

Chapter 1

THE “SELF-RULING” PEOPLE

WE often hear it said that “in a democracy, it is the people who rule.” This quality of the political system is presented as decisive, as a complete reversal of political doctrine with regard to the divine right of kings. In reality, it is nothing of the sort. Rule by the people is a myth which loses all substance once confronted with the real practice in democracy.

Democracy is not, in its origin, a system of the people. In England with the advent of the parliamentary system just as in France during the Revolution, it was not the people who were seen at work. Even the Russian Revolution was not a phenomenon of the people. To regard the people or what the communists elegantly call the “masses” as the agent of change or political upheaval is purely a theoretical view, a historical myth, of which one sees no trace in reality. The “people” were the pretext, the dupes, and almost always the victims of the revolutions, not the engines.

The French Revolution was built on the idea of the “nation,” which claimed to bring together the intellectual, social, and financial elite of the country. It was on this foundation that democracy was established and that it functioned during almost all of the nineteenth century. This “nation” met the desires of the philosophers who wanted to transfer power from

the monarch to an enlightened, philosophical, and philanthropic class who, moreover, ought to be financially comfortable. The educated bourgeoisie of the time were the protagonists of this idea, and a portion of the nobility formed their audience. Voltaire wanted to reserve the exercise of power to this superior class. He went so far as to say that the common people should not be taught to read for fear they might vie with the elite for power.

This idea of Voltaire's was inspired by what he had learned of parliamentary monarchy in England. He had seen, rightly so, a class system where the king, under the law, that is to say under Parliament, could no longer act freely in defense of the national interest or that of the more ordinary people, particularly the peasantry.

The appearance of the parliamentary system in England was tied to the great movement of Church property confiscation begun under Henry VIII and continuing until the coming of the Stuarts.¹ When Henry ordered an inventory of the Church's property and then its confiscation at the profit of the crown, he had in mind the dual objective of enrichment and popularity. He sought in effect to win the loyalty of new and old nobility who still regarded the Tudors as a weakly founded dynasty whose right to rule was questionable. Henry VIII generously distributed goods which did not belong to him: revenues from bishoprics, parishes, hospitals, and all kinds of charitable and academic institutions dependent upon

¹ Worth reading are the historical works of Hilaire Belloc on the ties in England between the Reformation, parliamentarianism, and capitalism.

the Church and whose financing was exclusively private. Most especially, he distributed stolen lands of abbeys whose monks he had driven out.

He thereby set off a general movement of pillaging which ultimately went beyond the crown's control and took place over the course of centuries. The crown itself did not succeed in keeping all the benefits of the confiscations. It soon found itself surrounded and taken hostage by a recently enriched aristocracy more powerful than itself.

This diminishing of royal power in England was largely assisted by the circumstances: for a century, the crown was placed on precarious heads. Henry VIII's son, Edward VI, was a child when he ascended to the throne, and he died at sixteen years of age. He reigned under the influence of his uncles. His half-sister Mary was Catholic, while her close entourage had good reasons not to be, being tied to recently acquired wealth. Elizabeth, Henry VIII's illegitimate daughter, owed staying in power to her flexibility vis-à-vis this enriched class, which assisted her and, when needed, constrained her in the exercise of government. When Elizabeth died, there was James I, who was a Scot, that is to say a foreigner with respect to the English, and his power was thereby lessened. His son, Charles I, was the first English sovereign to ascend to the throne without handicap since the death of Henry VIII in 1547. He was a male monarch, quite legitimate, Protestant, and English. He undertook to restore royal power after eighty years of weakness during which a wealthy and powerful class had taken shape. He clashed with them and was beheaded.

This glimpse into English history would not make sense without taking into account the Protestant Reformation. Henry VIII, although he broke with Rome and robbed the Catholic Church in his country, still maintained Catholic liturgical rites and general doctrine. But his son, Edward VI, pressed by his entourage, introduced the Reformation in England, for Protestantism afforded a justification for the pillaging of the Church's goods, past and future. No Catholic in good conscience could seize Church property and keep it permanently. Sooner or later he would find himself in an untenable moral situation that the Reformation, inimical to the Church and its goods, happened to conveniently resolve. All those who adopted the Reformation were thus justified in possessing the Church's goods and even in increasing their patrimony at its expense. In so doing, they were fighting "idolatry."

