

VANGUARDISM AND VIGILANCE: REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM AND  
REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2023

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# VANGUARDISM AND VIGILANCE: REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

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This dissertation provides a book-length study of the concept of the ‘revolutionary vanguard.’ Associated with defunct Marxist-Leninist ideology, the claim to represent the ‘vanguard of the revolution’ is treated by contemporary political theorists as antithetical to the pluralism essential for representative democracy. By offering an original reconstruction of the communist ‘tradition’ of vanguardism, this dissertation challenges the assumption that such claims necessarily express unaccountable modes of leadership. It shows that, beyond the obvious association with the Marxist-Leninist party, communists described the political work of vanguardism in terms of a component considered essential to the proper functioning of representative democracy: the capacity for citizens to maintain a vigilance over the conduct of political office-holders. The dissertation’s three chapters engage with three key episodes in communist history: nineteenth-century France in the lead-up to the 1871 Paris commune; central and eastern Europe in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian revolution, and; China in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Taken together, these episodes constitute a way of engaging with the ‘defunct’ communist canon that brings out unexpected resources for a key concern of contemporary liberal democracies: how to establish and maintain popular oversight over unaccountable elites.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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Dedicated to Wallis, Theodora, and Lucius.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It takes a village to raise an unruly infant like this dissertation, and whatever virtues it has at its current stage of maturity are entirely attributable to the community I was lucky enough to find after undertaking the odyssey to Ithaca NY in pursuit of a PhD. Above all, my committee – Jason Frank, Patchen Markell, Claudia Verhoeven, and Alexander Livingston – played indispensable roles in shaping the project at every stage. I could not have asked for academic mentors more supportive or more challenging. Thanks also to Begüm Adalet for her invaluable insights as external reader. My peers among the Cornell political theory graduate students provided endless assistance, in particular Alexia Alkadi-Barbaro, Jordan Ecker, Sam Rosenblum, Tessy Schlosser, Ewa Nizalowska, and Dan Zimmer. I also benefited enormously from conversation with graduate colleagues of various other disciplines: special thanks go to Louis-Philippe Brochu, Lin Le, Tessa Evans, Jessica Ness, Matt Finck, and Nicolas Mulder. Beyond Cornell, special thanks go to sustained intellectual connections I have been fortunate enough to share with Soren Dudley, Kevin Duong, Ed Quish, and Matt Shafer, and Jess Feldman. From beginning to end, Nicholas Bujalski has shown me the meaning of scholarly comradeship. Material based on the first chapter was published as an article in *Political Theory*, and I would like to thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on the ideas therein.

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## **Introduction: Approaching the Communist Tradition Today**

In December 1991, the upper chamber of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union – the legislative chamber newly empowered by Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev’s reformist agenda – formally voted their own country out of existence. Gorbachev had been attempting to bring about ‘socialist democracy’ by transforming the Supreme Soviet from a rubber-stamp for decisions of the CPSU Central Committee into a representative assembly with genuine legislative authority. In his 1987 book on *perestroika* (‘restructuring’), when discussing the importance of *glasnost* (‘openness’) to the democratization of Soviet society, Gorbachev extolled the liberalization of restrictions on media and freedom of expression: “The Central Committee highly appreciates the contribution the media have been making to perestroika. Why so? Because everything depends on the people. The people are in the vanguard of the struggle, and perestroika develops through them. This is why the way people think, the level of their civic awareness and their civic stand are of vital importance.”<sup>1</sup> If the party had legitimized its suffocation of civil society by representing itself as the ‘vanguard of the revolution,’ Gorbachev – drawing on no less an ideological authority than his own interpretation of the Leninist canon – now argued that the time for a popular vanguard outside the party’s control had come. But this plan, inspired by the Soviet Union’s first constitution of 1918, of giving ‘all power to the soviets’ – undergirded by the principle of free expression – proved incapable of

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 76.

coexisting with the hegemony of the party.<sup>2</sup> The delegates elected to the soviets ratified a new constitution that dissolved Gorbachev's presidency, rejected the Communist Party's leadership, and hastened the breakup of the Union and the entire Eastern bloc.

A month later, in January 1992, Deng Xiaoping came out of retirement as the paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party to embark on his Southern Tour, inspecting the financial hubs and manufacturing centers of China's new special economic zones. There, under the apocryphal slogan "to get rich is glorious," he announced the official embrace of private enterprise as the cornerstone of his party's developmentalist program of 'reform and opening up' (*gaige kaifang*). But Deng also stressed the consistency of this program with Marxism-Leninism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, as well as the need for the leadership of the party to ensure its success. In the aftermath of the June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 Tiananmen massacre, the party had resolved that economic liberalization and political liberalization were incompatible, and abortive moves toward a more open civil society were brutally foreclosed. In his flagship Southern Tour speech, implicitly comparing the fate of China to that of the Soviet Union, Deng asked: "Why, after the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident, has our country remained so stable? Because we undertook Reform and Opening Up, promoted economic development, and the livelihood of the people has been improved. Therefore, the military and state power must safeguard this road [*weihu zhe tiao daolu*], this system,

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<sup>2</sup> For a compelling reappraisal of the significance of Gorbachev's commitment to "neo-Leninism," see Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

and these policies.”<sup>3</sup> There could be no doubt, Deng stressed, that for decades to come the party Central Committee would need to vigilantly oversee the development of China’s ‘spiritual civilization’ to keep improvements in its ‘material civilization’ off the disorderly road toward ‘bourgeois liberalization.’

I quote from Gorbachev and Deng – two of the main figureheads of the end of the Cold War – to foreshadow the stakes of this dissertation. Much attention has been given to the political, economic and social processes that these pivotal communist leaders were caught up in. But what interests me are the ideological phrases they draw on in their speech, for it is in them that we find the echoes of the discourse of proletarian vanguardism that this dissertation will analyze. Political theorists have, on the whole, been loath to treat communist ideology as an authentic register of ‘theory’; taking their lead from colleagues in empirical political science, communist ideology has – since the sub-disciplinary boundaries were formalized at the height of the Cold War – usually been treated as a ‘hollow’ or ‘wooden’ discourse divorced from the lived experience of the masses in whose name it spoke. For theorists grappling with the meaning of democracy in modern society, the empty phrases of communist ideology tend to be treated – alongside those of fascism – as paradigmatic of the ‘totalitarian’ temptation implicit in certain misguided ways of thinking about popular sovereignty. I will have more to say about such anti-totalitarian democratic theory below. For now, though, it is enough to point out – as its opening gambit – that this dissertation takes seriously the idea that the propaganda of communist ideologues,

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<sup>3</sup>Deng Xiaoping, ‘Deng Xiaoping Nanxun Jianghua (Quanwen)’, *Gongchandangyuan Wang* January 21 2016. Available at <https://news.12371.cn/2016/01/21/ART11453342674674143.shtml>. Accessed June 15 2023.

whatever else we think of it, deserves to be reflected upon as meaningful political speech.<sup>4</sup>

From this perspective, the end of the Cold War can be interpreted not just as the triumph of liberal democracy but also as a theoretical disagreement between the West's two major Eastern adversaries.<sup>5</sup> At the level of economic thought, both agreed, of course, on the unfeasibility of state planning and the need to introduce market reforms as a step on the road to socialism.<sup>6</sup> But on another level, at stake were two conceptions of an idea central to the communist tradition's theory of political representation: vanguardism. Gorbachev staked his hopes in 'the people' expressing their consent to remain in the 'vanguard of the struggle' for the construction of socialism via the procedures of electoral institutions. For Deng, the party's ongoing monopolization of civil society was required to ensure that experiments with economic liberalization did not deviate from the goal of building a socialist future. If communists claimed to represent the vanguard of the people, Deng thought this claim relied on the vigilant maintenance of control over its historical development;

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<sup>4</sup> Political scientists and area studies specialists have long been challenging the assumptions of totalitarian models of communist ideology on the boundaries they draw between propagandistic discourse and pragmatic speech. This was one of the insights of, for example, Soviet subjectivity studies, which pointed out the pernicious effects of the assumption that a 'liberal individual' was waiting to be unfettered from the shackles of communist ideology. See Chatterjee, Choi, and Karen Petrone. "Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective." In *Mass Dictatorship and Modernity*, by Michael Kim, Michael Schoenhals, and Yong-Woo Kim, 205–29. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> This is the framework through which the Chinese Communist Party has tended to make sense of things. For a nuanced review of CCP assessments of the fate of Gorbachev's reforms, see Li, Jie. *Sovietology in Post-Mao China: Aspects of Foreign Relations, Politics, and Nationality, 1980-1999*. Brill, 2023, Chapter Five.

<sup>6</sup> On the differences between the Soviet and Chinese communist party's respective approaches to economic reform, see Weber, Isabella. *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate*. Routledge Studies on the Chinese Economy. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2021.

Gorbachev's fate bore testament to what would happen when such vigilance was relinquished. If, despite calls to dismantle the very idea of theoretical 'traditions,' the contemporary world continues to be construed as undergirded by a 'liberal tradition,' it also behooves us to acknowledge the role of a 'communist tradition' in its construction.

One helpful way into thinking about this dissertation's approach to 'traditions' is via the lens of the new disciplinary trend of comparative political theory, oriented as it is around the hubris of the 'Western liberal tradition' in relation to its 'others.' In the Anglophone world, comparative political theory largely got its bearings with the publication of Roxanne Euben's *Enemy in the Mirror* in 1999. Euben sought a new hermeneutic for grappling with Islamic fundamentalism, a body of thought seen – according to Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations framework – as the irreconcilably non-Western 'other' *par excellence*.<sup>7</sup> Taking inspiration from Fred Dallmayr's hermeneutical efforts to foster a 'dialogue among civilizations,' Euben responded to a sense that the West's cultural self-understanding as modern, open, and pluralist was grounded in a simultaneous disavowal and projection of traditionalist, closed, and intolerant values onto the Islamic other. Comparative political theory, Euben argued, could serve as a means to trouble the hubristic self-certainties of the contemporary West, by showing how those excluded others represented as bearers of a basically hostile theoretical tradition could, in fact, illuminate vital lessons about the

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<sup>7</sup> Euben, Roxanne Leslie. *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999.

limits of the universalist Enlightenment political concepts undergirding liberal democracy.

Much has changed since 1999. The illegal pursuit of anti-terrorist ‘forever wars,’ growing economic inequality and financial instability, the rise of right-wing authoritarianism, and the failure to address impending ecological collapse have shaken the West’s confidence in the solidity of its own liberal democratic traditions to the core. The celebratory mood during the post-Cold War third wave of democratization has given way to intensifying anxieties over democratic backsliding in the very heartlands of Western liberalism. Further challenging erstwhile Western triumphalism, the power best able to challenge US global influence – China – has steadfastly refused to match economic liberalization with predicted political democratization. Against three decades of commentary predicting its collapse, the Chinese Communist Party still holds sway over an illiberal party-state whose Sinicized Marxist-Leninist political culture and institutions arguably enjoy more domestic hegemony today than ever before. Little wonder, then, that the formerly *civilizational* fault-lines drawn across the geopolitical map by Huntington have once more given way to a binary framed as an alternative between two antagonistic *political systems*. Anxieties over liberal democracy’s future have now blossomed into a ‘new Cold War’ – the Russian invasion of Ukraine is seen as a dress rehearsal for China’s ambition to violently incorporate Taiwan into the mainland, and the specter of these authoritarian revisionist powers has galvanized faith in the coherency of the liberal West even as the actual resilience of its political institutions has flagged. The brief reprieve at the ‘End of

History,' when comparison took place within a basically liberal global system containing competing cultures, seems to be ending.<sup>8</sup>

This panoramic survey shows that the stakes of doing comparative political theory are very different today than they were twenty years ago. Challenges to the narrowly 'Western' political theory canon can no longer merely be made with reference to excluded *civilizational* frameworks. Instead, comparative political theory must expand its horizons to grapple with the 'non-Western' *political system* which, arguably, served as the pre-eminent enemy in the mirror during the formation of the discipline: the communist tradition. A political theorist who came closest to pursuing such a goal, writing around the same time as Euben, was Susan Buck-Morss, whose *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) could be described as a 'comparative' staging of the self-destructive "mass utopias" of both the liberal West and the communist East at the moment the confrontational stance that mutually sustained them was passing into history. The constellation drawn out by Buck-Morss counterposes two distinct "imaginaries" of sovereignty": a spatial imaginary based on the state's territorial control in the West, and a temporal imaginary based on the party-state's control of historical progress in the East. Sovereign legitimacy thus did not mean monopolizing force in a territorial jurisdiction, but instead concentrating the rule of civil society over the law in order to continuously maintain the image of the sovereign body situated in

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<sup>8</sup> For a more nuanced and up-to-date account of the stakes of comparative political theory, see the introduction in Jenco, Leigh K., Murad Idris, and Megan C. Thomas, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*. Oxford Handbooks. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Jenco, Idris, and Thomas are critical of the reification of cultural traditions in this subfield, however they do not historicize its categories in the way that I have tried to briefly sketch here.

the vanguard of history.<sup>9</sup> Drawing together West and East in this way, Buck-Morss illustrates how a shared imaginary of sovereign power undermined the utopian visions of both, albeit in divergent ways, indicating the need to move beyond it in the twenty-first century. But as we find ourselves deeper into that century, at a time when many of the sureties regarding liberal democratic institutions are being called into question, it is no longer enough to treat communist theory merely as a paradigmatic case of revolutionary ideology's insensitivity to the challenges of ordinary political life.

