in his Defense of the Constitution that egalitarian societies do not exist; political power in every human society is divided between the monarchical, aristocratic, and

democratic principles. He wrote that the Indians resembled the ancient Germans in that "the democratical branch, in particular, is so determined, that real sovereignty resided in the body of the people" but all three managed to convince themselves they were really the ones in charge. This he said worked well enough when one was dealing with populations scattered over a wide territory with no real concentrations of wealth, but, as the Goths found when they conquered the Roman empire, could only lead to confusion, instability, and strife as soon as such populations became more settled and had significant resources to administer (Adams 1797:296, see Levy 1999:598, Payne 1999:618). His observations are typical. Madison, even Jefferson, tended to describe Indians much as did John Locke, as exemplars of an individual liberty untrammeled by any form of state or systematic coercion—a condition made possible by the fact that Indian societies were not marked by significant divisions of property. They considered Native institutions obviously inappropriate for a society such as their own, that did.[11]

Still, Enlightenment theory notwithstanding, nations are not really created by the acts of wise lawgivers. Neither is democracy invented in texts; even if we are forced to rely on texts to divine its history. Actually, the men who wrote the constitution were not only for the most part wealthy landowners, few had a great deal of experience in sitting down to make decisions with a group of equals—at least, until they became involved in colonial congresses. Democratic practices tend to first get hammered out in places far from the purview of such men, and if one sets out in search for which of their contemporaries had the most hands-on experience in such matters, the results are sometimes startling. One of the leading contemporary historians of European democracy, John Markoff, in an essay called "Where and When Was Democracy Invented?", remarks, at one point, very much in passing:

> that leadership could derive from the consent of the led, rather than be bestowed by higher authority, would have been a likely experience of the crews of pirate vessels in the early modern Atlantic world. Pirate crews not only elected their captains, but were familiar with countervailing power (in the forms of the quartermaster and ship's council) and contractual relations of individual and collectivity (in the form of written ship's articles

[11] One of the most fascinating pieces of evidence produced by the pro-influence theory side is a text from 1775, during the writing of the articles of confederation, when colonial representatives negotiating with the Six Nations were willing to represent the entire idea of a colonial union as stemming from Canasatego's suggestion to their "forefathers" some thirty years before. In other words they were perfectly content to speak of the federation as an Iroquois idea when speaking *to* the Iroquois—despite the fact that, if one simply considers texts written or public statements made by colonial politicians to European or settler audiences at the time, one would not be able to produce evidence they were still aware that Canasatego had ever existed (Grinde & Johansen 1996:627).

> specifying shares of booty and rates of compensation for on-the-job injury). (Markoff 1999:673n62)

As a matter of fact, the typical organization of 18th century, pirate ships, as reconstructed by historians like Marcus Rediker (2004:60-82), appears to have been remarkably democratic. Captains were not only elected, they usually functioned much like Native American war chiefs. Granted total power during chase or combat, they were otherwise treated like ordinary crewmen. Those ships whose captains were granted more general powers also insisted on the crew's right to remove them at any time for cowardice, cruelty, or any other reason. In every case, ultimate power rested in a general assembly, that often ruled on even the most minor matters, always, apparently, by majority show of hands.

All this might seem less surprising if one considers the pirates' origins. Pirates were generally mutineers, sailors often originally pressed into service against their will in port towns across the Atlantic, who had mutinied against tyrannical captains and "declared war against the whole world". They often became classic social bandits, wreaking vengeance against captains who abused their crews, and releasing or even rewarding those against whom they found no complaints. The make-up of crews was often extraordinarily heterogeneous. "Black Sam Bellamy's crew of 1717 was 'a Mix'd Multitude of all Country's,' including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native American, African American, and two dozen Africans who had been liberated from a slave ship" (Rediker 2004:53). In other words, we are dealing with a collection of people in which there was likely to be at least some first-hand knowledge of a very wide range of directly democratic institutions, ranging from Swedish *things* to African village assemblies to Native American councils such as those from which the League of Six Nations itself developed, suddenly finding themselves forced to improvise some mode of self-government in the complete absence of any state. It was the perfect intercultural space of experiment. In fact, there was likely to be no more conducive ground for the development of new democratic institutions anywhere in the Atlantic world at the time.

I bring this up for two reasons. One is the obvious one. We have no evidence that democratic practices developed on Atlantic pirate ships in the early part of the 18th century had any influence, direct or indirect, on the evolution of democratic constitutions sixty or seventy years later. Nor could we. While accounts of pirates and their adventures circulated widely, having much the same popular appeal as they do today (and presumably, at the time, were likely to be at least a little more accurate than contemporary Hollywood versions), this would be about the very last influence a French, English, or colonial gentleman would ever have been willing to acknowledge. This is not to say that pirate practices were likely to have influenced democratic constitutions. Only

that we would not know if they did. One can hardly imagine things would be too different in the case of the Iroquois, who were never, in fact, referred to in such texts as “Iroquois” but most often as “the American savages”.