We must not conclude that all Catholics who adopted the Reformation were motivated by prospects of material gain. But it would be naive to think these prospects were not a decisive factor in a great number of conversions and, very likely, the majority of them among the nobility and bourgeoisie. England adopted the Reformation under the impulsion of a minority motivated by profit. For these persons, religion served as a pretext.

The families who had thus helped themselves to the Church's goods, morally justified by Protestant ethics, formed the gentry, the class of landowners who sat in Parliament. Parliament was not then, as one might believe today, an organ of popular representation. It was an instrument in the hands of the

gentry to defend its own class interests. It would take too long to detail here the mechanisms which enabled this wealthy class to so formidably build up its power that it would eventually challenge the king. One need only remember this: Parliament, which voted on the crown's budget, had attained a stranglehold on the monarchy, and the latter had fallen by insisting on its rights. At the center of the disagreement between Charles I and the members of Parliament was the property of the Church, confiscated at the profit of the crown long ago and wrongfully held by certain members of the gentry. Charles I wanted restitution. He was unable to match the opposition of the Protestant financial elite, who found in Cromwell a staunch and merciless defender, all the more so because his personal interests were directly threatened by the king's demands.²

The financial incentives for England's adoption of the Protestant Reformation are therefore intimately connected with the bolstering of parliamentary power. The Parliament in England was used to put the monarchy in check and to replace it with an oligarchic class of wealthy Protestants to whom the kings were required to submit. This is why the overthrow of James II in 1688 was a true revolution. It was not a popular revolution or the overthrowing of a tyranny, but it was the rebellion of a class implementing the transfer of sovereign power for its own profit.

The French Revolution followed a similar pattern. It did not bear the marks of a unanimous popular

² Oliver Cromwell owed his considerable fortune to Thomas Cromwell, his great-great-uncle, who carried out the confiscations in the name of Henry VIII, and generously helped himself in the process.

movement. It was principally members of the bourgeoisie and some aristocrats who initiated it at the meeting of the Estates-General. The works of Augustin Cochin³ aim to demonstrate that the revolutionary intention was already present in the selection of delegates to the Estates-General. The most informed observers of the time⁴ portrayed the French Revolution as a conspiracy. Even if it escaped the control of those who instigated it, the Revolution never took on a popular form. It remained a bourgeois phenomenon, replacing the power derived from birth with that derived from money. It instituted censitary suffrage,⁵ which remained the dominant form of suffrage into the nineteenth century. It abolished the privileges of the guilds in order to give free range to the capitalists. It abolished the privileges of the peasantry in order to give the industrialists cheap labor.

The parliamentary regimes which issued from the French Revolution imitated the British system: a king not in charge, ministers responsible to the Houses, and, above all, no universal suffrage. The bourgeois regimes' distrust of universal suffrage is easily understood. At the time, universal suffrage would have reinforced the conservatives, for the population would have spontaneously voted for its natural elite: manorial

³ See, for example, Augustin Cochin, *La crise de l'histoire révolutionnaire: Taine et M. Aulard*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1909).

⁴ Abbé [Augustin] Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (Hamburg: P. Fauche, 1798-1799).

⁵ Censitary suffrage was a restrictive form of suffrage whereby only those wealthy enough to pay the cens, a designated minimum tax threshold, enjoyed the right to vote.—Trans.

lords, notaries, and parish priests. The liberals, who constituted only a small minority of the population, would have lost their political power. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the two states practicing universal suffrage were also the two most powerful and most conservative monarchies: Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Censitary suffrage ensured power stayed in the hands of a wealthy minority. One could vote if he owned land or factories. Less than ten percent of the population enjoyed the right to vote—less than in Athens at the time of Pericles. It was lawful for the individual, of course, to become wealthy and acquire the right to vote by paying the cens.⁶ Theoretically, the electoral class was open, but in practice the wealthy had very well decided not to share with those who were not, and whose vote would have considerably changed the majority.