Beyond its "grand narratives" and "utopian illusions," my wager is that histories of communist thought can be written that speak to many of today's vital concerns. There are at least three similar approaches to this archive that all differ in instructive ways from what I am attempting to do here. First, there is what I call a 'therapeutic' approach: 'working through' the impasses of revolution's recension from contemporary consciousness by treating the left's lingering 'melancholia' over the 'lost object' of conquering state power to abolish capitalist exploitation. These are often framed as cultural and social histories of the left seeking to rescue more modest horizons of emancipation from the grandiose teleology of Marxist-Leninist theory.<sup>10</sup> Second, there is what I call a 'militant' approach: those who construct an equality-seeking politics of rupture with the present liberal democratic order, but do so based on different philosophical grounds than Marxist historical materialism.<sup>11</sup> Third, and

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<sup>9</sup> Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002. 23-30.

<sup>10</sup> Exemplary here is Traverso, Enzo. *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016 and its follow-up, Traverso, Enzo. *Revolution: An Intellectual History*. Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars associated with the early 2010's 'Idea of Communism' conference series are exemplary here, including Alain Badiou, Jodi Dean, and Bruno Bosteels. See Badiou, Alain. *The Communist Hypothesis*. Translated by David Macey and Steve Corcoran. London; New York: Verso, 2015; Dean,

perhaps most well-established, is the ‘critical Marxist’ approach: the commitment to treating Marx’s critique of political economy as a philosophical source for an emancipatory politics, while distancing it from the ideological movements that were carried out by ‘Marxists’ in his name.<sup>12</sup> There are aspects of each of these approaches that resonate with what I am doing in this dissertation, and these will become clear in the chapters that follow. But here it is worth getting clear on how I depart from them. First, each of these approaches seems to invoke a communist tradition only to set itself up in critical opposition to it. By contrast, I narrate a history plotted around precisely the canonical moments of this theoretical tradition. Second, the gesture of negating communism tends to be undertaken in pursuit of a more coherent or authentic solidarity with various social movements and actors that go under the name of ‘the left.’ By contrast, the concept around which I organize this engagement with communism’s canonical archive is that which has invariably been construed as its weak-point: the representative ideal of the revolutionary vanguard.

### **Vanguardism in Theories of Democratic Representation**

For my purposes, democratic theory seems a more fruitful terrain on which to draw comparisons with the ‘foreign’ tradition of communism. The point of linking revolutionary socialism to representative democracy is that it directly challenges one of the most basic assumptions about communism: that it names a utopian horizon in

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Jodi. *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*. London; New York: Verso, 2019; Bosteels, Bruno. *The Actuality of Communism*. London ; New York: Verso Books, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> The literature here is obviously too vast to cite, but see especially the first generation of the Frankfurt school and the various other Western Marxists. I engage with some more contemporary inheritors of these traditions in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

which autonomy and democracy are fused. A harmony of interests in a post-scarcity world freed from capitalist exploitation would allow self-legislation to occur almost immediately. When, according to prevailing theoretical trends, we think of democracy as an interminable experience of dissensus and contestation, only ever finding transitory expression in constitutional or legislative form, communism cannot but appear as the temptation to artificially bring such experiences to an end according to this utopian logic. “Species being” is, undoubtedly, a fine ideal to strive for, but every time actually-existing actors have called it time for its “realization,” the results have been disastrous. The explanations are almost too familiar to bear repeating: Marxists believe in a proletarian subject that simultaneously embodies the general will and pursues the general interest; when either or both of these conditions fail to materialize (which they more or less always do), Marxists take shortcuts, substituting their particular organization for the general proletarian class. Thus the vanguard party is born: in the moment of decision when the power to legislate is seized on behalf of a general will that cannot be verified according to any recognizable procedures. The vanguard party’s temporary dictatorship would give rise to communist autonomy, but it would require the complete *deprivation* of autonomy to arrive there, and the totalitarian concentration of power by one unaccountable agent: the vanguard party.

On this view, the utterances from Gorbachev and Deng with which I introduced this project can be seen as the coming apart of the two sides of the dialectic that the communist vanguard party thought it could master: the voluntaristic conviction that the people had a general will that the dictatorship of the proletarian party could faithfully enact, on the one side, and the technocratic optimism that society

could be rationally administered, on the other. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty long ago wrote, communism “could not maintain itself at that *sublime point* which it hoped it could find in the life of the Party, that point where matter and spirit would no longer be discernible as subject and object, individual and history, discipline and judgment; and therefore the opposites which it was to unite fall away from each other.”<sup>13</sup> Against Trotsky’s extension of this “sublime moment” when “the will to change the world finds confederates everywhere” into the “myth of permanent revolution,” Merleau-Ponty questioned whether one could “conceive of a continued, of an established, flow, of a regime that would live at this level of tension.” “For those who are not professional politicians, there is work and leisure, war and peace, movement and rest, and for them permanent revolution is a pretext for violence,” he goes on; “In principle, therefore, it is only in privileged moments that negativity actually descends into history and becomes a way of life. The rest of the time, it is represented by bureaucrats.”<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s mid-century phenomenological critique of the Marxist dialectic was thus meant to demonstrate the misguidedness of the Trotskyist faith that it was only the historical contingencies of the October revolution’s failure to spread internationally – and the structures this allowed for opportunists to exploit the revolution – that caused the Bolshevik party to maintain the ‘sublime point’ of fusion with its class conscious vanguard as leader of the exploited masses. In the decades that followed, however, this French discourse of ‘anti-totalitarianism’ would transform into a more thorough-going and sophisticated theoretical appreciation of democratic

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<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973. 72-3.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 90.

representation. The struggle among dissident leftists against totalitarianism was no longer articulated as an intra-left opposition to Stalinist bureaucratization in the *Parti Communiste Français*, but was now traced back to the very idea of popular sovereignty underpinning the revolutionary left as a whole. In Kevin Duong's words, "voluntarism, not bureaucracy, became the culprit that imposed unity onto irreducible social division"; in other words, the "monstrous autonomy of the political" no longer referred to the outgrowth of a pseudoscientific "higher law" which "usurps the will," but instead named "the emancipated will itself."<sup>15</sup>

The constant danger of democracy sliding into dictatorship – of pedagogical minorities attempting to incarnate particular representations of 'the people' – was taken up by Merleau-Ponty's student Claude Lefort, perhaps the most influential 'anti-totalitarian' democratic theorist. In Lefort's concept of the "revolutionary imaginary," articulated in his 1986 *Essais sur le politique*, democratic dictatorship begins from the desire for an absolute beginning, for the power to situate oneself at a point of origin clearly demarcated from that which came before.<sup>16</sup> But the revolutionary new can only define itself by negating the *ancien régime*, and therefore can only understand itself as a "destruction-advent": a birth which simultaneously requires the clearing away of all that it deems reactionary and traditional. Society, under this imaginary, is represented as a field where the old and the new can be clearly discerned, and 'the people' as enlightened subjects of the future – the "new man whose vocation is to

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<sup>15</sup> Duong, Kevin. "DOES DEMOCRACY END IN TERROR?' TRANSFORMATIONS OF ANTITOTALITARIANISM IN POSTWAR FRANCE." *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 2 (August 2017): 537–63. 559.

<sup>16</sup> Lefort, Claude. *Democracy and Political Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988. 96.

become a universal historical agent” – needs to be separated out from the particular, egoistic man still living in the unenlightened past. This leads to a contradiction between the empirical people – in which this egoistic element remains unfortunately mixed – and the people as purified, historical subject of the revolutionary imaginary. As Lefort writes, “the people are what they are only insofar as they extract themselves, thanks to their vigilance, from the empirical society in which they are embedded.”<sup>17</sup> Since the unitary image of the ‘good’ people requires an external ‘bad’ people against which to define itself, the corollary of popular vigilance is the enemy plot, and any obstacles to the formation of a popular will are imputed to the evil external will behind this plot.<sup>18</sup>

Terror results from the attempt to ground the secularization of political power in any positive vision. Lefort sees the revolutionary imaginary as fatally misinterpreting the historical emergence of democratic legitimacy: the passing of traditional sovereign authority literally incarnated in the figure of the king indicates the indeterminacy of authority itself. Although politics has been disentangled from the external, transcendent grounding it had during the *ancien regime*, “the one thing which remains hidden from the age of the scientific observer is the symbolic form which, as a result of this mutation in power, makes this distinction possible: the essence of the political.”<sup>19</sup> Any attempt to *represent* the power of the people legitimating democratic politics, Lefort argues – even via the most seemingly scientifically-sound means – will set up a teleological occlusion of the necessarily *empty* space of the political.

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<sup>17</sup> Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 108.

<sup>18</sup> Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 106-7.

<sup>19</sup> Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 227-228.

For François Furet, Lefort's historian interlocutor throughout his reflections on the revolutionary tradition, the spectre of democratic terror meant that any political organizing undertaken by intellectuals would lead to dangerous 'illusions'. He thus described the philosophical societies that were the Enlightenment-era wellspring of Jacobin rule as "tools for producing unanimous opinion", drawing a red thread between such societies and the pseudo-scientific socialism or racism of totalitarian revolutionary parties in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> To capture its theological connotations, we can call this an "apocalyptic" conception of vigilance. It rests on what Furet calls a "lay eschatology" developed by Enlightenment "*philosophes-prophètes*" who foretold a coming age of equality as the "regeneration" and "reversal" of the hierarchical old regime. Drawing on the insights of Burke and Tocqueville, Furet describes how hopes of thoroughgoing social transformation based on an abstract principle of equality were fomented by these prophets in pre-revolutionary clubs and societies cut off from concrete experiences of political life, and how this rendered them incapable of acting as responsible political representatives once parliamentary institutions began to form in 1789. "Members of the sections and of the clubs acted [instead] as the embodiment of the people, as vigilant sentinels," Furet writes, and "the power to govern legitimately was directly related to the ability to keep up the denunciation of the aristocrat's plot" (1981: 55). This preoccupation with popular vigilance precluded reasonable deliberation among parliamentary deputies,

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<sup>20</sup> Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 112-4. The attack on intellectual societies as the anti-political source of intellectual domination derives from Furet's reading of the *fin-de-siècle* historian Augustin Cochin (1876-1916) – Lefort is rejecting, here, Furet's embrace of Cochin's radical thesis that the 'great events' of the Revolution were organized by elite clubs and therefore could not be interpreted as authentic expressions of democratic politics.

transforming legitimate opposition against representatives of specific interests into illegitimate conspiracy against the general will. Furet's anti-totalitarianism thus interprets popular vigilance as a parsing of the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction, a dictatorial and exceptional form of popular sovereignty based on the voluntarist representation of a unitary general will.

But Lefort takes a firm stance against Furet here, pointing out that the role of such organisations is much less clear cut than the historian imagines: they led not only to the organization of politics around the unification of opinion, but also opened up vital spaces for social critique: "the new irrigation of the social fabric by associations which took it upon themselves to analyse the problems of political life ...". The fine line between what we have been calling the strong and weak authoritarian function of such groups is, he argues, part of the "indeterminacy" which in fact characterizes democracy itself – the habits of social critique upon which the open experience of democratic life depends always run the risk of spilling over into their own self-stultification under the imperative to turn political deliberation into a war between pre-formed unanimous opinions.

We could interpret a pluralist, 'post-Marxist' role for 'vanguardism' within Lefort's associational conception of intellectual leadership as adhering to a basic liberal distinction between state and civil society. This would be similar to what Jürgen Habermas, in his own appropriation of Lefort's philosophy, would describe as a "fully dispersed" popular sovereignty: in place of "avantgarde parties" cultivating sovereign bodies to *conquer* administrative power, the "cultural dynamics of opinion-forming avantgardes" should constantly *besiege* decision-making institutions through

the communicative power of a ratio-critical public sphere.<sup>21</sup> This form of power – wielded by “indirect” avantgardes following communicative procedures of mutual understanding – permits the progressive expansion of egalitarian norms without the intellectual domination of an a priori rationality being imposed ‘from without.’ Unlike the ‘constitutional patriotism’ of Habermas, though, Lefort refuses to provide any clues as to the normative definition of such a standard: his point is precisely to invite us to dwell on the “gap in the being of the world which we still experience,” and to participate in “an open-ended debate as to the foundations of legitimacy, a debate which means that democracy can never be purely a matter of institutions.”<sup>22</sup> This, as we shall see, is what makes his democratic theory so useful for contemporary theorists trying to get beyond the prevalence of normative and deliberative theorizing in the vein of Habermas. But recent scholarship on Lefort also reveals that his approach to theorizing the unavoidable “gap” in democratic experience itself places limits on the horizon of political possibility.

