STEVEN BILAKOVICS

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT POLITICS

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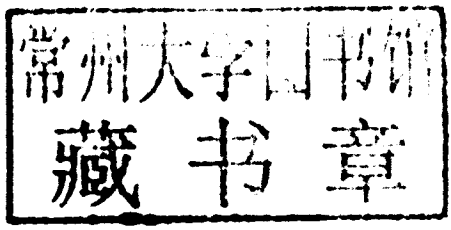

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DEMOCRACY WITHOUT POLITICS

For Timery and Jason

That which we can find words for is something already dead in our hearts; there is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking.

—Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

To understand the specificity of the present situation, one ought to reconstitute its genesis, so that we understand that our democracy seeks to institute a political and thus human order that is free of all "incorporation" . . . , a political and human order that is purely "spiritual." This idea conflicts with appearances: doesn't our society give a large place to the body and hardly any place to the soul? In reality, our society is the one in Western history that most systematically reduces the role of the body.

—Pierre Manent, *A World beyond Politics?*

It could be said that people are losing the "will" to act socially, or that they are losing the "desire." These words as pure psychological states mislead because they do not explain how a whole society could lose its will together, or change its desires. They further mislead in suggesting a therapeutic solution, to shake people out of this self-absorption—as if the environment which has eroded their social will and transformed their desire might suddenly welcome changed individuals with open arms.

—Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*

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Introduction

Democracy as Self-Subverting

> Every government harbors within itself a natural flaw that seems inextricably intertwined with the very principle of its existence
>
> —Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Playing Politics

"Politics" has probably always been something of a dirty word. In America today it seems exclusively and irretrievably so. Polling data over the past half century has made clear the American people's increasing "dissatisfaction" with their politics and "distrust" of their government. Perhaps the most striking trend in more than three decades of the General Social Survey, for example, is the deterioration of "confidence" in political institutions and processes (even as opinions on a wide array of other issues have remained remarkably static).[1] When one considers this trend in conjunction with the long-term decline in political participation, from voting rates on out, a general contempt of contemporary politics is hard to deny; as the belief that America is "on the wrong track" grows more pronounced, the available practices of politics are rejected as a means to make things better. Indeed, beyond a failure to provide solutions, the condition of our politics is cited as a large part of the problem—as the very evidence that America is on the wrong track.[2]

More revealing even than the statistical representation of Americans' low opinion of politics is the rhetorical culture within which today's politics takes shape. Listening to the language that citizens, politicians, and journalists use to persuade one another, we begin to understand the particular mode of Americans' contempt of politics; beyond the fact that Americans hate politics, an analysis of our political rhetoric helps us

diagnose precisely how and why Americans hate politics. Consider what the following phrases—and their pervasiveness—tell us about the specific character of Americans' attitudes and beliefs regarding politics. We hear political debate shot through with the bad-faith accusation of "playing politics."[3] Elections, those most pivotal of liberal democratic moments, now comprise the "silly season," during which people say the most preposterous things to gain the least competitive advantage.[4] And outside the electoral moment, "politics as usual" is cast as inane, at once a childish game divorced from reality and a fraud wherein opportunistic maneuvers are (barely) disguised as reasoned arguments.[5] The alternative intentions of "playing politics"—of speaking in a political context—can only be to manipulate or to pander. Similarly, it seems unimaginable not only that political partisanship and disagreement can be anything but "petty" and "bickering" but also that political moderation and compromise represent anything but an unprincipled lack of "core conviction."[6] The alternatives are the calculated obstructionism of "playing the blame game" and the calculated expediency of "flip-flopping."[7] And even as the majority of Americans apparently consider it self-evident that their elected representatives are in the pockets of "special interests," the chronic complaint is that these degenerate characters "don't get anything done." The alternatives are corruption and gridlock.[8] Surveying this no-way-out rhetorical landscape, we might well conclude that politics, far from a means of addressing collective problems and purposes or a mode of exercising our freedom, has become something of a stage for us at our worst. Today, "political" and "cynical" seem to be synonymous.