The other reason is that frontier societies in the Americas were probably more similar to pirate ships than we would be given to imagine. They might not have been as densely populated as pirate ships, or in as immediate need of constant cooperation, but they were spaces of intercultural improvisation, largely outside of the purview of states. Colin Calloway (1997; cf. Axtell 1985), has documented just how entangled the societies of settlers and natives often were, with settlers adopting Indian crops, clothes, medicines, customs, and styles of warfare, trading, often living side by side, sometimes intermarrying, and most of all, of the endless fears among the leaders of colonial communities and military units that their subordinates were absorbing Indian attitudes of equality and individual liberty. At the same time as New England Puritan minister Cotton Mather, for example, was inveighing against pirates as a blaspheming scourge of mankind, he was also complaining that fellow colonists had begun to imitate Indian customs of child-rearing (for example, by abandoning corporal punishment), and increasingly forgetting the principles of proper discipline and “severity” in the governance of families for the “foolish indulgence” typical of Indians—whether in relations between masters and servants, men and women, or old and young (Calloway 1997:192).[12] This was true most of all in communities, often made up of escaped slaves and servants who “became Indians” outside the control of colonial governments entirely (Sakolsky & Koehnline 1993), or island enclaves of what Linebaugh and Rediker (1991) have called “the Atlantic proletariat”, the motley collection of freedmen, sailors, ships whores, renegades, Antinomians and rebels who developed in the port cities of the North Atlantic world before the emergence of modern racism, and from whom much of the democratic impulse of the American—and other—revolutions seems to have first emerged. But it was true for ordinary settlers as well. The irony is that this was the real argument of Bruce Johansen’s book “Forgotten Founders” (1982), that first kicked off the “influence debate”—an argument that largely ended up getting lost in all the sound and fury about the constitution: that ordinary Englishmen and Frenchmen settled in the colonies only began to think of themselves as “Americans”, as a new sort of freedom-loving people, when they began to see themselves as more like Indians. And that this sense was inspired not primarily by the sort of romanticization at a distance one might encounter in texts by Montesquieu or even Jefferson, but rather, by the actual experience of living in frontier societies that were essentially as Calloway puts it, “amalgams”. The colonists who came to America found

[12] “Though the first English planters in this country had usually a government and a discipline in their families and had a sufficient severity in it, yet, as if the climate had taught us to Indianize, the relaxation of it is now such that it is wholly laid aside, and a foolish indulgence to children is become an epidemical miscarriage of the country, and like to be attended with many evil consequences” (Calloway 1997:192)

themselves in a unique situation: having fled the hierarchy and conformism of Europe, they found themselves face to face with an indigenous population far more dedicated to principles of equality and individualism than they had hitherto been able to imagine; they proceeded to exterminate them, even at the same time as they found themselves becoming like them, adopting many of their customs, mores and attitudes.

I might add that during this period the Five Nations were something of an amalgam as well. Originally a collection of groups that had made a kind of contractual agreement with one another to create a way of mediating disputes and making peace, they became, during their period of expansion in the 17th century, an extraordinary jumble of peoples, with large proportions of the population war captives adopted into Iroquois families to replace family members who were dead. Missionaries in those days often complained that it was difficult to preach to Seneca in their own languages, because a majority were not completely fluent in it (Quain 1937). Even during the 18th century, for instance, while Canasatego was an Onondaga sachem, the other main negotiator with the colonists, Swatane (called Schickallemy) was actually French—or, at least, born to French parents in what's now Canada. On all sides, then, borders were blurred. We are dealing with a graded succession of spaces of democratic improvisation, from the Puritan communities of New England, with their town councils, to frontier communities, to the Iroquois themselves.

traditions as acts of endless refoundation

Let me try to pull some of the pieces together now.

Throughout this essay, I've been arguing that democratic *practice*, whether defined as procedures of egalitarian decision-making, or government by public discussion, tends to emerge from situations in which communities of one sort or another manage their own affairs outside the purview of the state. The absence of state power means the absence of any systematic mechanism of coercion to enforce decisions; this tends to result either in some form of consensus process, or, at least in the case of essentially military formations like Greek hoplites or pirate ships, a system of majority voting (since in such cases the results, if it did come down to a contest of force, are readily apparent.) Democratic innovation, and the emergence of what might be called democratic values, has a tendency to spring from what I've called zones of cultural improvisation, usually also outside of the control of states, in which diverse sorts of people with different traditions and experiences are obliged to figure out some way to get on with one another. Frontier communities whether in Madagascar or Medieval Iceland, pirate ships, Indian Ocean trading communities, Native American confederations on the edge of European expansion, are all examples here.