On Lefort’s view, the state serves as the site where the symbolic unity of society is staged. As Antoon Braeckman puts it, his political philosophy is “a hermeneutics of society in which the state acts as an essential interpretive tool.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the real heterogeneity that exists in society’s messy plurality *misrecognizes* itself as a unified entity through the prism of the state. But this does not

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<sup>21</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996. 486-489.

<sup>22</sup> Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 114.

<sup>23</sup> Braeckman, Antoon. “The Hermeneutics of Society: On the State in Lefort’s Political Theory.” *Constellations* 25, no. 2 (June 2018): 242–55. 243.

imply the possibility of ‘proper’ recognition: society is structurally incapable of transparently representing itself to itself, and therefore has no option but to imperfectly *mis*-represent itself via the state. To oversimplify, Lefort’s account draws on the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s basic lesson about ‘lack’: the impossible-to-satisfy desire for wholeness constitutes human subjectivity, as the imaginary sense of inhabiting a state that would satisfy this desire is sought in the various representations available among the order of symbols into which we are born. Being a human subject – entering into the realm of symbolic exchange by occupying the place of the pronoun “I” – necessitates, at least in the moment of exchange itself, the misrecognition that the symbolic might signify my desire without remainder. Lefort applies this insight about the symbolic to the division between state and society: the state, like the ego, is the necessary fiction that allows society to imagine itself as whole.

Key to understanding this analogy is Lefort’s idiosyncratic use of the term ‘state’: not to describe empirically-identifiable sets of governing institutions, but rather to identify a society’s specific *mise en forme*, or how it is ‘shaped’. The *ancien regime*, democracy, and totalitarianism are modern society’s three regimes of ‘shaping.’ In the first of these, society views itself as an incarnated body, mystically united through the king’s symbolic presence. In other words, there is no awareness that misrecognition is taking place: political life proceeds as if the state were perfectly capable of giving body to the real existence of society. It is only in democracy that the irreducible gap between state and society is accounted for in the very shaping of the state itself. The state appears as an “empty place of power”, whose occupants cannot take the form of a concrete body and instead shift according to the diverse desires

registered by the institution of elections. Society still misrecognises itself, as is its lot, but – at a concrete institutional level – this misrecognition is reflexively acknowledged as something to be repeatedly navigated rather than repressed. But the democratic regime must constantly defend itself against the revolutionary imaginary which, as we saw above, attempts to occupy the empty place of power with an incarnated image of the ‘people-as-One’.

Lefort’s phenomenological statism limits our understanding of the representation of the people in democratic theory. Salih Gerçek usefully distinguishes between ‘subject-oriented’ and ‘world-oriented’ readings of flesh in the work of Lefort’s mentor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>24</sup> He shows that Lefort takes the former path, leading to a focus – inflected, as we saw, by Lacan – on the lack and indeterminacy of the social. The notion of flesh is a way of undermining any solid incarnation of the ‘people-as-One,’ since it forces acknowledgement that such a self-sufficient bodily form is an impossible illusion. Politically, this translates to the democratic imperative to always hold open the ‘empty space’ of power. The latter, world-oriented reading of flesh, however, goes one step further. This path, which Gerçek claims Lefort misses in his mentor’s work, sees such indeterminacy as not merely the impossibility of stably representing the popular sovereign subject, but – in addition – as proliferating sites for the creative production of multiple manifestations of political subjectivity. In Gerçek’s words, “the ultimate shortcoming of this account of democratic politics is its failure to explain how the experience of democratic

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<sup>24</sup> Gerçek, Salih Emre. “From Body to Flesh: Lefort, Merleau-Ponty, and Democratic Indeterminacy.” *European Journal of Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (October 2020): 571–92.

indeterminacy can be an opportunity for expanding the places and experiences of collective subjectivity.”<sup>25</sup> Jason Frank makes a similar argument: for him, “Lefort’s attempt to reveal the logic of incarnation as fundamentally incompatible with the symbolic transfiguration of modern democracy nonetheless remains, through its very opposition, invested in the political-theological framing he seeks to contest.”<sup>26</sup> Does the politics of vanguardism, then, attempt to ‘incarnate’ society, effacing democracy’s properly indeterminate place of power by bringing about a determinate representation of the sovereign popular body? Or does it instead highlight the polyvalent “flesh” of democratic practice, helping to construct the sense of a shared world for action in concert? I want to suggest that there is no reason to believe that – historically – vanguardism could name both; but the very self-evidence of the first option has left us unable to acknowledge the surprising fact that we might *also* be able to think about vanguardism in the second way.

One way to approach this insight is through Jacques Rancière’s democratic theory. Like Lefort, Rancière also affirms a ‘radical gap’ in political experience. And, like Lefort, his well-known account of democracy as ‘dissensus’ affirms a strong distinction between sociological explanation and the experience of democracy. It is only the appearance of the ‘part which has no part’ in reigning ‘partitions of the sensible’, and the reconfiguring power of such ‘miscounts,’ that constitutes the political for Rancière; activity that relies on pre-politically established representations

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<sup>25</sup>Gerçek, ‘From Body to Flesh,’ 585.

<sup>26</sup> Frank, Jason A. *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021. 33. Gerçek also stresses the similarities between the insights he draws from Merleau-Ponty and Frank’s notion of ‘the living image of the people’.

of society is merely regulatory ‘policing’. Crucially, though, he does not relate this experience of democratic indeterminacy to any particular spatial or historical form in the way that Lefort does. In doing so, he shifts the terrain upon which we might imagine avant-gardism as operating: no longer as an operative in the modern drama of secular progress, but instead as a practice of intersubjective ‘world-making’.

To begin drawing out these differences, I quote here at length Rancière’s commentary on Lefort’s ‘empty place of power’:

... there is really no reason to identify such indetermination with a sort of catastrophe in the symbolic linked to the revolutionary disembodiment of the ‘double body’ of the king. We need to dissociate democratic disruption and disidentification from this theatre of sacrifice that originally ties the emergence of democracy to the great spectres of the re-embodiments staged by terrorism and totalitarianism of a body torn asunder. And this duality is not the Christian duality of the celestial body and the earthly body: it is the duality of a social body and a body that now displaces any social identification.<sup>27</sup>

Rancière radicalizes Lefort’s interpretation of the political, assigning the indeterminacy constitutive of politics a transhistorical status; he thus seems to reject the shared horizon of ‘modernity’ which, despite its ban on particular organizations formulating progressively-oriented transformative subjectivities, nonetheless undergirds the legitimacy of democracy as a secularizing break with the *ancien regime*. Martín Plot thus takes issue with Rancière’s seemingly ahistorical critique of

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<sup>27</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999. 100.

Lefort, for “the simple reasons that all politics adopts a historical form and that we have no access to a point of view from where we could make such a claim.”<sup>28</sup>

Rancière is explicit throughout *Disagreement* that the regime-types which have always fascinated political philosophy only capture *police* and never *politics*, and even the expansive sense in which the term ‘regime’ is used by Lefort – as the epiconstitutional, phenomenological *mise en forme* according to which a society interprets itself – cannot account for the stagings (*mises en scene*) of disidentification that interest him. As the more recent round of Anglophone Rancière interpreters have made clear,<sup>29</sup> this is no refusal of forms in the name of ‘purity’ or ‘rupture’ – nothing akin to the eternal struggle between virtuous social spontaneity and statist discipline. Rancière’s rejection of historical regimes in politics is instead transplanted onto the terrain of historical regimes in *aesthetics*.

Rancière sees that, underlying Lefort’s political transition regime schema – the regicidal rupture between the old, theological-absolutist regime and the modern, secular-democratic; one old, representable monarch to new, un-representable *demos* – is a “simple line of transition or rupture between the old and the new, the representative and the non-representative or the anti-representative” which undergirds the notion of modernity in *art*, the paradigm of which is “the transition to non-figurative representation in painting.”<sup>30</sup> But – and here is the absolutely essential point

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<sup>28</sup> Plot, Martín. *The Aesthetico-Political: The Question of Democracy in Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 101.

<sup>29</sup> See Chambers, Samuel Allen. *The Lessons of Rancière*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; Panagia, Davide. *Rancière’s Sentiments*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London ; New York: Continuum, 2006. 19.

of Rancière's theory of artistic regime change – the notion of modernity “seems to have been deliberately invented to prevent a clear understanding of the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience.” This is what he calls the transition from the “representative regime” to the “aesthetic regime” of art.

While “the notions of modernity and the avant-garde” see the break with mimetic art as akin to “the revolutionary severing of the king's head as a severing of tradition in the history of humanity,”<sup>31</sup> the transition Rancière detects comes from a shift “in the distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in social occupations” – the ‘representative regime’ establishes the appropriate hierarchies for the artisanal practices that we today call ‘art’, ensuring their incorporation into “a fully hierarchical vision of the community.” What sets apart the aesthetic regime, for Rancière, is that it “identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres.” And yet, “it simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.”<sup>32</sup> For him, the “unsurpassable reference” in this shift is Schiller's formulation, in the wake of the French revolution's failed regenerative republicanism, of a “specific mode of living in the sensible world that must be developed by ‘aesthetic education’ in order to train men susceptible to live in a free community.”<sup>33</sup> Artisanal practices are no longer expressions of particular partitions within established police orders, but instead – in being rendered autonomous – take on the role of shaping the form of life

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<sup>31</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22.

*itself*. It was this change in regimes of art that “produced a new idea of political revolution: the material realization of a common humanity still only existing as an idea.”<sup>34</sup>

When viewed from under neither the notion of modernity, nor the regime of democracy, but rather from the perspective of the aesthetic regime of art, the “convenient connection” in “the concept of the avant-garde” between “the artistic idea of innovation and the idea of politically guided change” appears less logical. There is, underlying it, a “covert connection” uniting the former’s “invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come,” on the one hand, with the latter’s topographical or militaristic interpretation of the historical requirements for subjective political orientation on the other.<sup>35</sup> In other words, avant-gardism refers to an ongoing conflict between the desire to build representations as blueprints for structures to house the coming utopian community, and the desire to wield a superior “intelligence” to represent the strategic situation for present-day politics.<sup>36</sup> These are related, in turn, to “two different ideas of subjectivity”: “a party” as “a form of political intelligence that sums up the essential conditions for political change”, on the one hand, and “global political subjectivity” as “the potentiality inherent in the innovative

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<sup>34</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> The tension between political and aesthetic avant-gardism has been noted by numerous scholars. Raymond Williams, for example, suggests that the only stable referent bringing these two diverse groups together was a general hostility to bourgeois culture’s ascendancy in the second half of the nineteenth century. The libertarian creative spirit of artists often came into conflict with the need for political groups’ desire for organised political action, and would, as with the Italian Futurists’ contributions to fascism, lead to deep involvement in right wing movements. When looking at the artistic avantgardes in the specific context of the Second International, Eric Hobsbawm cites the Arts and Crafts Movement, centred around the Englishman William Morris, as the place where “new politics and new arts converged,” since this style “provided much of the internationally current iconographic vocabulary of the social democratic movement” – the more famous representatives of the avant-garde, by contrast, did not feel at home in this mass organization.

sensible modes that anticipate a community to come.”<sup>37</sup> But it is only a third idea – that of modernity – that prevents us from seeing how these two ideas of subjectivity exist in a productive tension, since “it would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities.”<sup>38</sup> Interpreting avant-gardism outside of the unitary temporal movement implied by the idea of modernity, in other words, reveals a field of subjectivating practices in constant tension with one another, across a proliferation of different sites. But because his experiments in political aesthetics grew out of a post-1968 disillusionment with Marxism, Rancière never extended his search for ‘world-making’ theoretical resources into the communist ‘ideological’ archive of vanguard *politics*; it is this historical work that I attempt to pursue in this dissertation.

### **Proletarian Vanguardism: Beyond ‘Totalitarian’ Vigilance**

As already intimated, my return to the archive of communist vanguardism – and my desire to break out of the anti-totalitarian framework – is motivated by the contemporary ‘crisis’ of representative democracy. It is within the context of the ‘constructivist’ or ‘symbolic’ turn in theories of democratic representation that I want to reintroduce the idea of proletarian vanguardism. In most accounts of the contemporary crisis of democratic representation, the transition to a post-industrial society – and the corollary dissolution of the antagonism between labor and capital – is invoked as one of the defining factors contributing to the decline of party systems

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<sup>37</sup> Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 21.

capable of initiating positive projects in the name of substantial constituencies. Am I really suggesting, with a straight face, that the notion of a ‘proletarian vanguard’ has any relevance to our contemporary political landscape? How is this still relevant in an era where class identity is no longer salient? Throughout the dissertation, I do not treat class as a sociological category. I affirm the observation that ‘the proletariat’ is, indeed, a purely symbolic identity, one that relied on a particular constellation of material conditions but that exceeded and in many cases subverted them. But my focus is on *how* this identity was constructed in terms of its potential as a vanguard. This means looking at a certain neglected dimension of the ‘class struggle’: namely, the idea that ‘proletarians’ made better vanguards than ‘non-proletarians.’