Articulated in such language, contemporary political disenchantment apparently follows from something other than rational apathy and goes beyond the sense that political actors and institutions are usually corrupt. Rather, the practice of politics seems to be perceived as *absurd*—as a sphere of human activity devoid of meaning and so undeserving of respect. "Politics" is a game, both constituted and removed from reality by its idiosyncratic set of rules. It can be played more or less fairly, to be sure, and it can be more or less dramatic and entertaining, but ultimately politics is something that is played. And like any game, it seems bizarre, pointless, and sort of silly to the outside observer, even (or especially) when played for the highest of stakes.

The conceptual metaphor of politics-as-game frames a strikingly con-

sistent rhetorical strategy of persuasion, evident in the examples above.[9] One begins by invoking crisis or warlike conditions or by asserting some truth obvious to plain common sense or by asserting the obviousness of crisis. In any case, it's made clear that we need not meetings and talk and disputation but decisive and immediate action (the telling assumptions being that speech and action are incompatible species and that to "get something done" we must set aside or rise above words: "Stop Talking; Start Doing," as one recent advertising campaign puts it; "Rhetoric or Real?" as a common CNN sidebar asks).[10] In this sense, persuasion within the rhetorical culture of "playing politics" takes effect as an attack upon rhetoric—in a sort of performative contradiction, words are used to reject the need or efficacy of words.[11] Moreover, insofar as the politics of democracy is premised upon the possibility of replacing force with persuasion—insofar as argument serves as the very medium of democratic politics—the rhetoric of "playing politics" takes effect as an antipolitical rhetoric. To be sure, politics may proceed in economic terms, in which language is used to signal self-interest and argument is reduced to bargaining. But how absurd will this type of politics appear in times of pervasive and persistent crisis? When persuasion by means of giving reasons for one's political position is taken as either a "fiddling" waste of time in the face of emergency (when persuasion must give way to the force of necessity) or as just the public mask of private self-interest (when service to the public good is a dire necessity), we are left with a politics of negotiation in times of necessity—drastic times met by trifling and petty measures. Reduced to this, the democratic mode of politics cannot but seem out of place, incongruous with experience and detached from pressing reality.[12]

Today's political alienation is thus much more intractable than if apathy or corruption were solely at its root. An apathetic people can always be "awakened," and a corrupt system can always be reformed (especially, it is often presumed, in times of crisis). But what is to be done when democratic politics is experienced as nonsense—as quite literally a theater of the absurd, the play where nothing happens? What is to be done when the practice of politics becomes transparently vacuous and farcical—reduced to deploying trite slogans and repetitive gibberish ("talking points") to move demographic pieces into position at key places on the board ("battleground states") so as to put a mark in the win col-

umn for the red or the blue team, with the consequence of nothing much changing? What is to be done when what was once considered the most human of activities becomes a "horse race"? Our options, it seems, are to step back and lampoon this political burlesque, with its ludicrous caricatures and clichés, or to suspend thought and reflection and throw ourselves in as fan(atic)s.

How have we ended up with such a dead-end political vocabulary? How can we work our way out when words spoken in the context of politics are just assumed to be "spin"—when language is assumed to conceal rather than convey meaning? How can we reform our politics when such uncritical cynicism undermines reflection, argument, and action? What is to be done when, as one recent account puts it, the world of politics appears an "unfit place for human habitation"?[13] One conclusion seems warranted already: political reformation (assuming these terms are not mutually exclusive) must come from outside democratic politics.[14]

Why Is Democratic Politics So Unpopular? Market Structures and Liberal Systems

Given the long-term nature of the phenomenon, Americans' growing distaste for politics cannot be explained exclusively in terms of recent events (Vietnam, Watergate), prevailing conditions associated with the perceived performance of government (booming or busting economy, crime rates), or contemporary transformations (the post–cold war phase of globalization, the rise of the news media of consolidated ownership and multiplied venues).[15] As important as these factors surely are in altering the style and substance of—along with even our perceptual modes of access to—today's political campaigns, for instance, our analysis of political disaffection, to be of sufficient scope, must consider more sustained conditions, relatively long-standing aspects of the American political system and American society, and even broader trends of which America is a part.