The bourgeois parliamentary system, which was that of the European democracies of the nineteenth century, was inspired by the English system in which the Bill of Rights made Parliament the true ruler. Never, in the spirit of this system, was sovereignty to fall into the hands of all the people. The parliamentarians had thus obtained power to make laws which served their own interests, first those of the gentry, and then those of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. The true purpose of Parliament was to subjugate the monarchy in order to obtain sovereignty and exercise power for its own ends.

⁶ See note 5 above.

One spoke of “popular rule” because it would have been difficult to admit to the principle of a “bourgeois rule,” but under this generous appellation it was the power of one class which was imposed and consolidated. “Universal suffrage will never happen,” Minister Guizot said. The people of this period, moreover, would have considered it utter madness to grant the right to vote to the unlearned and illiterate, and believed it necessary to have a minimum amount of education to vote. It was thought then that someone well-informed voted well. It is true that, at the time, the means of mass communication did not belong to the state, nor were they subsidized by it.

Just as in the case of the English Revolution, the French Revolution was nothing other than a successful ploy to take power out of the impartial hands of the king in order to place it into the hands of the rich. The pretext of fighting for freedom, invoked in both cases, was only a deceptive cover. Liberal democracy did not want liberty for all, but only the liberty of the wealthy. If this was not true, how does one explain the prohibition against strikes and unions in the name of economic liberty, and the revocation of legislative power by way of censitary suffrage?

In any case, the term “democracy” does not exactly correspond to this bourgeois parliamentarianism in existence prior to universal suffrage. Does the term not better correspond to the system defined by the principle of “one man, one vote”? The passage of time can make one think the parliamentary systems of the nineteenth century were systems of transition which could only evolve towards universal suffrage. A teleological view of history, whose naiveté is more and

more evident, presents contemporary democracy as a resolution of parliamentary tensions of the preceding centuries. The democratic system is therefore considered final. Even if its practice still leaves something to be desired, its principles are reputed to be absolutely true.

The transfer of sovereignty to the people as a whole did not, however, give more surety to the people or to its sovereignty. Much importance is given these days, it seems, to the will of the majority and to the consent of the people, but at the same time there are record rates of abstention in the elections. A hundred years ago democrats fought to obtain universal suffrage. They saw themselves as trailblazers and envisioned the gratitude of future generations of voters happy to exercise their power of self-rule. How disappointed they would be to see that a third of the electorate today relinquishes their right to vote!

A democracy with such a high rate of abstention is certainly an unhealthy system. One might view this as a temporary crisis. One might also understand that democracy is an impossible system.

Popular sovereignty is first of all a contradiction in terms. It is impossible for the people to exercise sovereignty, for they are inevitably divided amongst themselves in their race for power. Unity is a characteristic inseparable from sovereignty. To transfer sovereignty to the people is to condemn it to such a fragmentation that it loses all reality. Democratic society is not only divided according to orientations, ideologies and political factions, but it is also an individualistic society. It is not an organic society in the sense that the Ancien Régime was with

its corps and privileged orders. It is atomized and unorganized. The people in it do not represent a whole which is capable of embodying sovereignty, but a multitude of disparate, even conflicting, elements. Even if they were validly represented by political parties, the people would be incapable of exercising sovereignty through the mediation of groups who oppose each other and vie for power.

Since democracy's beginnings, there has been a monumental error concerning the true identity of the people. This may seem paradoxical since democracy is supposed to be the system of the people par excellence. Few systems, none to be exact, claim to represent the people, its welfare, its rights and its sovereignty more than democracy. And yet democracy seems to be unaware of who the people truly are. Actually, it is very well aware. The great democrats know quite well who the people are, but they distrust them. Nothing is more dangerous to democracy than the people. That is why democracy will always claim to serve the people while only permitting a small number to rule in their stead. What democracy demands from the people is legitimacy. It does not care about their opinion.

In the Ancien Régime, the people were not sovereign, nor did they claim to be so. Sovereignty was embodied in the monarch, who ruled and governed. The monarch was a true sovereign insofar as he was not divided against himself or enmeshed in quarrels of interest. He was *superanus*, sovereign, that is to say above organized society and therefore free in his decisions. Still, the people were not absent. The people were represented in the estates, representative

bodies convoked by province or generality, and which were found in various forms throughout all of Europe.