In 1995, Rancière declared that the post-Cold War triumph of liberal democratic institutions over totalitarianism would in fact better be described as “post-democracy.” This is because democracy, for Rancière, names “not a set of institutions or one kind of regime among others but a way for politics to be” – “a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies as a community that we proposed to conceptualize in the broader concept of the police.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, the collapse of totalitarianism’s voluntarist myths about a ‘real’ popular sovereign did not lead, as one might expect, to “increased attachment to the institutional mechanisms of the sovereignty of the people and principally to parliamentary forms of control,” but rather to a disaffectedness with such mechanisms. “The paradox is this,” Rancière writes: “at the time the institutions of parliamentary representation were being contested, when the notion that these were ‘mere forms’ held sway, they were nonetheless the object of

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<sup>39</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 99.

a *vastly superior militant vigilance*. We have seen generations of militant socialists and communists battle fiercely for a constitution, rights, institutions, and institutional mechanisms that they otherwise claimed expressed the power of the bourgeoisie and of capital.”<sup>40</sup> Unpacking this paradox will help – and putting it into comparison with more recent anti-totalitarian approaches to the crisis of representative democracy – will elucidate the stakes of this dissertation’s recuperation of the communist tradition’s concept of proletarian vanguardism.

On the one hand, for Rancière, the vigilance of militant socialists and communists arises from their commitment to overthrowing the ‘mere forms’ of representative government – the familiar dynamic of Lefort’s ‘revolutionary ideology’ analyzed above. This is what Rancière calls the “metapolitics” of Marxism, which construes a “real” social content gestating beneath the illusory “democratic appearances” of political forms, the “old mole” of the agents of social revolution breaking through the false universalism of bourgeois democracy to institute an authentically universal proletarian democracy where “the content matches the phrase.”<sup>41</sup> The lie of bourgeois democracy’s popular sovereignty is counterposed to its ‘meta’ or other, the truth of the class struggle driven by the proletariat to the point that the lie can no longer be sustained.<sup>42</sup> “The metapolitical interpretation of the internal division of the people divides any political scene in two,” Rancière writes: “there are those who play the game of forms ... and those who direct the action designed to

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<sup>40</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 97. Emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> This is the way Marx put it in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, a text Lenin’s appraisal of which I will engage with in Chapter Two.

<sup>42</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 84.

eradicate the play of forms.”<sup>43</sup> The direction of this proletarian subject – as the “declassifying class” – toward “politics’ reincorporation into the social” culminated in “the most radical figure of the archipolice order,” which we might assume means totalitarian communism.<sup>44</sup> Similarly to Lefort, then, it seems that Rancière views this militant vigilance as – whatever collateral benefits it may have brought – a totalitarian invasion of the political by the social.

But the other side of the paradox is that the social and workers’ movement also entailed what Rancière describes as a properly political dynamic, figured above all “in its key word, proletarian.” “From the political point of view,” he writes, “proletarian is a specific occurrence of the demos, a democratic subject, performing a demonstration of its power in the construction of worlds of litigious community, universalizing the issue of the count of the uncounted, beyond any regulation, short of infinite wrong.” Rather than simply positing the ‘lie’ of liberal democracy’s mismatch between formal and substantive equality, and the ‘truth’ of the proletariat as the social identity that could do away with this lie, the archive of socialism – insofar as it consists of claims made on behalf of the proletariat as a part that had no business partaking in the formal “egalitarian text” – did the political work of “reconfigur[ing] the relationships between the visible and the invisible.”<sup>45</sup> During what Rancière calls the “age of social revolution,” in the context of an industrializing society, the naturalized function of “the proletarian” as the propertyless worker unworthy of participating in representative government could be “the privileged name under which this liaison was

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<sup>43</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 90.

performed” as “one of those subject names that organize a dispute: not the name of some universal victim, but rather the name of a universalizing subject of wrong.” This is not to dismiss the “egalitarian text,” but rather “to invent a new place for it: the polemical space of a demonstration that holds equality and its absence together.”<sup>46</sup> The holding open of this “democratic gap” is what allows for the manifestation of ‘the people’ in its materiality, not as a unitary sovereign body overthrowing the existing regime, but instead as an endless re-duplication of what it means to live in a society of equals. If the socialist movement had the habit of translating these demonstrations into the historical logic of denouncing the untruth of liberal democracy from the perspective of a social revolution to come, it “has not itself ceased being reinterpreted, offering matter and form for other ways of playing the gap and obliterating it.”<sup>47</sup>

What democracy’s triumph over totalitarianism entailed, for Rancière, was the loss of this double-sided proletarian claim – not merely the final relinquishing of the positive metapolitics that hoped to replace illusory representative democracy with social revolution, but also the absolutization of a *negative* metapolitics that reduced all claims and declarations to an ordered regime of public opinion and representative mechanisms. The regnant “consensus” democracy of the 1990s was thus, for Rancière, a “postdemocracy,” “a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people ... [a regime where] they are entirely caught in a structure of the visible where everything is on show and where there is thus no longer any place for appearance.”<sup>48</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon – Lefort’s most prominent student today – has

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<sup>46</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 88-89.

<sup>47</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 102-103.

similarly emphasized the corrosive effects of democratic minimalism's reduction of 'the people' to mechanisms for the apportionment of interests based on measures of public opinion. Rosanvallon has updated the anti-totalitarian deference for the 'empty place of power' to include not only the threat of voluntarist claims to unitary popular sovereignty, but also their corollary: the evacuation of popular sovereignty via the drive to establish what he calls an "order of capacities." But he also explicitly rejects Rancière's diagnosis of contemporary postdemocracy, instead arguing for the salience of "a different type of depoliticization" that he calls "counter-democracy."

This idea is meant to capture the series of political experiments, rooted in ancient Athens and extending to today, that "understand sovereignty in terms of a dynamic and potentially conflictual relationship between a representative power and a power of oversight, both emanating from the people."<sup>49</sup> To differentiate distrustful counter-powers complementary to electoral democracy from those hostile to it, Rosanvallon makes a conceptual distinction between two kinds of vigilance: one that stems from a belief that the political world is, in principle, something that can be rendered fully "transparent," and one that pursues the more modest end of increasing its "legibility." The demand for transparency risks effacing the empty place of power by encouraging either of the voluntarist or rationalist attempts at simplifying social conflict described above. The demand for legibility, on the other hand, is oriented toward a clear appreciation for the complexities of political decision-making in a modern, pluralistic society.<sup>50</sup> It entails "permit[ting] individuals ... to gain insight into

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<sup>49</sup> Rosanvallon, Pierre. *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 92.

<sup>50</sup> Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*, 22-4.

the difficulties encountered in trying to bring into existence a society of equals through the informed design and implementation of redistributive measures.”<sup>51</sup> Rosanvallon thus posits that popular mistrust can become politically productive when it is itself “disenchanted”: i.e., combined with a hard-nosed awareness of the complex processes by which emancipatory goals are realized. When citizens have internalized this realist sensibility, their diffuse oversight can bolster electoral institutions rather than undermining them by keeping an *informed* eye on representatives’ conduct. Viable popular sovereignty thus requires protecting this healthy desire for a legible politics from the illusory temptation of rendering society completely transparent to popular oversight. If a transparency-seeking popular vigilance inhabits the sovereign realm of the *extra*-ordinary, the principle of legibility trains the eyes of the people to appreciate the *ordinary* challenges of political life.

What interests Rosanvallon, as a faithful student of Lefort, is the way that the “center stage” of the state conditions and structures these vigilant “counter-powers” in society. Unlike Rancière’s focus on postdemocracy, then, Rosanvallon examines the way that the rise of counterdemocracy is associated with a new political dynamic between state and society. Across his cycle of philosophical histories of democracy, he sees a fundamental change in the core principle animating democratic societies today: the electoral-representative relationship of authorization must be superseded by a relationship of ‘civic vigilance’ between governors and governed. It is this change – no less than a “second democratic revolution – that would allow counter-powers to

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<sup>51</sup> Rosanvallon, Pierre. *Good Government: Democracy beyond Elections*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018. 167.

function effectively, and in a relationship of complementarity, with more familiar liberal democratic institutions. With the hollowing out of traditional representative institutions, Rosanvallon notes that democracy is increasingly identified with oligarchic partisan competition over authorization to form government. Detached from the mass constituencies of the past, opposition parties prioritize positioning themselves as superior governors for the next election, neglecting their traditional function of holding governing parties to account or channeling the interests and identities of their bases. “Citizens wish to be able to penetrate the ‘black boxes’ of decision making,” Rosanvallon writes – this attitude of opacity breed distrust in all institutions of government.<sup>52</sup> Under these conditions, counter-powers tend to encourage what he calls “destructive legitimation,” under which “governments sacrifice some measure of status in order to signal that they are attentive to society’s needs.” In a democracy that privileges periodic authorization over persistent vigilance, the cycle of governments signaling their attentiveness to counter-powers is self-reinforcing: “in the end, the power of the political to institute the social is undermined” as a dialectic between demands for full transparency and the corroded political capacity to promote legibility unfolds.<sup>53</sup>

What Rosanvallon calls a society of “permanent democracy” that centers the principle of vigilance and legibility is thus a distinct alternative to one that centers periodic authorization via electoral mechanisms, and a more viable challenge to nascent authoritarian trends than reviving the atrophied institutions of liberal

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<sup>52</sup> Rosanvallon, *Good Government*, 157.

<sup>53</sup> Rosanvallon, *Counter-democracy*, 263-4.

democracy in their historical form. Following “a new interpretive framework for approaching the question of separation of powers in its properly societal context,” Rosanvallon— in the first book of his cycle – urges us to avoid “the assumption that of a ‘democratic seed’ that, once planted, automatically gives rise to the modern democratic regime.”<sup>54</sup> In the final book of his cycle, he ends up suggesting “civic vigilance organizations” as one way to think about this separation of powers: “watchdog groups devoted specifically to monitoring government performance ... and working to promote citizen involvement, training, and education.”<sup>55</sup> The symbolic turn in democratic theory has thus motivated renewed investigation into the history of democracy, reinterpreting how political life was rendered legible for a vigilant citizenry in the past in order to reimagine how this might happen in the present.

Interrogating the communist tradition of vanguardism, instead of assimilating it entirely to what Rosanvallon calls the “cult of insurrection,”<sup>56</sup> reveals it as invested in maintaining the ordinary vigilance of a legible society as much as the populist or totalitarian vigilance of a transparent one. But emphasizing as I do the *proletarian* quality of this vanguardism – in the sense in which Rancière opens up the possibilities for interpreting this key word in the contexts of socialism above – shows that the archive I am investigating in this dissertation can help us think about Rosanvallon’s ‘permanent democracy’ in a way that retains room for the appearance of the people in the political institution of the social. Moreover, Rosanvallon, in turn, bolsters the

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<sup>54</sup> Rosanvallon, *Counter-democracy*, 149-150.

<sup>55</sup> Rosanvallon, *Good Government*, 263.

<sup>56</sup> Rosanvallon, Pierre. *La démocratie inachevée: histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003. 127-154.

connection of these appearances to the central site through which politics is understood to take place in contemporary life – the state – without necessarily assimilating popular sovereignty to the incarnation of a unitary subject.

Moreover, despite emphasizing declarations of “the proletarian” class as the paradigmatic instance of the general claim of the part which has no part, Rancière more or less shares with Rosanvallon the sense that vanguardism belongs to this “insurrectionary culture” that reduced politics to a superior intelligence defining and issuing orders on behalf of the uncoun­ted. But what I show throughout this dissertation is that the language of ‘proletarian vanguardism’ – when not immediately connected to the dynamics of the vanguard party – is tied to a broader wager about the most reliable sources of ‘counterpower’ in modern commercial society. The main ‘quality’ of the proletariat, on this account, is its propensity to surveil the conduct of political representatives. If, as Rosanvallon puts it, “to govern means to make the world intelligible, to provide citizens with analytic and interpretive tools to help them make decisions and act effectively,”<sup>57</sup> then the designation ‘bourgeois’ – as the antithesis against which ‘the proletarian’ is declared – can simply refer to a style of governance, of office-holding, that tends not to recognize the importance of this work and therefore is less likely to undertake it.