Theorizations of this sort typically revolve around the characterization of ours as a liberal democratic political system embedded in a "market society." The reasoning here generally follows one of two paths. First, in our modern, middle-class, commercial republic, people are otherwise occupied by matters both noble and base and so are "rationally ignorant"

of and uninterested in a complex political process that daily effects them little; the consumer-citizen chooses to spend finite resources elsewhere.[16] In turn, the ordinary running of government is intentionally (and perhaps fortunately) entrusted to institutional mechanisms, elected representatives, and technocratic "experts." Second, consumed by the need to make a living and with their political power institutionally channeled into the merely symbolic act of voting in occasional elections, citizens are reduced to spectators of a distant and byzantine political system dominated by organized "special interests" and oligarchic "elites." Moreover, in our age of globalizing corporate capitalism, politics becomes just economics by other means; money is power, and in our pay-to-play political system, the people's putative authority amounts to sound without fury. "Democracy" has been co-opted and reduced to an empty rhetoric, used by those in power to keep those out of power docile. In the first line of reasoning described here, the reigning popular sovereign happily abdicates direct rule, if not ultimate authority; in the second, a citizenry longing for more significant political power is institutionally and materially locked out of political space.[17]

Neither of these familiar views is wholly convincing, though. The first (wherein the liberal democratic political system makes possible the semipublic governance of an apolitical populace) predicts political apathy but not the contempt so widely and vocally expressed today. While surely rationally disengaged from politics, the majority describes itself less as apolitical than as antipolitical. How can we account for the widespread lack of respect for all things political that accompanies our lack of interest?

The second view (wherein the liberal democratic political system obstructs more direct and robust democratic participation) makes perfect sense of this contempt. But it apparently misrepresents the expressed desires of the majority of Americans. Recent research calls into question the extent to which people want or would affirm their own increased participation in democratic politics. Combining national survey data with an analysis of what people (reconstructed into "focus groups") actually said, the important work of John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse finds, "The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are

assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making process."[18] Why is this? Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that our aversion to taking part in the politics of democracy is not primarily a response to the particular defects, inequities, or ugliness of our political system. It is not, for example, the perception that politics is dominated by special interests and self-serving politicians that sours us on the whole endeavor. Indeed, they find that citizens are motivated to participate in politics to the extent that they are largely by fear of "being played for a sucker" by those in power.[19] Along deeply Tocquevillian lines, as we shall see, people appear willing, even eager, to embrace political powerlessness, but resent any abuse (or perhaps even sign) of privilege—in this case, those in power taking advantage of their privileged position to take advantage of us.[20] And it is this prospect that compels citizens to intervene in the political process.

Even as people assume selfishness in their elected officials and corruption in their governing institutions, though, they apparently don't want to "return power to the people." The people are not exactly populists; they seek "to weaken the power of institutions but not strengthen the power of ordinary people."[21] The authors identify three primary reasons why people turn down political power. First, people say they have neither the time nor the interest and don't want the burdens of responsibility. Second, in their political roles and capacities, people apparently have no more faith in each other, or even in themselves, than in their elected representatives. We don't trust politicians, but neither do we trust ourselves as citizens. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write, "People overwhelmingly admit that they and the American people generally are largely uninformed about political matters. They also have reservations about the trustworthiness of the American people, with half of the people not trusting their fellow citizens."[22] Finally, people demonstrate an abiding aversion to the very stuff of democratic politics—to addressing common issues, goals, and conflicts by means of arguing together. Two primary explanations are offered. First, the majority believes that Americans are basically unified rather than factious, thinking that "Americans generally agree on overall societal goals" and that "the common good is not debatable."[23] The common good is a matter of common sense, and so disagreement does not seem reasonable. Conflict becomes a sign that there is something very wrong with us and our government; insofar