The estates neither were nor wanted to be democratic representative bodies. They did not represent individuals but interests tied to orders (clergy, nobility, bourgeoisie and peasantry). The entire organic structure of the Ancien Régime rested not on the individual, but on corps and orders, endowed with privileges and powers to defend their proper interests. This was one of the counterbalances to the monarchy. The monarchy without the corps and orders became a tyranny; the corps and orders without the monarchy begot chaos, civil war, and soon the tyranny of an oligarchy or single man.

The realism of the Ancien Régime lay in the fact that the people were not expected to govern or even to advise the government. They were expected, in an organized way, to represent their interests. The people were certainly not consulted except in these things. But at least, concerning their interests, they did not say anything senseless, for they were speaking of what they knew best. The guilds were consulted about their professional interests and the clergy about their interests tied to religion and works of charity. The Estates-General of 1614—the last convoked in France before 1789—is very illustrative of how interests were defended. It was at this time the bourgeoisie demanded they only continue to pay tallage on the condition that the nobility remain restricted from entering into the professions.⁷

⁷ See Frantz Funck-Brentano, *L'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1942); François Bluche, *L'Ancien Régime: Institutions et société* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1993).

Faced with these disparate interests, often complementary and at times conflicting, all the freedom and power of the monarchy was necessary in order to maintain the peace and the cohesion of the social body. A weak monarchy, as in England, would be subjugated to the interests of a more powerful class to the detriment of other classes' interests. A strong monarchy could, after having listened to all parties, impose the decision which best served the common good, even against certain particular interests. Such a monarchy played the role of the arbiter among factions, a role that does not exist in democracy because its government is itself derived from factions.

The concept of an organic society was abolished at the time of the French Revolution. The corps and orders were suppressed, the privileges were abolished, and everything which allowed the people to protect themselves from the power of the state was banished in the name of liberty. What were the people given in exchange? Sovereignty. They were given the false promise that they would no longer need to defend themselves from the state since they themselves were the state. But if a people organized into corps and orders are incapable of exercising sovereignty, how much more so a people comprising a formless mass of individuals!

This incapacity of the democratic people was intended and planned. A people incapable of exercising power over themselves are condemned to entrust their fate to their representatives, the political parties, who will thenceforth be the true sovereigns. They will exercise the power, legitimized by elections,

over an unorganized people without natural defenses to face the power of the state.

This is how the people are regarded in a democracy: a formless and unorganized mass of indistinct individuals. They are like dough in the hands of the state. This people are deprived of organization in the face of the state. The sole organs of resistance which can raise their heads to the state are the political parties and unions—themselves politicized, that is to say under control. The people are condemned to have themselves represented by organizations which are designated to them and outside of which no legal representation is possible. They believe—because they have been told so—that the electoral process is the best way to have themselves represented, while in reality the purpose of the electoral system is not to represent the population but to ensure the elite have power that is regarded as legitimate.

It is thanks to this legitimacy that democratic power enjoys a stranglehold on the people that is without precedence in the history of governmental systems. The supposedly free democratic people are given laws and taxed, without consultation, at the initiative of parties who sit in their name. The democratic people are instructed in schools that the state controls, subsidizes and regulates. They are informed by media the state owns or controls by means of regulations, subsidies, or groups of influence. They take medications the state authorizes, and they eat food the state stamps. The money they use is under the control of the state, which fixes its value and interest rate. The list of the state’s prerogatives is long, and it can only justify them through elections.

In the Ancien Régime these prerogatives did not exist. We can ask ourselves with good reason which of the two peoples, that of the Ancien Régime's traditional monarchy or that of the parliamentary democracy, is freer. There, where the democratic people can boast of an entirely theoretical freedom that evaporates in the fire of the state's systematic interventionism, the Ancien Régime was for its part "bristling with freedoms," to borrow the expression of Charles Maurras, freedoms that were very practical and associated with specific purposes, despite the power of the monarchy.

It would be naive to believe that a lever of power such as the democratic state, which legislates, taxes, instructs, informs, physically cares for, feeds, and so forth, a non-resisting population, would be quietly left in the hands of those elected by the people, at the mercy of their caprices and of electoral chance. The political parties secured their power quite some time ago in order to evade this risk which the people represent. But this power evades even them, for they themselves are the playthings of those more powerful than they.