By focusing on the concept of the vanguard, this dissertation does not seek to renovate or rediscover a particular form of political organization as a direct resource for political actors in the present. My goal is far more modest: I am merely trying to show that the questions communist actors turned to the concept of the vanguard to

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<sup>57</sup> Rosanvallon, *Good Government*, 307.

address were not the ones contemporary theorists assume. As a mode of making a representative claim, communist vanguardism was not fundamentally oriented – as is usually assumed – toward giving *voice* to the interests of its constituency. Instead, the key dimension that I uncover in this dissertation is the idea of a vanguard as an organizational principle based on fomenting and sustaining a relationship of ‘vigilance’ between elite and mass. Crucially, what I hope to show is that this relationship exceeds the specific party form with which vanguardism is most often associated. As we will see in Chapter Two, the party – first parliamentary, and then revolutionary – did, indeed, become the paradigmatic organizational form of vanguard agency. But by situating the early twentieth century moment of social democratic and communist revolutionary internationalism in the broader context that I reconstruct throughout the dissertation, I show that the claim to represent a constituency the pursuit of whose interests was the condition of universal social emancipation cannot be treated as the conceptual ‘core’ of vanguardism.

It may seem a glaring omission that the question of overcoming capitalism is only addressed obliquely, and not until the second chapter of the dissertation. Surely the whole metaphysics of the vanguard in communist thought was oriented toward the abolition of this economic system’s domination and exploitation, and the erection in its place of a more just society? Surely, indeed, the fragmentary threads I am treating as theoretical resources are merely epiphenomenal to the classless utopia at this ideology’s core? In trying to constellate a *theoretical* archive legible to the ‘generality’ of democratic theory, do I not render fuzzy the irreconcilable *practical* differences between communists and capitalists? By approaching this communist archive as,

primarily, a resource for political theory – at a greater distance from its practical contexts than most interpreters of communism have done – do I not glibly misread the most cherished stakes of the communist lifeworld, tendentially assimilating communist ideas to an essentially liberal political language more compatible with contemporary late capitalism?

My focus on “vigilance” as a ‘reactive,’ ‘judging,’ or ‘surveilling’ principle of popular power is, indeed, a step backward from the expansive visions of active, participatory, autonomous citizenship that so conspicuously characterize both the communist and liberal democratic projects of high modernity. And, to be sure, other analysts of this kind of power all acknowledge this.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps Jeffrey Green’s shift from the ‘voice’ of the people to its ‘eyes’ is the most arresting, with its insistence that we relinquish the dream of democratic institutions that allow for the participatory expression of the *vox populi* as an almost chimerical product of enlightenment optimism. Of course, to be more precise, the point is not to *relinquish* the dream but rather to acquire greater attentiveness to the ways of thinking about popular power that it marginalized and occluded. The relation between popular sovereignty and representative government, as many theorists have argued and continue to argue, was not simply the stark Madisonian opposition between an elective aristocracy capable of deliberation among diverse social voices and a demagogic rule of the majority enamored with the fantasy of voicing a general will. It required, as Madison himself

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<sup>58</sup> Beyond Rosanvallon, see also Green, Jeffrey E. *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; Pettit, Philip. *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. I engage more with Pettit in Chapter One.

suggested, navigating between institutions that would allow pluralism of *voice* with a political culture that jealously watched over the claims of *any* such voice. As many of these contemporary democratic theorists have been pointing out for some time now, the paradox of balancing power with counterpower – trust in institutions and officeholders with distrust – was precious to all the great liberal realists. Benjamin Constant and Max Weber, a century apart, had their own versions of it, and they continue to be *loci classici* for pondering these questions. But, where Constant and Weber are almost always juxtaposed against the “irresponsible” socialist and communist utopians of their own times, my wager is that there is much to be gained from troubling these interpretive binaries.

The problem of ‘supervising’ the conduct of state is thus a more restricted and, perhaps, more ancient way of figuring popular power than the more expansive visions of democratic sovereignty that have defined political modernity. For theorists interested in the experience of agency of the exercise of judgment, the centering of ‘administration’ in my discussion will, no doubt, come across as an impoverished and denuded account of democratic power. But such complaints are misplaced, for this dissertation is precisely an immanent critique of the more parsimonious conceptions of democratic representation. In other words, the conceptual map it draws between proletarian vanguardism and vigilance is meant to trouble some of the most basic and foundational assumptions about the institutions of representative democracy that, whether or not theorists supplement these with ‘deeper’ and ‘richer’ visions of popular sovereignty, remain the quintessential guideposts of our disciplinary and public discourses. And it is meant to do so in a way that releases theorizing about the

requirements of a democratic society from the long-vanished threats the specter of which continues to haunt these discourses as a new Cold War takes shape.

### **Chapter Outlines**

I begin my narrative of the proletarian vanguard with the first avowed communist to use this term: the most notorious revolutionary of nineteenth century France, Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881). Blanqui and Blanquism are usually associated with the conspiratorial sects of the Parisian underground that sought to restore the Jacobin revolutionary dictatorship via coups d'état of enlightened radical republicans. Focusing on his actual deployment of the term 'vanguard' in the 1860s, I instead situate Blanqui in the unfamiliar context of constitutional thought, showing how his model of proletarian vigilance is as much associated with the 'aristocracy' of the modern monarchy as with the *demos* of the ancient republic. In promoting a *proletarian vanguard*, I argue, Blanqui was resisting a powerful current within the republican opposition movement leading up to the foundation of the French Third Republic that attempted to empower a new, 'industrial' aristocracy. I show that it was an earlier effort to legitimize the most productive members of society as the new guarantors of liberty that the term 'vanguard' was first deployed in the political pamphlets of the industrial agitator Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825), and subsequently taken up by moderate republicans in their efforts to establish a minimalist electoral democracy that would exorcise the specter of revolutionary terror. Crucially, for Saint-Simon and his heirs, the industrial vanguard's empowerment in a mixed regime represented a historical transcendence of the need for a vigilant society altogether; the

science of society had unlocked a peaceful age in which popular sovereignty itself could be replaced by benevolent administration. Blanqui is often diametrically opposed to Saint-Simon – the former is said to express a voluntarist-populist mentality equally corrosive to the indeterminacy of ‘the political’ as the latter’s technocratic elitism. Without denying Blanqui’s commitment to revolutionary dictatorship, I argue that his distinct language of proletarian vigilance as an indispensable quality of democracy resisting the “stultification” of popular involvement in political life need not automatically result in revolutionary terror.

This unfamiliar account of the pre-Marxist communist concept of the proletarian vanguard sets up the second chapter, which jumps ahead a few decades to the historical moment in which the ‘Leninist’ vanguard party gained widespread conceptual coherence: the formation of the Third (Communist) International in the years 1917 to 1920. This chapter challenges the ways in which democratic theorists tend to interpret V.I. Lenin’s (1870-1924) notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, above all the idea that Lenin sought to incarnate the constituent power in the image of an enlightened proletarian vanguard knowable only to party initiates. I instead build on the conceptual framework I develop in the first chapter to show how Lenin conceived of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the system of representative government that would best ensure popular vigilance over elite conduct in an era of imperialist conflict. To make this interpretive argument, I reconstruct the broader of discourse of the vigilance of the proletarian vanguard as it was developed by the German social democratic thinker Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), who provided the most influential framework for thinking about representative government as the arena in which the

Marxist class struggle would play out. I argue that the fateful rift between communists and social democrats after the October 1917 Russian revolution – as represented in the polemics between Lenin and Kautsky, at least – revolved around the question of whether parliamentary or soviet institutions would best promote the vigilance that both camps agreed was the necessary condition for a democratic regime. Drawing out these unfamiliar aspects of this inflection point in political modernity takes on renewed importance today, as political theorists increasingly turn to the thought associated with twentieth century anti-colonial revolutionaries that often drew inspiration from Lenin’s call to shift the center of progressive historical gravity to the East.

The third and final chapter grapples with the event most spectacularly associated with communism’s totalitarian mobilization of a vigilant society against the enemies of the proletariat: the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This final campaign of the Maoist period remains the touchstone for the chaotic terror that communist party-states’ attempts to cleanse themselves of ‘bureaucratism’ through the orchestration of mass campaigns. Its initial reception in the West (especially in France) as an authentic attempt to revive an anti-imperialist mass movement communism, and subsequent disillusionment with the idea that Maoism presented an alternative to Stalinism helped pave the way for the broader disintegration of the communist left in the late 1970s. Taking seriously the continuity of Mao’s mass campaigns with the Stalinist logic of the party purge, this chapter nonetheless unearths the belated figuration of a vigilant proletarian vanguardism in the democracy movement that arose in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, as the Chinese Communist Party inaugurated its turn to pro-market reforms. Unlike other social

movements to establish a 'communism with a human face,' the Chinese democracy activists of the late 1970s were translating a protracted struggle for vigilance against bureaucratism initiated from above into a bottom-up demand for lasting institutions of popular oversight.

## Chapter One

The notion of a ‘revolutionary vanguard’ achieved global significance in the twentieth century through the institution of the Marxist-Leninist party: a disciplined, conspiratorial body of revolutionaries whose dictatorship legitimised itself by claiming a unique capacity to identify and educate the people on their true interests. Forged in the proto-communist Noël ‘Gracchus’ Babeuf’s failed 1795 plot to revive the French Revolution’s Jacobin dictatorship, and finally realized by the Russian Bolsheviks in their 1917 coup, faith in the vanguard idea is said to have been kept alive in the interim by the “evil genius of nineteenth-century democracy,”<sup>59</sup> the underground insurrectionist Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881). Babeuf, Blanqui, Bolsheviks: acolytes of a persistent vanguard faith, inspired by the Jacobin Terror, in an enlightened dictatorship cultivating the collective virtue necessary for a democratic society; a constant reminder of the contradiction at the heart of democratic theory, the temptation to incarnate majority rule through the will of a minority.<sup>60</sup> The rise of ‘vanguard’ as a term used in actual political speech also seems to reflect this continuity. The term is first adapted from its original military context in an 1824 pamphlet by the early French socialist Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), where it describes an enlightened elite responsible for reorganizing society to usher in

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<sup>59</sup> Furet, Francois. *Revolutionary France: 1770-1880*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995. 486.

<sup>60</sup> This genealogy of Leninist vanguardism dates back to the earliest rumblings of discontent between the factions of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party that would become the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, a period which will form the focus of the next chapter. For two recent iterations of what I would call the standard account of vanguard politics, see McAdams, A. James. *Vanguard of the Revolution: The Global Idea of the Communist Party*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017 ; Gray, Phillip. *Vanguardism: Ideology and Organization in Totalitarian Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

a new age of human emancipation. By 1879, Paul Lafargue (Karl Marx's son-in-law) could write to an elderly Blanqui that "the proletariat," having gained "a sense of its historical mission and the revolutionary forces behind it, have been asking only to be organised in order to be the vanguard of the movement for all of humanity."<sup>61</sup> Despite many Marxists refusing the authoritarian implications of vanguardism, Marx and his allies in the International Working Men's Association were happy to locate the 'vanguard' in the development of the class struggle, identifying those agents whose consciousness of their world-historical position in the expanding movement against capitalist domination was most developed.<sup>62</sup>

In this chapter, I challenge this neat genealogy by presenting a revisionist history of the vanguard idea as it emerged in nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>63</sup> I center this

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<sup>61</sup> Lafargue quoted in Bernstein, Samuel. *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979. 349. The original letter can be found in Blanqui Archives MS 9588(2) f. 678-9.

<sup>62</sup> The classic statement on this is the controversy over the significance of the Paris Commune at The Hague Congress of the International Working Men's Association in 1872, where Marx insisted that the Parisian workers massacred by government troops should be viewed as the "vanguard" in the movement for emancipation from capitalism, while his anarcho-syndicalist rival Mikhail Bakunin recognised in the Commune nothing more than the latest futile uprising of a people whose absolutist political culture had prevented them from ever developing an authentically free way of life. See Karl Marx, 'Report of the General Council' to the Fifth Congress of the International Workingmen's Association, held in The Hague, Holland, September 2-7 1872. In *The International Herald* October 5, 12 and 19 1872. Available at

<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1872/hague-conference/hague-report.htm>; Bakunin, Mikhail. 'On the International Workingmen's Association and Karl Marx.' In Sam Dolgoff (trans., ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 286-321.