All of this has very little to do with the great Literary-Philosophical traditions that tend to be seen as the pillars of great civilizations: indeed, with few exceptions, those traditions are

explicitly hostile to democratic procedures and the sort of people that employ them.[13] Governing elites, in turn, have tended either to ignore these forms, or to try to stomp them out.

At a certain point in time, however, first in the core states of the Atlantic system—notably England and France, the two that had the largest colonies in North America—this began to change. The creation of that system had been heralded by such unprecedented destruction that it allowed endless new improvisational spaces for the emerging "Atlantic proletariat"; states, under pressure from social movements, began to institute reforms; eventually, those working the elite literary tradition started seeking precedents for them. The result was the creation of representative systems modeled on the Roman Republic that then were later redubbed, under popular pressure, "democracies" and traced to Athens.

Actually, I would suggest that this process of democratic recuperation and refoundation was typical of a broader process that probably marks any civilizational tradition, but was then entering a phase of critical intensity. As European states expanded and the Atlantic system came to encompass the world, all sorts of global influences appear to have coalesced in European capitals, and to have been reabsorbed within the tradition that eventually came to be known as "Western". The actual genealogy of the elements that came together in the modern state, for example, is probably impossible to reconstruct—if only because the very process of recuperation tends to scrub away the more exotic elements in written accounts, or if not, integrate them into familiar topoi of invention and discovery. Historians, who tend to rely almost exclusively on texts and pride themselves on exacting standards of evidence, therefore often end up, as they did with the Iroquois influence theory, feeling it their professional responsibility to act as if new ideas really do emerge from within textual traditions. Let me throw out two examples:

- **African fetishism and the idea of the social contract**: the Atlantic system of course began to take form in West Africa even before Columbus sailed to America. In a fascinating series of essays, William Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988) has described the life of the resulting coastal enclaves where Venetian, Dutch, Portuguese, and every other variety of European merchant and adventurer cohabited with African merchants and adventurers speaking dozens of different languages, a mix of Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and a variety of ancestral religions. Trade, within these enclaves, was regulated by objects the Europeans came to refer to as "fetishes", and Pietz does much to elaborate the European merchants' theories of value and materiality to which this notion ultimately gave rise. More interesting perhaps is the African perspective. Insofar as it can be reconstructed, it appears strikingly similar to the kind of social contract

[13] Usually one can pick out pro-democratic voices here and there, but they tend to be in a distinct minority.

theories developed by men like Thomas Hobbes in Europe at the same time (MacGaffey 1994, Graeber forthcoming). Essentially, fetishes were created by a series of contracting parties who wished to enter into ongoing economic relations with one another, and were accompanied by agreements on property rights and the rules of exchange; those violating them were to be destroyed by the objects' power. In other words, just as in Hobbes, social relations are created when a group of men agreed to create a sovereign power to threaten them with violence if they failed to respect their property rights and contractual obligations. There are even later African texts praising the fetish as preventing a war of all against all. Unfortunately, it's completely impossible to find evidence that Hobbes was aware of any of this: he grew up in a merchant's house, lived most of his life in port towns and very likely had met traders familiar with such customs; but his political works contain no references to the African continent whatsoever, other than one or two references to Classical Greek sources.

- **China and the European nation-state**: over the course of the Early Modern period, European elites gradually conceived the ideal of governments that ruled over uniform populations, speaking the same language, under a uniform system of law and administration; and eventually, too that this system should be administered by an meritocratic elite whose training should consist largely in the study of literary classics in that nation's vernacular language. The odd thing is nothing approaching a precedent for a state of this sort existed anywhere in previous European history, though it almost exactly corresponded to the system Europeans believed to hold sway (and which to a large extent, did hold sway) in Imperial China.[14] Is there evidence for a Chinese "influence theory"? In this case, there is a little. The prestige of the Chinese government evidently being higher, in the eyes of European philosophers, than African merchants such influences would not be entirely ignored. From Liebniz's famous remark that the Chinese should really be sending missionaries to Europe rather than the other way around, to the work of Montesquieu and Voltaire, one sees a succession of political philosophers extolling Chinese institutions—as well as a popular fascination with Chinese art, gardens, fashions, and moral philosophy—at exactly the time that Absolutism took form; only to fade away in the 19th century once China had become the object of European imperial expansion. Obviously none of this constitutes proof that the modern nation state is in any way of Chinese inspiration. But considering the nature of

[14] Obviously the Chinese state was profoundly different in some ways as well: first of all it was a universalistic empire. But Tooker to the contrary, one can borrow an idea without embracing every element.

> the literary traditions we're dealing with, even if it were true, this would be about as much proof as we could ever expect to get.