as politics is a stage for conflict, it displays us at our worst. Second, and similarly, people think that arguing both should be unnecessary and actually is inefficacious. The majority considers arguing to be "a complete waste of time" and just "bickering" and "pointless conflict."[24] Perhaps not surprisingly, the public overwhelmingly supported (by 86 percent) the proposition "Elected officials should stop talking and take action."[25] As useless as it is ugly, the politics of argument is as such rejected; the good citizen of democracy participates, we might say, as conscientious objector.

Weighing against the notion that political cynicism is rooted in the American people's experience of being institutionally and materially locked out of a distant political system, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse conclude, "People do not like politics even in the best circumstances; in other words, they simply do not like the process of openly arriving at a decision in the face of diverse opinions. They do not like politics when they view it from afar and they certainly do not like politics when they participate in it themselves." Simply, Americans "yearn for 'the end of politics.' " This leads people, the authors write, to a dilemma: "People want to turn political matters over to somebody else because they do not want to be involved themselves, but they do not want to turn decision making over to someone who is likely to act in a selfish, rather than other-regarding, manner." The perceived way out of this dilemma is to place power in the hands of virtue. Today, the relevant virtues are formulated as empathetic selflessness and problem-solving competence. Above the world of self-interested partisanship, people seek in a representative not so much an official responsive to their policy preferences as a part Burkean disinterested trustee of the common good and part Clintonian feeler of their pain. At the same time, given the desire for quiet decisiveness in decision making, people tend to favor government (administration) by "business leaders" and "nonelected, independent experts"—politics reduced to a business or a science, wherein things get done efficiently and progress toward shared goals is measurable.[26]

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse dub this the politics of "stealth democracy"—"government by autopilot" that renders the processes of politics at once trustworthy and unseen (like a stealth bomber, power operating from on high).[27] In the people's ideal form of democratic politics, decisions are made "efficiently, objectively, and without commotion or dis-

agreement" while decision makers display the personable selflessness of empathy and/or the impersonal selflessness of impartiality.[28] To introduce an idea we shall return to in considering Claude Lefort's theory of democracy, what we want on this account is the providential power of nobody—power that is effective but evidently unheld. A human agent might be thought to approximate this combination of efficacy and selflessness: the Cincinnatus figure who rises above the paradox of republican politics, wherein the pursuit of power demonstrates an absence of the very virtues that qualify one to hold power. An institutional agency might be thought to approximate this combination: the military, today's last bastion of power in the hands of (martial) virtue; the Supreme Court, with its impersonal body of impartial experts (as opposed to the "activist judges" of a "politicized" Court). Perhaps this helps explain why the military receives a great and growing vote of confidence from the American people even as confidence in most every other institution crumbles and why the least democratic branch of the American government is by far the most popular.[29] And the very realization of this combination would be the seating of power in some perfectly virtuous (empathetic and impartial, efficient and effective) superhuman agency.

Expressing an almost equally low regard for direct democratic participation and popular power as for liberal democratic institutions and procedures, Americans' aversion to politics runs deep, below the liberal political system, to the practice of democratic politics as such.[30] This picture is complicated, of course, by the possibility that we have been in some way programmed or seduced into such beliefs and so into political powerlessness. To simplify for the time being, the common course of this argument holds that we have been led or manipulated or subconsciously reconstructed to imagine human association as at bottom a market and human beings as at bottom bourgeois. In turn, we buy into "purchasing power" and the need satisfaction of "consumerism" as the essence of freedom, reject equality as incompatible with individual opportunity and collective prosperity, embrace governance according to hierarchical business models and "market forces" as necessary and proper in a world of competition and complexity, accept decision making as the work of a technocracy, and so on. Today, the argument extends, the market order is taken as no less than natural: given, spontaneous, inescapable, even

coded into our biology. Moreover, market orders are taken as Natural: endowed as our faith with a sort of religious moral significance.[31] Consequently, politics (along with everything else) is perceived as an essentially economic activity, preconceived in terms of competitive self-interest and judged by the logic of efficiency. On both counts, a robustly democratic politics is reflexively dismissed by the people themselves as unrealistic. Citizens believe themselves lacking not only the time and expertise but also the requisite public-spiritedness to manage democratic politics. Prejudiced against our own political possibilities and capacities, we come to hold that in the modern world we simply cannot afford the luxury of democracy.[32]