<sup>63</sup> Political theorists have neglected the history of the *avant-garde*, but it has long been a key area of interest for art scholars, who agree that the term only took on distinctly different connotations in aesthetic and political spheres during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Before this time, the work of artists had been an essential if subordinate component in the broader *avant-garde* project of articulating and struggling for various visions of socio-historical progress. *Avant-garde* formal experiments strictly pertained to the organisation of society, and only later would avant-gardism come to mean the single-minded commitment to innovating artistic form as an end in itself. When an art scholar like Calinescu makes this distinction, though, it is usually from the perspective of artistic creation: before the 1870s, avant-gardism was a didactic, conformist trend in art that imposed external standards on artists and would reach its fullest expression in Soviet socialist realism. See Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Avant-garde, decadence, kitsch*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1977. 95-151. But such a perspective tends to simplify avant-gardism in the political sphere: for the

chapter around two key moments — two fleeting references to an “*avantgarde*” agent — in the writings of Saint-Simon and Blanqui respectively which, when placed in a certain context, illuminate an unfamiliar story about the emergence of representative democracy in the nineteenth century. The undeniable prominence of the radical republican dream of dictatorially cultivating collective autonomy notwithstanding, I carefully trace how the term ‘vanguard’ could actually refer to a very different set of logics around political agency. Far from fomenting a sense of collective participation in sovereign democratic subjectivity, Blanqui’s use of the term vanguard refers to a way of *maintaining* the awareness that centralized sovereign authority is something that can be held in check. Blanqui was trying to protect this sense of “civic vigilance” (to borrow a term from Phillip Pettit) from a triumphal historical consciousness that saw on the horizon a reconciliation of social forces which would obviate the need for citizens to check their government’s abuses of power altogether. But here is the confusing part: it is precisely to describe the kind of force that would *disseminate* this historical consciousness that the term vanguard was first introduced into political parlance, as just mentioned, by Saint-Simon. I show how, during the final years of what Francois Furet has called the ‘long’ French Revolution, Blanqui appropriated the language of vanguardism against those successors of Saint-Simon — the positivists — who had become the hegemonic intellectual force among the future leaders of the

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likes of Calinescu, the fate of modern avant-garde art appears to be under constant threat from a political dogmatism exemplified by the Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. I argue that there is much to be gained from overcoming this analytical imprecision which – in seeking to preserve the specificity of aesthetic avant-gardism – reduces *political* avant-gardism to a transhistorical and teleological force culminating in Soviet-style domination of artistic expression.

Third French Republic. In doing so, I argue, he sought to keep civic vigilance alive as an indispensable component of republican liberty.

This chapter does not limit itself to the annals of early socialism, however; in order to better illustrate the theoretical significance of my revisionist conception of vanguardism, I begin by analyzing the notion of civic vigilance. I center on the question of where to locate the most reliable motivational resources to prevent abuses of power in modern societies. This discussion begins by interrogating Phillip Pettit's theory of republican democracy. While Pettit convincingly shows the importance of civic vigilance to popular influence over government agencies, I argue that his theory does not sufficiently provide for the kind of motivation citizens would need to have in order to play the contestatory role he assigns to them in his republican democracy.

To better think through the requirements of civic vigilance, I take as my starting point the Baron de Montesquieu's influential distinction between the "mainsprings" of republican and monarchical liberty: 'virtue', as love of country, and 'honor', as love of self. Surprisingly, it is the tradition of relying on the self-interested spirit of honor to invigilate the exercise of political power — the aristocrat's habit of civilly disobeying a monarch who flouts law or convention — that is most relevant to our purposes. This is because Saint-Simon's thought grew out of attempts during the Bourbon Restoration (1814-1830) to make France's post-revolutionary constitutional monarchy work. Saint-Simon recognized that the old monarchical principle of honor would no longer be enough to preserve liberty in a rapidly expanding commercial society and administrative state. The shift away from landed estates as the base of economic power made noble invigilating honor obsolete, and a concerted aesthetic and

spiritual effort was needed to ensure the rise of industry as a new principle for modern monarchy suitable to a new productive industrial aristocracy. As part of the so-called ‘industrialist’ wing of the liberal opposition, Saint-Simon wagered that the empowerment of society’s ‘productive’ forces would obviate altogether the need for *either* surveilling *or* sovereign power. The ‘feudal’ politics of honor — the governing of men through force and counter-force — would be replaced by an ‘industrial’ technocratic politics of, in a phrase that Friedrich Engels would later popularize, the administration of things by those with the relevant expertise. Saint-Simon’s vanguard vision, therefore, entailed replacing honor with industry as a motivational principle: the industrial age would glorify socially-beneficial productive activity in the way that the feudal age had glorified the courageous prowess of the noble warrior.

Grappling with Blanqui’s vanguardism requires engagement with another Restoration-era liberal understanding of the new principle required to render modern monarchy stable and free articulated in direct opposition to Saint-Simon: that of Benjamin Constant (1767-1830). Constant, another admirer of Montesquieu, also began from the obsolescence of honor as a motivating principle for checking power, but, unlike Saint-Simon, he saw this as part of the historical unfolding of an equal participatory power that would entrench surveillance over sovereign authority. In the research on ancient polytheism which occupied him for most of his life, Constant identified religious liberty, or ‘liberty of intelligence’, as the fundamental motivating force behind this surveilling power. This is because only independent religion, for Constant, could sustain the general passion for investigation and self-sacrifice that such invigilation called for. It was an equal force constitutive of human nature as such.

Modern liberty, therefore, required the preservation of society's intelligent religious sentiment, against the monopolization of religion and science by what Constant called 'sacerdotal corporations' — the power of priests. While the Catholic church's reactionary clericalism was the most obvious of such corporations, he also homed in on the industrialism of Saint-Simon and his allies, with its self-conscious desire to wield spiritual authority, as a major sacerdotal threat.

The reason Constant's anti-clerical solution to civic vigilance is relevant to our story is that, in combatting Saint-Simon's vanguard, he introduces the two core rhetorical moves that, I argue, are taken up again a generation later by Blanqui. These are, first, the portrayal of sacerdotal 'usurpation of intelligence' as a threat to a free society, and, second, the importance of one sphere of religious and scientific knowledge to this usurping power in particular: astronomy.<sup>64</sup> Strangely enough, the political significance of the observation of the stars is the red thread running through the story I tell here. Astronomy plays *the* pivotal role in Constant's study of religion: astronomers are the first priests, and their very monopoly on communing with the stars is the germ of all clerical privilege. Saint-Simon, likewise, sees ancient astronomy as the decisive turning point in the expansion of humanity's techno-scientific capacities culminating in the industrial age. The fundamental difference between Constant and

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<sup>64</sup> It should be stressed from the outset that these themes were not, of course, unprecedented in the history of French anticlericalism. Although he does not use the term 'usurpation', the Marquis de Condorcet's 1794 *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* — a key reference for both Constant and Saint-Simon — speaks in similar terms, when he describes the interruption of intellectual development by the medieval church's superstitious dominion (9<sup>th</sup> Epoch, p.150). Charles-François Dupuis, meanwhile, in his *The Origin of All Religious Worship* (1795) famously tried to find the astronomical roots of every religious belief by tracing elementary myths and legends to the movements of stars and constellations. But Constant deepens and sharpens these disparate threads, and, most importantly, applies them to 'priestly' attempts at scientific enlightenment as well, in a way that is also evident in Blanqui.

Saint-Simon is that, whereas the former views sacerdotal privilege — although near-ubiquitous — as a historical contingency that the development of human intelligence can in principle overcome, spiritual power, in the latter’s terminology, plays the indispensable role of organizing knowledge in every age. Where Constant argued that humanity had reached a point in its intellectual perfection where it could shrug off the astronomical paradigm for the sake of political liberty, Saint-Simon argued the opposite: that the mechanical precision with which post-Newtonian astronomy could explain celestial movements had to be extended to the science of politics. It is the attempt to monopolize intelligence in an age where such priestly authority has been outstripped by it that Constant uses the term ‘usurpation’ to describe. His 1813 influential pamphlet *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation* — with its injunction to “obey time” — systematically describes this phenomenon in relation to the popular despotism of Napoleon’s empire, but Constant sees the same intelligence-usurping menace in Catholic legitimism and Saint-Simonian industrialism alike. A major contribution of this chapter, then, is to show how — far from being superseded by the new struggles of the nineteenth century — the discourse of anticlericalism remained an innovative rhetorical resource for making sense of its most ‘modern’ questions.

My counter-intuitive claim is that we can see the influence of Constant’s arguments about sacerdotal astronomy and intellectual usurpation on the conception of a political vanguard that Blanqui would deploy against the positivist heirs of Saint-Simon. By the 1860s, positivists had emerged as a hegemonic intellectual force among the republican opposition to Napoleon III. They were committed to a rigid pedagogical model, which sought to reserve political participation for an elite who had passed

through the necessary stages of scientific education which, recapitulating the development of human knowledge, began with astronomy and culminated in sociology. Blanqui railed against the “usurpation of intelligence” threatened by positivist public education, and these diatribes culminate, I suggest, in *L’Eternité par les astres*, the radically anti-deterministic astronomical speculations an imprisoned Blanqui would write in 1872. When, in 1869, Blanqui wrote that “the communists have always constituted the boldest vanguard of democracy,” it is to describe the difference between these usurpers and the republicanism which would prevent the proletarian intelligence he saw as a vital fund of civic vigilance from being funneled into acquiescent acceptance of the spiritual authority of experts.

Quite simply, then, Blanqui is not, as critics of his strident anticlericalism would have us believe, chasing an illusory “palingenesis” of some fossilized sans-culotte fantasy of 1793; instead, he is adapting certain elements of the popular radicalism of the Paris sections as they had been filtered through his own very real experiences. Not least among these, I emphasize, was the very non-illusory anticlerical struggle in 1830 that he fought alongside Constant and that was so formative to his political outlook. Without denying the — at best ambivalence towards, at worst outright approval of — democratic dictatorship in Blanqui, I argue that, when we abandon the hopeless hermeneutic of trying to pin down a coherent Blanquist doctrine, of squaring this doctrine up with the man’s notorious reputation as an eternal conspiracist, it becomes possible to appreciate the contradictory strands of his thought on their own terms. Finally, then, in bringing together Blanqui and Constant — the purported grandfathers of authoritarian communism and liberal democracy,

respectively — I demonstrate the vital theoretical resources available to us when we break free from the interpretive straitjacket of Cold War canonization.<sup>65</sup>

### **Usurpation, domination and republican constitutionalism**

Before undertaking our de-familiarizing historical journey, I begin in this first section of the chapter by detailing the contemporary theoretical puzzle to which vanguard resistance to the usurpation of intelligence responds, by analyzing Pettit's highly influential republican theory of democracy. It is his notion of 'civic vigilance', crystallized from a long lineage of republican thinkers, that captures the non-sovereign mode of popular participation relevant to our purposes. At the same time, it reveals a symptomatic blind spot in Pettit's republicanism that the alternative genealogy of vanguardism I am tracing here can help shed light on. Pettit argues that, in order for political institutions to not dominate the people they claim to represent, citizens must be able to see state interference in their lives as something over which they have control, and this is achieved, in part, through a vigilant civic culture, with citizens disposed to identify and resist instances of illegitimate interference, and governments, in turn, disposed to be inhibited by this resistance. Accepting the premise that a vigilant civic culture is a *sine qua non* of democratic legitimacy, I argue that the way in which such a disposition is acquired entails, on Pettit's telling, the stultification of another, more fundamental fund of agential motivation on which any watchful society must draw. Borrowing a distinction from Patchen Markell's critique of Pettit, I show

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<sup>65</sup> I am not the first to suggest Constant's proximity to a communist: see Higgonet, P., 'Marx, disciple de Constant?' *ABC*, 6, 1986, 10-16.

why a freedom-based theory of democratic legitimacy must supplement the latter's basic requirement — the capacity to assert popular control by identifying instances of domination — with a capacity to maintain popular involvement by identifying instances of *usurpation*. A democratic theory of power, he convincingly shows, must *also* be able to label such instances of political illegitimacy, in addition to those instances of domination that Pettit believes constitute the paradigm of illegitimacy. A core theoretical motivation of this chapter is, therefore, to further reflect on non-usurpation as complementing non-domination in a more complete vocabulary of republican principles for thinking about the requirements of agency.

Pettit establishes political legitimacy as a good separate from social justice. Unlike various stripes of what Bernard Williams called 'moralist' political theory,<sup>66</sup> Pettit's republicanism tries not only to stipulate a just and free social order, but also to provide resources for assessing how justly and freely that social order is imposed. But while justice and legitimacy are distinguished, the entire edifice still rests on a single principle: freedom as non-domination. To be free, on Pettit's influential view, is to live in the awareness that your actions will not be dominated, i.e., subjected to the power of arbitrary interference by another's will. This requires *both* a social realm without 'horizontal' domination (i.e., among individuals), *and* a political realm without 'vertical' domination (i.e., between the individual and the state). Adhering to

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<sup>66</sup> As we will see, Pettit's discussion of political legitimacy is distinct from the 'basic legitimation demand' characterises the realist position Williams asserts against the moralists. This is because the former still explicitly asserts the special desirability of *non-dominating* legitimacy, while the latter – in rejecting moral philosophy *tout court* as a foundation for political theory – frames his conception of legitimacy as a general principle in itself. My understanding of Williams' basic legitimation demand is informed by Matt Sleat, 'Bernard Williams and the possibility of a realist political theory,' *European Journal of Political Theory* 9(4) 2010, 485-503.

the principle of non-domination, in other words, entails holding states to account not only for failing to uphold a social order in which citizens are free from one another's arbitrary wills, but also for granting social justice itself in an arbitrary way. We know we are in an illegitimate state, on Pettit's view, when we only enjoy justice "as the result of an indulgence on the part of those in power."<sup>67</sup> A legitimate state, by contrast, must make it so that citizens can picture its coercive power as only ever interfering in their lives in a manner continuous with, not alien to, their own wills. State power is legitimate when it is clearly operating 'on the people's terms.'