The people in a democracy are the object of all kinds of manipulations and deceptions. They were taken from the land by massive industrialization, instructed by compulsory education, and then informed by television. They believed this to be an effect of their liberation and social ascendancy. In order that they are oblivious to the chains which bind them, the people are filled to excess by a society of consumerism, are overwhelmed by advertising, and their will is eroded by hedonistic pleasures. They get

over paying taxes by treating themselves to vacations. The ruling powers encourage them to do so, for inasmuch as they work and enjoy themselves, inasmuch as they pay taxes and consume, they are not involved in politics and they do their part to keep the system going.

Because they are individualistic, the democratic people are not organized. They are incapable of taking a stand. They sense themselves powerless in the face of the state, and indeed they are. This atomization is aggravated today by the mass immigration which the countries of Europe are experiencing, and which is desired by the states and the European Union. The sense of belonging and popular identity dissipates amidst the fragmentation into ethnic communities, ghettos and lawless areas, and even through interracial blending. Immigration inhibits national characteristics and renders society yet more passive and yet more able to be manipulated by the state.

Terms such as "population," "public opinion," "civil society," and "international community" tend to make one think of real interlocutors and aim to give a kind of legitimacy to the ruling powers. But the population is not expressing itself, and when it does by way of referendum or petition, it is not heeded. The Irish referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon proved to be nothing but a sinister farce. Public opinion is a creation of the media, of the ruling powers in other words. And if it is contrary to what the powers want, it is denied. As for the "international community," that is simply some of the world's powerful people gathered around a table, who are themselves subject to yet more powerful lobbies.

Therefore, the best definition of democracy is not “government of the people” or “rule by the people,” for these expressions are utopian and meant to deceive. The best definition was given by the Russian philosopher Vasily Rozanov (d. 1919): “Democracy is the system by which an organized minority governs an unorganized majority.” This “unorganized majority” is the people, aggregated and individualistic, incapable of reaction because disjointed.

This definition of democracy is consistent with the notion of “utilitarian enframing”⁸ Yvan Blot brought to light.⁹ The individual therein is considered as human material—“the most important of raw materials”—able to be exchanged or manipulated at will. He is reduced solely to his utilitarian aspects of producer, consumer, and taxpayer. He is merely a tool programmed by the media and education, and distracted from his natural aspirations by occupational work (necessary to assure his subsistence and to repay his debts), leisure activities, and the material and sensual pleasures to which he looks forward. This schema contrived for the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century suits even better the democratic societies of the twenty-first century, which have followed the totalitarian descent by a more gradual route.

According to the concept of “utilitarian enframing,” the individual is at the service of an oligarchy greedy for power and personal enrichment.

⁸ “Enframing” refers here to German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s notion of *Gestell*.—Trans.

⁹ Yvan Blot, *L’oligarchie au pouvoir* (Paris: Éditions Economica, 2011).

In order to suitably fulfill his role as “raw material,” the individual must be void of any roots: without race, without nation, and without religion. He must be void of an ideal; or rather his sole ideal must be simply the satisfaction of his needs. In morality, he must be relativistic so as to readily accept all tendencies of the ruling power and all attacks on human dignity when presented in a favorable light by the ruling power and justified by an inordinate appeal to emotions. Furthermore, the individual must be void of personality as of independent judgment. It is imperative that he conform to the movements of the crowd and not seek to be different. He must therefore “be brought up in a purely technical and utilitarian manner, without the general culture letting him think he is a free man.”¹⁰

Such is the individual in a democracy. It is the composite of such individuals which is called the people. The intention, then, of democratic power is not to serve the good of the people, but to make use of the people for the good of the ruling oligarchy. From this vantage point, it is better for the individuals to no longer form a people at all, but rather a completely disposable and submissive human reserve. If this intention has not yet been fully realized, it is clear that it is well on its way to fulfillment. But it clashes with the reality of human nature, which rebels insofar as it is able in the face of its utilitarian debasement.

¹⁰ Yvan Blot, “La façon dont l’oligarchie traite l’homme: une matière première,” *Polémia*, October 4, 2009, <http://archives.polemia.com/article.php?id=2393>.