There is much to recommend this interpretation. That "education policy" is most always and without dissent framed by the necessity of "not falling behind in global competition" stands as only one (if perhaps the most dispiriting) example of our tendency to appraise the human world in economic terms.[33] Yet, the notion of market society as Platonic cave is not wholly convincing. The very fact that "market society," "consumer culture," and so on are invoked almost exclusively to condemn them, never to affirm them as legitimate or aspirational, undermines the analysis of capitalism as effectively "totalizing."[34] Far from being indoctrinated into an unquestioned capitalist consciousness, people constantly question and regret the costs of capitalism. Every word of praise for the efficiency, prosperity, and freedom following from the unplanned and unregulated open market is accompanied by scorn for "a culture of fast-food homogenization," hierarchical corporatism ("Big Oil," "Big Tobacco"), the Almighty Dollar, "affluenza," self-indulgent luxury, conspicuous consumption, the rich getting richer, ubiquitous advertising, selling out, Hollywood vanity, inauthenticity, shallowness, and greed.[35] If Americans are materialistic consumers, it would seem that they are self-loathing materialistic consumers. Indeed, American culture seems largely composed of the criticism of what that culture is perceived to be.

The widespread view that we exist blindly invested in the one-dimensional shadows of consumer culture undermines itself: were we fully socialized into the cave, we would not know it, much less be prone to decry it. More than any reality the concept represents, I shall suggest, "market society" captures our imagination to such an extent today for two main reasons. First, various ingredients of open-market economics

are easily translated into goods that we do passionately affirm. Second, as a reductive exaggeration of elements of society that are prevalent, the notion of a "consumer society" preys upon our insecurities as precisely the type of corruption of human association we fear possible, likely, even inevitable. Indeed, the fear of a creeping, tempting, infecting, colonizing bourgeois ethos is constitutive of our social form; it is how we imagine dehumanization.

A robust interpretation of American society would thus recognize, for instance, that we *transform* consumerism by representing it in terms of self-expressive freedom and personal empowerment even as we dread the descent of modern life into a homogenized and stultifying consumer culture, devoid of anything lofty and challenging, populated by herds of last men or cheerful robots. Similarly, we *elevate* greed by making the effort to philosophize it as good (the spur to individual striving, and so to collective prosperity and human progress) even as we anxiously await the dissolution of society into a base and degrading greediness. We love opportunity and hate opportunism. Any plausible interpretation of our social form must account for this dualism and so must look toward the multidimensionality of the wider frame of reference by which we judge the market elements of our society.[36]

The Antipolitics of Democratic Openness: Cynicism and Idealism

In response to the shortcomings of the views outlined above, my argument proceeds in two parts. First, insofar as one can make general claims about a "society," "culture," "zeitgeist," or "age," ours is rendered more fully intelligible as a democratic society rather than as a market society. Second, a society so constituted fosters the particular manner of contempt for politics so widespread today, the reflexive cynicism that we might juxtapose to reflective skepticism and a vigilant distrust of those in power.[37] Building upon the works of Alexis de Tocqueville, I argue that the democratic "social state" tends to be taken by its inhabitants as natural and even as a quasi-sanctified, providential order of human association—and that both the liberal democratic form of government and the direct democratic practice of politics are devalued within democratic society. There is an *antipolitical prejudice* inscribed in the democratic way of imagining, understanding, and evaluating the world.