Pettit identifies popular "control" of state interference as the "core element" of republican political legitimacy, and specifies three requirements for its realization – what he calls an "intuitive job specification for a democratic system."<sup>68</sup> They include equal or 'individualized' access to government influence; this access being 'efficacious' enough that unjust outcomes are only ever experienced as mere 'tough luck' rather than the work of an alien will; and, finally, ensuring that this popular control is rooted, in the last instance, in society's 'unconditioned' influence over government: i.e., the political system "must enable people to enjoy a directive influence over government that is based on the resistive character of the society, not

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<sup>67</sup> Pettit, Phillip. *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 186.

<sup>68</sup> Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 22. This all goes on within the what Pettit is at pains to establish as the historically necessary domain of state agency itself. Pettit establishes the state as a will-independent necessity by pointing out that particular states themselves do not control whether or not the state system in general exists, since it is an outcome of inter-state competitive dynamics that far exceed individual states' realm of choice. This observation is important for his argument, since it allows him to home in on a manageable way of thinking about popular control of the state – and hence political legitimacy – which is confined to "the making, administering and adjudicating of law – and over related decisions" within a bounded territory.

on the goodwill of government or of any other agency.”<sup>69</sup> It is this third requirement of ‘unconditioned influence’, and the sense in which it exerts ‘control’ on the government, that I would like to focus on.

Unconditioned influence, for Pettit, rests on what he calls the “trump card” that society, despite the state’s overwhelming monopoly of force, still wields: “To the extent that the possibility of popular, successful resistance is on the cards ... as a matter of common belief ... the influence of the people over the government can be established on a robust basis and can constitute a real form of power.”<sup>70</sup> This, in turn, requires the “absolutely crucial” institutions of a mixed constitution and a contestatory citizenry. The mixed constitution is a means of preventing the concentration of legitimate authority – and hence its amenability to arbitrary abuse by any particular will – under a single sovereign authority. It ensures that the state acts as “a distributed agency that is answerable to the demands of reason, like any agents, but answerable in virtue of the rules of coordination under which distinct component parts operate.”<sup>71</sup> Pettit, importantly, does not require that these distributed powers be as formal as the familiar ‘three branches’ legislative, adjudicative, and administrative. Instead, he offers a range of other examples as to how the mix might play out, stressing how much room for institutional innovation there is on this front. Pettit’s second requirement, the contestatory citizenry, is defined with reference to a political culture of “civic vigilance”. He stresses the ‘realism’ of popular vigilance: it is neither a “panoramic, altruistic oversight” that excises personal desire in the name of moral purity, nor a

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<sup>69</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 174.

<sup>70</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 173.

<sup>71</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 224.

“participatory, Rousseauvian engagement” that sets up a “grand, will-forming, law-making exercise” as its impossible goal (a model we will examine below). Instead, it relies only on “particularistic enthusiasm and attachment”, framed as “appeals to a public standard ... and made in a public forum,” a kind of activity visible to us already in the “watchdog, activist bodies” that “democracies naturally give life to.”<sup>72</sup> In sum: a shared sense of popular influence over the state is necessary so that the delivery of public goods are not experienced as (potentially) arbitrary gifts, and this (in part) requires dispersed power in a responsive state and particularistic vigilance in a resistive society.

The relationship between citizen and state, then, is one where “popular influence” flows as much as possible without being “diluted” or “diverted” by other streams of influence,<sup>73</sup> and it is to describe the danger posed by these other streams of influence that Pettit himself introduces the language of usurpation. The danger of elected representatives “usurping” greater share of power to regulate public life — and thus acting according to incentives beyond those they are purported to represent — is avoidable, for Pettit, by putting such regulatory power under the control of independent, unelected officials and bodies. But such bodies can, of course, themselves usurp popular influence; Pettit’s solution to this is to imagine them as operating according to a form of “indicative” representation, which, while not reflected in official electoral institutions, nonetheless is “imposed on them by the contestatory pressures to which they are subject.”<sup>74</sup> As one might have guessed from

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<sup>72</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 226-8.

<sup>73</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 231.

<sup>74</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 231-8.

our previous discussion, contestatory culture is thus something of a constant background requirement against the domination that would result from non-popular influence usurping popular influence over political institutions. Pettit understands this political culture, finally, as putting the state under the people's invigilation: ensuring that government is subject to an unceasing "domination without interference," and that such domination is a "matter of common awareness",<sup>75</sup> in such a way that intimidates any of the state's dispersed agencies away from the temptation to usurp popular influence.

I now want to suggest how this way of thinking about popular power in general, and its usurpation in particular, potentially undermines the conditions of its own realization. Following Markell, I also want to suggest the importance of disaggregating non-usurpation as a supplementary principle delineating certain requirements of agency alongside that of non-domination. In order to establish an invigilating society, citizens, as we have seen, need to be able to imagine themselves as exercising domination over their government – of controlling it. The problem is that there are dimensions of political agency that are not only distinct from control, but are also potentially stifled in the pursuit of it. We might, with Markell, call all these dimensions of agency 'involvement.' The crucial thing about involvement is that it helps us identify all those ways of being involved in political life that do not take the form of preventing or combatting domination. As he puts it, "... citizens may only be able to preserve ... involvement [in the kinds of 'activist bodies' we saw Pettit describe above], insofar as they also value it *for its own sake* [in addition to valuing it

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<sup>75</sup> Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 225.

as a way of maintaining popular influence over state power]”.<sup>76</sup> Although Pettit insists that non-domination is “not the only value in politics but ... [merely] serves a gateway role,”<sup>77</sup> it is precisely as a gateway principle that it prevents us from thinking about other ‘ways in’ to political agency.

Out of the Roman roots from which Pettit culled non-domination as the guiding principle for republican freedom, Markell isolates ‘non-usurpation’ as a supplementary principle that can also account for the experience of involvement. Becoming part of what Roman law referred to as another’s *dominium* — an object of property over which arbitrary control could be exercised, i.e., a slave — is the paradigm of both social injustice and public illegitimacy in Pettit.<sup>78</sup> Holding apart from this model of private *dominium* the distinct Roman legal sphere of public power makes possible the identification of a separate criteria for assessing political legitimacy. The Romans called this sphere *imperium*, and it denoted a right to command descended from Rome’s earliest kings, distributed in the republican constitution among the various magistracies. The key point is that it was not merely the arbitrary exercise of *imperium* that was deemed illegitimate; rather, Markell points out prominent examples of Roman citizens using the language of *usurpatio* to resist *imperium*’s undue concentration, on the grounds that the unequal “horizontal distribution of involvement it established” ... “displaced active involvement in political life.”<sup>79</sup> The capacity to be involved in public life, on Markell’s interpretation

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<sup>76</sup>Markell, Patchen. “The Insufficiency of Non-Domination.” *Political Theory* 36, no. 1 (2008): 9–36. 29.

<sup>77</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 127.

<sup>78</sup> Markell, ‘Insufficiency of Non-Domination’, 24ff.

<sup>79</sup> Markell, ‘Insufficiency of Non-Domination’, 29.

of the Roman republic, was valued on its own terms, independently from the capacity to be free from domination.

Usurpation reveals the implications of Pettit's account of how agents acquire the capacity to exercise non-arbitrary control over affairs in the first place, in a way that domination cannot account for. We are free, for Pettit, when others judge us as capable of engaging in the kinds of practical discourse that allow us to be held responsible for our own actions.<sup>80</sup> Pettit defines this kind of responsibility as a kind of "status freedom," where other people take us as the "type" of person who can be held to account for failing to act according to "common avowable interests." I am free when I can be trusted to carry an action through according to means and ends that make sense to other people around me, and therefore to know when others are arbitrarily interfering in what I am doing (that is, whether the interferer is taking control of a situation of which I am already in control myself). Pettit does address the question of how we come, in the first place, to identify with the status freedom of acting according to common avowable interests and the supervisory position it puts us into with regard to our own affairs and the affairs of that agent which exists to satisfy us (the state). But (without going into too much detail here) Markell draws out how, despite being explicitly opposed to a 'developmentalism' that would slide back into a 'positive' account of liberty, "we [nonetheless] acquire and maintain our status as

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<sup>80</sup> This "status freedom" is, in Pettit's theory of democracy, advertised as the unique positive good that the republican state provides. Unlike a merely just liberal state, a legitimate republican state guarantees the equal status freedom of its members, providing them with a kind of security that even the Kantian 'kingdom of ends' – in which every human being is treated as an end in herself, and never a means to another end – would not be able to, since all its members would live in the knowledge that their recognition as an autonomous individual was not being granted on their own terms, and could thus (at least potentially) be revoked according to the (at least potentially) arbitrary decision of another will. See Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 181-3.

discursive agents,” on Pettit’s account, “only through the acceptance of certain demands and requirement that we do not author.”<sup>81</sup>

Markell’s point in bringing all this up is that Pettit’s account of freedom misses the ways in which domination and usurpation frequently happen simultaneously: the displacement of existing forms of social and political activity by a developmental force, frequently justified as a benevolent facilitator of our ability to control self and state, can accompany the arbitrary interference in control over public institutions even as it presents itself as a means of resisting that interference.<sup>82</sup> Becoming a responsible citizen means *disavowing* the ways of directing processes one may have already had from the perspective of the *avowable* interests that are reasonable to all members of the discursive community. Thus, for Markell, an active, contestatory citizenry must be “prepared to guard [their involvement] against usurpation – including, paradoxically, usurpation by those institutions and officials whose role is precisely to guard citizens against the arbitrariness of their own passions and aspirations.”<sup>83</sup> If republican democracy depends on citizens’ willingness to invigilate their state, then this is

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<sup>81</sup> Markell, ‘Insufficiency of Non-Domination,’ 25.

<sup>82</sup> Markell, ‘Insufficiency of Non-Domination,’ 26.

<sup>83</sup> Markell, ‘Insufficiency of Non-Domination,’ 29. What Markell goes on to draw out is that, strangely enough, we are most free for Pettit when we are exercising our capacity for control over affairs *virtually*, rather than *actually*. That is, the moments when we have the most influence over a teleological process – i.e., are most in control – are those in which we are ready to intervene should things go wrong and we have to correct course, but ultimately are not required to do so, since this means we “are never exposed to the regress that would arise in any case of action under the *active* control of our beliefs and desires.” This problem is exacerbated when it comes to Pettit’s theory of democracy, since it turns out that this kind of virtual control is precisely how he imagines democratic society’s contestatory culture operating. He writes: “A society might be resistive in this sense [of civic vigilance] and yet not be very regularly subject to popular disturbance; the important thing is that resistance should remain a permanent possibility” (174, fn.31). In other words, it is much easier to attribute responsibility to one’s status freedom, based on a recognizable ‘image of the free man,’ than it is to sift through the causal chains of the actions such a man may have performed, stemming as they may from various contingent, irrational beliefs and desires. History bears testament to the vast gulf between the virtual and the actual when it comes to popular control.

precisely where we need to be able to resist the temptation to equate the “stultifying” and “world-narrowing” quality of usurping power to the arbitrary, option-limiting power of domination.

It is first, in Saint-Simon, as an explicit attempt to *usurp* civic vigilance and then, in Blanqui, as an attempt to resist this very usurpation that, I argue, we can think about the surprising political and theoretical stakes of the pre-Leninist use of the term ‘vanguard’. But tracing the language of usurpation into the modern world is a complex operation. The difficulty lies in the fact that the Western European revival of Roman civil law in the eleventh century took place alongside the persistent sway of feudal political institutions: something like *dominium* could have a claim on people, but the social framework for *imperium* was clearly long gone. Instead, Europe was an intricate web of *dominationes* — hereditary lordly titles. By the time of the Italian renaissance, when Roman republican liberty had gained popularity as an ideal, the influence of civil law on actual political practice meant it was far more natural to think about political power in the way Pettit reconstructs domination (this is, perhaps, why he sees no issue in reconstructing the principle of non-domination as the mainspring of early modern republicanism). When political talk of ‘usurpation’ occurs, it will in this context resemble the way Pettit deployed the term above, referring to something like the arbitrary seizure of a claim to political influence belonging to someone else. In John Locke’s property-preserving commonwealth, for example, usurpation is “a kind of domestic conquest ... where one is got into the *possession* of what another has right to,” with this prior right of possession based on “the rules ... of appointing those who are to have any share in the public authority, and settled methods of conveying the

right to them.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, public office is a sphere of control hemmed in by legitimate procedures, and usurpation names the act of arbitrarily violating these procedural boundaries. Freedom as non-domination would, it seems, be a perfectly appropriate principle with which to resist this kind of abuse.

Here, though, we once again open onto the question of legitimacy: on what basis are the rules and methods for appointing and conveying shares in public authority themselves justified? Can the power to set the rules *itself* be usurped? I want to suggest that there are two ways to address this constitutional question. For those who imagine a social contract as the basis of constitutional legitimacy, the answer is yes; for those, like Pettit, who adhere to the tradition of the ‘mixed constitution’, the answer is no. The question is not whether an underlying sovereign authority has fallen out of the rightful hands, since no fixed body can be said to wield such authority. But it is this absence of usurpation as a question of sovereignty in mixed constitutionalism that, I go on to show, allows something like usurpation of involvement to emerge.