So is the modern nation-state really a Chinese model of administration, adopted to channel and control democratic impulses derived from largely from the influence of Native American societies and the pressures of the Atlantic proletariat, that ultimately came to be justified by a social contract theory derived from Africa? Probably not. At the very least, this would no doubt be wildly overstating the case. But neither do I think it a coincidence that democratic ideals of statecraft first emerged during a period in which the Atlantic powers were at the center of vast global empires, and an endless confluence of knowledge and influences, or that they eventually developed the theory that those ideals sprang instead exclusively from their own "Western" civilization—despite the fact that, during the period in which Europeans had not been at the center of global empires, they had developed nothing of the kind.

Finally, I think it's important to emphasize that this process of recuperation is by no means limited to Europe. In fact, one of the striking things is how quickly most everyone else in the world began playing the same game. To some degree, as the example of al-Malibari suggests, it was probably happening in other parts of the world even before it began happening in Europe. Of course, overseas movements only started using the word "democracy" much later—but even in the Atlantic world, that term only came into common usage around the middle of the 19th century. It was also around the middle of the 19th century—just as European powers began recuperating notions of democracy for their own tradition—when Britain led the way in a very self-conscious policy of suppressing anything that looked like it might even have the potential to become a democratic, popular, movement overseas. The ultimate response, in much of the colonial world, was to begin playing the exact same game. Opponents to colonial rule scoured their own literary-philosophical traditions for parallels to ancient Athens, along with examining traditional communal decision-making forms in their hinterlands. Material wasn't hard to find. As Steve Muhlenberger and Phil Payne (1993; cf. Baechler 1985), for example, have documented, if one simply defines it as decision-making by public discussion, "democracy" is a fairly common phenomenon; examples can be found even under states and empires, if only, usually, in those places or domains of human activity in which the rulers of states and empires took little interest. Greek historians writing about India, for example, bore witness to any number of polities they considered worthy of the name. Between 1911 and 1918, a number of Indian historians (K.P. Jayaswal, D.R. Bhandarkar, R.C. Majumdar[15]) began examining some of these sources, not only Greek accounts of Alexander's

[15] Rather than pretend to be an expert on early twentieth century Indian scholarship, which I'm not, I'll just reproduce Muhlenberger's footnote: "K.P. Jayaswal, Hindu Polity: A Constitutional History of India in Hindu Times

campaigns but also early Buddhist documents in Pali and early Hindu vocabularies and works of political theory. They discovered dozens of local equivalents to fifth century Athens on South Asian soil: cities and political confederations in which all men formally classified as a warriors—which in some cases meant a very large proportion of adult males—were expected to make important decisions collectively, through public deliberation in communal assemblies. The literary sources of the time were mostly just as hostile to popular rule as Greek literary sources[16], but at least until around 400 AD, such polities definitely existed, and some of the deliberative mechanisms they employed continue to be employed, in everything from the governance of Buddhist monasteries to craft guilds, until the present day. It was possible, then, to say that the Indian, or even Hindu, tradition was always inherently democratic; and this became a strong argument for those seeking independence or self-rule.

These early historians clearly overstated their case. After independence came the inevitable backlash. Historians began to point out that these "clan republics" were very limited democracies at best: the overwhelming majority of the population—women, slaves, those defined as outsiders—were completely disenfranchized. Of course all this was true of Athens as well, and historians have pointed that out at length too. But it seems to me questions of authenticity are of at best secondary importance. Such traditions are always largely fabrications. To some degree that's what traditions are: the continual process of their own fabrication. The point is that in every case, what we have are political elites—or would-be political elites—identifying with a tradition of democracy in order to validate essentially republican forms of government. Also, that not only was democracy not the special invention of "the West", neither was this process of recuperation and refoundation. True, elites in India started playing the game some sixty years later than those in England and France, but historically, this is not a particularly long period of time. Rather than seeing Indian, or Malagasy, or Tswana, or Maya claims to being part of an inherently democratic tradition as an attempt to ape the West, it seems to me, we are looking at different aspects of the same planetary process: a crystallization of longstanding democratic practices in the formation of a global system, in which ideas were flying back and forth in all directions, and the gradual, usually grudging adoption of some by ruling elites

The temptation to trace democracy to some particular cultural "origins" though seems almost irresistible. Even serious scholars continue to indulge it. Let me return to Harvard to

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2nd and enl. edn. (Bangalore, 1943), published first in article form in 1911-13; D.R. Bhandarkar, Lectures on the Ancient History of India on the Period form 650 to 325 B.C., The Carmichael Lectures, 1918 (Calcutta, 1919); R.C. Majumdar. Corporate Life in Ancient India, (orig. written in 1918; cited here from the 3rd ed., Calcutta, 1969, as Corporate Life)."

16 I say almost. Early Buddhism was quite sympathetic: particularly in the person of the Buddha himself. The Brahmanical tradition is uniformly hostile. Some of the first political tracts in India contain advice to kings on how to coopt and suppress democratic institutions.

provide one final, to my mind particularly ironic, example: a collection of essays called "The Breakout: The Origins of Civilization" (M. Lamberg-Karlovsky 2000), put together by leading American symbolic archeologists.[17] The line of argument sets out from a suggestion by the famous Chinese archeologist K. C. Chang, that early Chinese civilization was based on a fundamentally different sort of ideology than Egypt or Mesopotamia. According to Chang, the Chinese state was essentially a continuation the cosmos of earlier hunting societies, in which the monarch replaced the shaman as having an exclusive and personal connection with divine powers. The result was absolute authority. Chang became fascinated by the similarities between early China and the Classic Maya, as reconstructed through recently translated inscriptions: the "stratified universe with bird-perched cosmic tree and religious personnel interlinking the Upper, Middle, and Under Worlds", animal messengers, use of writing mainly for politics and ritual, veneration of ancestors, and so on (1988, 2000:7). The states that emerged in the Third Millennium in the Middle East, in contrast, represented a kind of breakthrough to an alternate, more pluralistic model, that began when gods and their priesthoods came to be seen as independent from the state. Most of the resulting volume consists of speculations as to what this breakthrough really consisted of. C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky argued that the key was the first appearance of notions of freedom and equality in ancient Mesopotamia, in royal doctrines which saw a social contract between the rulers of individual city states and their subjects (2000)—which he calls a "breakout", and which most contributors agreed should be seen as "pointing the way towards Western Democracy" (Larsen p122). In fact, the main topic of debate soon became who, or what, deserved the credit. Mason Hammond argued for "The Indo-European Origins of the Concept of a Democratic Society" (2000), saying that notions of democracy "did not reach Greece from contact with the Near East or Mesopotamia—where equity and justice were the gift of the ruler—but stemmed from an Indo-European concept of a social organization in which sovereignty might be said to rest not with the chief but with the council of elders and the assembly of arms-bearing males" (p59). Gordon Willey on the other hand sees democratic urges as arising from the free market, which he thinks was more developed in Mesopotamia than China, and largely absent under Maya kingdoms, where rulers ruled by divine right "and there is no evidence of any counterbalancing power within the chiefdom or state that could have held him in check" (Willey 2000:29).[18] Linda Schele, the foremost

[17] Most were in fact published in a journal called "Symbols".

[18] One is tempted to say this leaves us to chose between two theories for the origin of Huntington's "Western civilization", one neo-liberal, the other crypto-fascist. But this would be unfair. At least the authors here do treat the broad zone that later includes Islam as part of a "Western" bloc to which they attribute the origin of Western ideas of freedom: though it is hard to do otherwise since virtually nothing is known of what was happening in Europe during this early period. Probably the most fascinating contribution is Gregory Possehl's essay on Harappan civilization, the first urban civilization in India, which as far as is presently known seems to have lacked kingship and any sort of centralized state. The obvious question is what this has

authority on the Classic Maya, concurs, adding that this shamanic cosmos "is still alive and functioning today" in "modern Maya communities" (2000:54). Other scholars try to put in a good word for their own parts of the ancient world: Egypt, Israel, the Indus Valley.

At times, these arguments seem almost comical parodies of the kind of logic I've been criticizing in historians: most obviously, the line of reasoning that assumes that, if there is no direct evidence for something, it can be treated as if it does not exist. This seems especially inappropriate when dealing with early antiquity, an enormous landscape on which archeology and linguistics can at best throw open a few tiny windows. For example: the fact that "primitive Celts and Germans" met in communal assemblies does not in itself prove that communal assemblies have an Indo-European origin—unless, that is, one can demonstrate that stateless societies speaking non-Indo-European languages at the time did *not* meet in communal assemblies. In fact the argument seems almost circular, since by "primitive", the author seems to mean "stateless" or "relatively egalitarian", and such societies almost by definition cannot be ruled autocratically, no matter what language people speak. Similarly, when characterizing the Classic Maya as lacking any form of "countervailing institutions" (Willey describes even the bloodthirsty Aztecs as less authoritarian, owing to their more advanced markets), it doesn't seem to occur to any of the authors to wonder what ancient Rome or Medieval England would look like to us if it had to be reconstructed, like the Classic Maya, exclusively through ruined buildings and official statements that the government had carved in stone.

In fact, if my argument is right, what these authors are doing is searching for the origins of democracy precisely where they are least likely to find it: in the proclamations of the states that largely suppressed local forms of self-governance and collective deliberation, and the literary-philosophical traditions that justified their doing so. This, at least, would help explain one otherwise very peculiar pattern: the fact that in Italy, Greece, Mesopotamia, and India alike, sovereign assemblies appear at the beginnings of written history and disappear almost immediately thereafter. The fate of the Mayas is instructive here. Sometime in the late first millennium, Classic Maya civilization collapsed. Archeologists argue about the reasons; presumably they always will; but most theories assume popular rebellions played at least some role. By the time the Spaniards arrived six hundred years later Mayan societies were thoroughly decentralized, with an endless variety of tiny city-states, some apparently with elected leaders. Conquest took much longer than it did in Peru and Mexico, and Maya communities have proved so consistently rebellious that over the last five hundred years, there has been virtually no point during which at least some have not been in a state of armed insurrection. Most ironic of all, the current wave of the global justice

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to say about the existence of early Indian "democracies" or "republics". Could it be, for instance, that the first two thousand years of South Asian history was really the story of the gradual erosion of more egalitarian political forms?

movement was largely kicked off by the EZLN, or Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a group of largely Maya-speaking rebels in Chiapas, mostly drawn from campesinos who had resettled in new communities in the Lacandon rain forest. Their insurrection in 1994 was carried explicitly in the name of democracy, by which they meant something much more like Athenian-style direct democracy than the republican forms of government that have since appropriated the name. The Zapatistas developed an elaborate system in which communal assemblies, operating on consensus, supplemented by women's and youth caucuses to counterbalance the traditional dominance of adult males, are knitted together by councils with recallable delegates. They claim it to be rooted in, but a radicalization of, the way that Maya-speaking communities have governed themselves for thousands of years. We do know that most highland Maya communities have been governed by some kind of consensus system since conquest. While it's possible that nothing of the sort existed in rural communities during the Classic Maya heyday, it seems rather unlikely.

Certainly, modern rebels make their own views on the Classic Maya clear enough. As a Chol-speaking Zapatista remarked to a friend of mine recently, pointing to the ruins of Palenque, "we managed to get rid of those guys. I don't suppose the Mexican government should be all that much of a challenge in comparison."

PART V:
THE CRISIS OF THE STATE

We're finally back, then, where we began, with the rise of global movements calling for new forms of democracy. In a way, the main point of this piece has been to demonstrate that the Zapatistas are nothing unusual. They are speakers of a variety of Maya languages—Tzeltal, Tojalobal, Ch'ol, Tzotzil, Mam—originally from communities traditionally allowed a certain degree of self-governance (largely so they could function as indigenous labor reserves for ranches and plantations located elsewhere), who had formed new largely multi-ethnic communities in newly opened lands in the Lacandon (Collier 1999; Ross 2000, Rus, Hernandez & Mattiace 2003). In other words, they inhabit a classic example of what I've been calling spaces of democratic improvisation, in which a jumbled amalgam of people, most with at least some initial experience of methods of communal self-governance, find themselves in new communities outside the immediate supervision of the state. Neither is there anything particularly new about the fact that they are at the fulcrum of a global play of influences: absorbing ideas from everywhere, and their own example having an enormous impact on social movements across the planet. The first Zapatista encuentro in

1996 for example eventually led to the formation of an international network (People's Global Action), based on principles of autonomy, horizontality and direct democracy, that included such disparate groups as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil, the Karnataka State Farmer's Association (KRSS, a Gandhian socialist direct action group in India), the Canadian Postal Workers' Union, and a whole host of anarchist collectives in Europe and the Americas, along with indigenous organizations on every continent. It was PGA, for instance, that put out the original call to action against the WTO meetings in Seattle in November 1999. Even more, the principles of Zapatismo, the rejection of vanguardism, the emphasis of creating viable alternatives in one's own community as a way of subverting the logic of global capital, has had an enormous influence on participants in social movements that in some cases are at best vaguely aware of the Zapatistas themselves and have certainly never heard of PGA. No doubt the growth of the internet and global communications have allowed the process to proceed much faster than ever before, and allowed for more formal, explicit alliances; but this does not mean we are dealing with an entirely unprecedented phenomenon.

This is not a trivial point. One might gauge its importance by considering what happens even to good arguments if it is not born constantly in mind. Let me turn here to an author whose position is actually quite close to my own. In a book called "Cosmopolitanism" (2002), literary theorist Walter Mignolo begins with a powerful summary of the context of Vittoro and Kant's cosmopolitanism, showing just how they took shape within the creation of European empires; then invokes Zapatista calls for democracy to counter an argument by Slavoj Zizek that Leftists need to temper their critiques of Eurocentrism in order to embrace democracy as "the true European legacy from ancient Greece onward" (1998:1009). He writes:

> The Zapatistas have used the word democracy, although it has a different meaning for them than it has for the Mexican government. Democracy for the Zapatistas is not conceptualized in terms of European political philosophy but in terms of Maya social organization based on reciprocity, communal (instead of individual) values, the value of wisdom rather than epistemology, and so forth… The Zapatistas have no choice but to use the word that political hegemony imposed, though using that word does not mean bending to its mono-logic interpretation. Once democracy is singled out by the Zapatistas, it becomes a connector through which liberal concepts of democracy and indigenous concepts of reciprocity and community social organization for the common good must come to terms (Mignolo 2002:180)

This is a nice idea. Mignolo calls it "border thinking". He proposes it as a model for how to come up with a healthy, "critical cosmopolitanism", as opposed to the Eurocentric variety represented by Kant or Zizek. The problem though it seems to me is that in doing so, Mignolo himself ends up falling into a more modest version of the very essentializing discourse he's trying to escape.

First of all, to say "the Zapatistas have no choice but to use the word" democracy is simply untrue. Of course they have a choice. Other indigenous-based groups have made very different choices. The Aymara movement in Bolivia, to select one fairly random example, chose to reject the word "democracy" entirely, on the grounds that in their people's historical experience, the name has only been used for systems imposed on them through violence.[19] They therefore see their own traditions of egalitarian decision-making as having nothing to do with democracy. The Zapatista decision to embrace the term, it seems to me, was more than anything else a decision to reject anything that smacked of a politics of identity, and to appeal for allies, in Mexico and elsewhere, among those interested in a broader conversation about forms of self-organization—in much the same way as they also sought to begin a conversation with those interested in reexamining the meaning of the word "revolution". Second of all, Mignolo, not entirely unlike Levy-Bruhl, ends up producing yet another confrontation between apples and oranges. He ends up contrasting Western theory and indigenous practice. In fact, Zapatismo is not simply an emanation of traditional Maya practices: its origins have to be sought in a prolonged confrontation between those practices and, among other things, the ideas of local Maya intellectuals (many, presumably, not entirely unfamiliar with the work of Kant), liberation theologists (who drew inspiration from prophetic texts written in ancient Palestine), and mestizo revolutionaries (who drew inspiration from the works of Chairman Mao). Democracy in turn did not emerge from anybody's discourse. It is as if simply taking the Western literary tradition as one's starting point—even for purposes of critique—means authors like Mignolo always somehow end up trapped inside it.

In reality, the "word that political hegemony imposed" is in this case itself a fractured compromise. If it weren't, we would not have a Greek word originally coined to describe a form of communal self-governance applied to representative republics to begin with. It's exactly this contradiction the Zapatistas were seizing on. In fact, the contradiction seems impossible to get rid of. Liberal theorists (e.g., Sartori 1987:279) do occasionally evince a desire to brush aside Athenian democracy entirely, to declare it irrelevant and be done with, but for ideological purposes, such a move would be simply inadmissible. After all, without Athens, there would be no way to claim that "the Western tradition" had anything inherently democratic about it. We would be left tracing back

[19] I am drawing here on a conversation with Nolasco Mamani, among other things the Aymara observer at the UN, in London during the European Social Forum 2004.

our political ideals to the totalitarian musings of Plato, or if not, perhaps, to admit there's really no such thing as "the West". In effect, liberal theorists have boxed themselves into a corner. Obviously, the Zapatistas are hardly the first revolutionaries to have seized on this contradiction; but their doing so had found an unusually powerful resonance, this time—in part, because this is a moment of a profound crisis of the state.

the impossible marriage

In its essence, I think, the contradiction is not simply one of language. It reflects something deeper. For the last two hundred years, democrats have been trying to graft ideals of popular self-governance onto the coercive apparatus of the state. In the end, the project is simply unworkable. States cannot, by their nature, ever truly be democratized. They are, after all, basically ways of organizing violence. The American Federalists were being quite realistic when they argued that democracy is inconsistent with a society based on inequalities of wealth; since in order to protect wealth, one needs an apparatus of coercion to keep down the very "mob" that democracy would empower. Athens was a unique case in this respect because it was, in effect, transitional: there were certainly inequalities of wealth, even, arguably, a ruling class, but there was virtually no formal apparatus of coercion. Hence there's no consensus among scholars whether it can really be considered a state at all.

It's precisely when one considers the problem of the modern state's monopoly of coercive force that the whole pretence of democracy dissolves into a welter of contradictions. For example: while modern elites have largely put aside the earlier discourse of the "mob" as a murderous "great beast", the same imagery still pops back, in almost exactly the form it had in the 16th century, the moment anyone proposes democratizing some aspect of the apparatus of coercion. In the US, for example, advocates of the "fully informed jury movement", who point out that the constitution actually allows juries to decide on questions of law, not just of evidence, are regularly denounced in the media as wishing to go back to the days of lynchings and "mob rule". It's no coincidence that the United States, a country that still prides itself on its democratic spirit, has also led the world in mythologizing, even deifying, its police.

Francis Dupuis-Deri (2002) has coined the term "political agoraphobia" to refer to the suspicion of public deliberation and decision-making that runs through the Western tradition, just as much in the works of Constant, Sieyés, or Madison as in Plato or Aristotle. I would add that even the most impressive accomplishments of the liberal state, its most genuinely democratic elements—for instance, its guarantees on freedom of speech and freedom of assembly—are premised on it. It is only once it becomes absolutely clear that public speech and assembly is no longer, can no longer be the medium of political decision-making, but at best an attempt to

criticize, influence, or make suggestions to political decision-makers, that they can be treated as sacrosanct. Critically, this agorophobia is not just shared by politicians and professional journalists, but in large measure, by the public itself. The reasons I think are not far to seek. While liberal democracies lack anything resembling the Athenian agora, they certainly do not lack equivalents to Roman circuses. The ugly mirror phenomenon, by which ruling elites encourage forms of popular participation that continually remind the public just how little fit they are to rule, seems, in many modern states, to have been brought to a state of unprecedented perfection. Consider here, for example, the view of human nature one might derive from generalizing from the experience of driving to work on the highway, as opposed to the view one might derive from the experience of public transportation. When ordinarily Americans object that real democracy would be impossible, because people are naturally egotistical and uncooperative, it is normally just such experiences they are using as the basis of their generalizations. Yet the American—or German—love affair with the car was the result of conscious policy decisions by political and corporate elites beginning in the 1930s. One could write a similar history of the television, or consumerism, or, as Polanyi long ago noted, "the market" itself.

Jurists, meanwhile, have long been aware that the coercive nature of the state ensures that democratic constitutions are founded on a fundamental contradiction. Walter Benjamin (1978) summed it up nicely by pointing out that any legal order that claims a monopoly of the use of violence has to be founded by some power other than itself, which inevitably means, by acts that were illegal according to whatever system of law came before it. The legitimacy of a system of law thus necessarily rests on acts of criminal violence. American and French revolutionaries were, after all, guilty of high treason according to the system of law under which they grew up. Of course, sacred kings from Africa to Nepal have managed to solve this logical conundrum by placing themselves, like God, outside the system. But as political theorists from Agamben to Negri remind us, there is no obvious way for "the people" to exercise sovereignty in the same way. Either the right-wing solution (constitutional orders are founded by, and can be set aside by, inspired leaders—whether Founding Fathers or Fuhrers—who embody the popular will), or the left-wing solution (constitutional orders gain their legitimacy through popular revolutions) lead to endless practical contradictions. In fact, as sociologist Michael Mann has hinted (1999), much of the slaughter of the twentieth century derives from some version of this problem. The demand to simultaneously create a uniform apparatus of coercion over every piece of land on the surface of the planet, and to maintain the pretense that the legitimacy of these apparatuses derives from "the people", has led to an endless need to determine who, precisely, "the people" are supposed to be. Try to solve the problem using the coercive mechanisms themselves, and terrible things are likely to happen.

> In all the varied German law courts of the last eighty years—from Weimar to Nazi to communist DDR to the Bundesrepublik—the judges have used the same opening formula: 'In Namen des Volkes', 'In the Name of the People.' American courts prefer the formula 'The Case of the People versus X'… (Mann 1999:19)

In other words, "the People" must be evoked as the authority behind the allocation of state violence, despite the fact that any suggestion that the proceedings be in any way democratized is likely to be greeted with horror by all concerned. Mann suggests that pragmatic efforts to work out this contradiction, to use the apparatus of violence to identify and constitute a "people" that those maintaining that apparatus feel worthy of being the source of their authority, has been responsible for at least sixty million murders in the twentieth century alone.

It is in this context that I might suggest that the anarchist position—that there really is no resolution to this paradox—is really not all that unreasonable. The democratic state was always a contradiction. Globalization has simply exposed the rotten underpinnings—by creating the need for decision-making structures on a planetary scale where any attempt to maintain the pretense of popular sovereignty, let alone participation, would be obviously absurd. The neo-liberal solution of course is to declare the market the only form of public deliberation one really needs, and to restrict the state almost exclusively to its coercive function. In this context, the Zapatista response—to abandon the notion that revolution is a matter of seizing control over the coercive apparatus of the state, and instead proposing to refound democracy in the self-organization of autonomous communities—makes perfect sense. This is the reason an otherwise obscure insurrection in southern Mexico caused such a sensation in radical circles to begin with. Democracy, then, seems for the moment to be returning to the spaces in which it originated: the spaces in between. What happens after that, what forms it will take if it does, gradually, detach itself from the mechanisms of systematic violence in which it has been entangled, is something we can't, at present, know, and would probably never be able to predict.

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