For Locke and other thinkers of the social contract, the answer is to imagine that legitimate power-distributing procedures are grounded in an agreement among rationally consenting equals that marks the beginning of political society. In Locke’s version of the story, this contract is reasonable because it is motivated by the protection of pre-political property as natural right.<sup>85</sup> The sovereign authority instituted by the social contract, then, is not itself a form of power that can be usurped:

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<sup>84</sup> John Locke, “Second Treatise on Government.” in Peter Laslett (ed). *Two Treatises of Government*. Student ed. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 197-198.

<sup>85</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, IX.

sovereignty either adheres to the property-protecting terms of the contract, or it does not, triggering the dissolution of political society and the ‘right of resisting.’ Violation of the contract is tyranny, which Locke explicitly frames alongside usurpation in a contrasting pair: the former names the exercise of power beyond the natural right *in general*, whereas the latter names the exercise of power beyond a positive right *in particular*.<sup>86</sup> Simply put, Locke constructs a pre-political, non-usurpable sovereignty prior to all those subsequent claims to political office which *can* be usurped, allowing disputes about the latter to be adjudicated against the former.

This picture looks very different when we come to Rousseau, for whom “*tyrant* and *usurper* are two perfectly synonymous words”, and the dissolution of government is no less than “the moment the government usurps sovereignty.”<sup>87</sup> How can this be so? The simple answer is that government, for Rousseau, exists to obey the sovereign authority formed by the general will; there is no recourse, as in Locke, to natural law. To elaborate: sovereignty, based on the general will, is inalienable, indestructible, and unrepresentable. The sovereign cannot contract with any other party — least of all a would-be government — since this would limit the unlimited authority deriving from the original contract which established the general will, and thereby destroy itself. Thus, “the trustees of the executive power are not the people’s masters but its officers... it is not a question of them contracting but of obeying.”<sup>88</sup> This means that for a government to be legitimate (and remain that way), it must remain under the

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<sup>86</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, XVIII.199.

<sup>87</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “On the Social Contract.” In *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two Discourses and the Social Contract*. Edited by John T. Scott. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012. III.10. Emphases in original.

<sup>88</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III.18.

general will's control. To achieve this, Rousseau suggests periodic sovereign assemblies (self-authorized to act as a provisional government and legislate on particular matters), which consult the general will on the desirability of the instituted government and, if necessary, on how a new government should be constituted. Finally, then, Rousseau is clear that *preventing* the people from assembling on this basis is the “simple means” by which “all the governments of the world, once they are invested with the public force, sooner or later usurp the sovereign authority.”<sup>89</sup> Rousseau's account of usurpation is no less than the domination of the general sovereign will by a particular governmental will instituted solely to obey it. In the name of non-usurpation, the government must be kept under the control of — must be dominated by — a directly democratic assembly of the body politic.

At this point we arrive at the participatory account of democratic freedom that Pettit considers anathema to freedom as non-domination. For Pettit, this ‘Continental’ republicanism is incompatible with neo-Roman republicanism because it can only function by quashing the civic vigilance and mixed constitution which, as we have seen, are two of the necessary conditions of the popular control required by the latter. After Rousseau (or at least his vulgarization), a republic is increasingly pictured as a state whose members are “forced to be free” by submitting to the general will of a popular, majoritarian sovereign.<sup>90</sup> Because, Pettit argues, “the sovereign assembly of the people has to have absolute power and not be subject to interrogation by citizens”, “citizens are no longer invigilators of government ... They are law-makers, not law-

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<sup>89</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III.18.

<sup>90</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, I.7.

checkers, generators of law, not testers of law.” Any attempt to challenge the general will is banned, since laws which issue from this sovereign assembly are “sacralized”, and, as a result, “[come] draped in an authority and majesty that brooks no individual opposition.”<sup>91</sup> Pettit notes the irony that, in pursuing the cause of non-domination, Rousseau ends up justifying (only this time on democratic grounds) precisely the kind of absolutism against which republicans had agitated for so long. We might also note the parallel irony that maximal participation in rule based on the logic of possessive non-usurpation leads to the maximal monopolization of involvement from the perspective of participatory non-usurpation.<sup>92</sup> Pettit’s potted history credits Benjamin Constant’s 1819 lecture on the ‘liberty of the ancients’ for popularizing the idea that republican freedom means popular sovereignty, and, simultaneously, for presenting the standard liberal conception of freedom as non-interference as the only viable ‘liberty of the moderns.’<sup>93</sup> But as we will see, Constant struggled also — and,

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<sup>91</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 14-15. Ironically, from one reviewer’s avowed liberty-as-non-interference-advocating perspective, Pettit’s treatment of democratic participation *itself* falls into the trap of pursuing a kind of popular sovereignty based on the imaginary of a general will. See Dyzenhaus, David. ‘Critical notice of *On the People’s Terms*, by Phillip Pettit, Cambridge University Press, 2012, xii+333pp.’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 2013, 43(4), 494-513.

<sup>92</sup> This is also, importantly, the account of usurpation Claude Lefort finds in his exegesis on the historiographical lessons of François Furet: the urge among historians of the French Revolution to “identify” with its actors instead of questioning the significance of their actions, deriving from the “desire to have roots in the nation and to have links with a real point of origin,” which itself “reproduces the revolutionaries’ desire to found the nation, to situate themselves at a point of origin, and to wipe out every trace of an earlier usurping people which perpetuated its domination by disguising itself as a nobility.” For Lefort and Furet, this desire for regeneration is “the contradiction that arose between ideology and practice”, and, as “the connection between national ideology and socialist ideology”, needs to be interrogated in order to avoid the violent consequences of revolutionary politics (i.e., the terroristic impulse to exterminate the oppressive past in the name of the emancipated future). See Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*. David Macey, trans. London: Polity Press, 1988. 94-95. For a recent revisionist interpretation of the classic French revolutionary theorist of the need to overcome noble usurpation — the abbé Sieyès — which reads him as trying to rethink the principle of sovereignty, and thus casts his notion of usurpation in a very different light to Furet, see Rubinelli, Lucia. ‘How to think beyond sovereignty: Sieyès and constituent power.’ *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2019, 18(1). 47-67.

<sup>93</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 16.

arguably, at a deeper level — against ancient liberty’s democratically-legitimated *usurpation of involvement* and, in doing so, I argue, would inspire Blanqui’s vanguardism.

And indeed, we must also note here how the participatory freedom of popular sovereignty brings us right back to the idea that interests us most: vanguardism. Rendering concrete the assembled body of the sovereign people and, thereby, initiating a dictatorship in the name of constituting democratic power is usually said to be the characteristic goal of vanguard political action. Beyond the examples cited at the beginning of this chapter, we can look at Andrew Arato’s recent accusation, in *Post-Sovereign Constitution-Making*, that contemporary left populists are “constituting a political vanguard” in their attempts to “incarnate”, through identification with the unitary symbol of the popular leader, a popular sovereign agent capable of acting as a constituent power.<sup>94</sup> What I will draw out in subsequent sections of this chapter, instead, is a concept of ‘political vanguard’ that names a mode of resisting the usurpation of involvement in the civic vigilance essential to non-sovereign democratic legitimacy.

First, though, we must examine why mixed constitutionalism does not allow for the kind of conception of usurpation found in contractual sovereignty. The mixed constitution *prevents* an attitude of civic vigilance from turning into an accusation of sovereign usurpation, by allowing contestatory claims to complement one another within a dispersed array of power centers. The baron de Montesquieu is, as Pettit

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<sup>94</sup> Andrew Arato, *Post-Sovereign Constitution-Making: Learning and Legitimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 287.

points out, the most prominent theorist of the mixed constitution. While most attention is usually paid to Montesquieu's famous stylized depiction, in Book X of *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), of the checks and balances in the English constitution — with its separated powers jealously defending their established prerogatives — it is crucial to note that the book is, arguably, far more invested in making sense of a very different way of thinking about intermediary powers in modern societies. This is the principle of honor embodied by the noble class in modern monarchical regimes. Montesquieu, to a certain extent, sees the customary diffusion of implicit codes of honor — reflected in institutions but, crucially, not monopolized by them — as a stabler guarantee of non-domination than England's fragile constitutional order based on 'extreme liberty'. As Istvan Hont puts it, "the exciting thing in the eighteenth century was the modern monarchy as *res publica*" — "the danger ... was that fanatics of republicanism," like Rousseau, "would mistake the modern republican monarchy for an ancient republic and try to suppress its modern element."<sup>95</sup> This modern monarchy was a regime where vigilant honor upheld liberty and stability.

Montesquieu can be read as intervening in eighteenth century debates over the legitimacy of the French absolute monarchy, in such a way as to quell any talk of usurpation. These debates were characterized by nobles, wishing to shore up the legitimacy of their independent power against ever-centralizing royal authority, mobilizing the historical record to accuse the crown of usurping prerogatives that rightfully belonged to them. The assertion of original rights, excavated out of the

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<sup>95</sup> Hont, Istvan. 'Histories of Government: Republics, Inequality, and Revolution?' in *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*. B. Kaposy and M. Sonenscher, ed. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. 77-78.

distant past, could renew aristocratic liberty in the present. Montesquieu attempted to debunk these disputes about antiquarian laws, and he achieved this by attending to what he calls the *spirit* of the laws: namely, the empirically observable web of social and material conditions alongside which legal institutions develop.<sup>96</sup> His objective is to show how the ‘Gothic constitution’ of monarchy as a whole, in spite or perhaps because of the fact that it “was found in the forests”, is an organic system of mixed powers which, when properly fine-tuned, is highly compatible with the needs of a modern commercial society.<sup>97</sup> This meant that nobility could function *within* a mixed

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<sup>96</sup> de Montesquieu, Charles. *The Spirit of the Laws*. A.M. Coehler et. al., ed. & trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. 166. My account of Montesquieu is heavily influenced by the Introduction in Sonenscher, Michael. *Emmanuel-Joesph Sieyès: Political Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003. xlv ff.

<sup>97</sup> In the last few books of *L'Esprit des lois*, he painstakingly traces the process by which, following the barbarian conquests, the Germanic laws of the Frankish tribes were grafted on to the Roman laws of the Gallic communities. This display of erudition responded to vital political debates in which the participants identified injustices in the contemporary absolutist monarchy by imputing usurpations to its institutional history. A “Germanist” faction sought to show how the Franks had made their own laws — which gave the landholding nobility the right to administer justice on their estates — the law of the land after the conquest, and that these noble prerogatives tied to property were gradually usurped by power-hungry kings in subsequent centuries. A “Romanist” faction, meanwhile, insisted that the Franks initially framed their authority according to the Roman laws already obeyed by their Gallic subjects; Frankish kings originally had the powers of Roman consuls, which meant, in the absence of the emperor’s higher magistral authority, that they could legitimately claim the full prerogatives of *imperium*. This, in turn, made the *nobles* the usurping ones, nibbling away over the ages at an original royal monopoly on justice as old as the founding kings of Rome. The debate between Germanists and Romanists, then, was a clash between ancient and modern ways of thinking about usurpation: Germanists fought to protect access to political offices rooted in property claims independently established by ancient conquests, while Romanists fought to defend the sovereign as unitary inheritor of a claim to dispense justice throughout the realm. The former denounced monarchical usurpation of the nobles’ private *dominium*; the latter, aristocratic usurpation of the monarch’s public *imperium*. In characteristic fashion, Montesquieu ‘moderates’ this antagonism, insisting that usurpation had taken place on *neither* side. He seeks instead to temper accusations over the sphere of dominion. “[The Romanists and the Germanists] have each made a system, the one seeming to be a conspiracy against the third estate, and the other against the nobility” (627). While dismissing as historically unverifiable the Romanist analogy between consular and royal power, he nonetheless argues, against the Germanists, that the Frankish conquerors did not simply subjugate the Gauls: the acquisition of landed property carried with it an obligation to fulfil serfs’ needs, and, in order to preserve the people they had conquered, the nobility was thus ultimately answerable to broader concerns in their administration of justice that grew out of a mixture of Roman and Germanic legal systems (626). Thus when, to take a notable example, in the thirteenth century, King Louis IX ‘reappropriated’ the administration of justice from the nobility — establishing the crown as (theoretically, at least) a final court of appeal — Montesquieu insists that this was no usurpation of lordly prerogative, but instead a reasonable and

constitution as an intermediary body, ensuring the liberty of all by fomenting the kind of civic vigilance we have seen as essential to non-domination. But if Montesquieu settles the dispute about usurpation between king and nobles, he nonetheless opens up another battlefield over *who* gets to play this intermediary role. Using the pattern of argumentation established by Montesquieu, those who saw themselves as the actual force behind the benevolent transformations brought on by commerce would come to see the old nobility and clergy as usurpers of their legitimate access to intermediary offices. As we shall see, it is from this French milieu of what Annabel de Dijn calls “aristocratic liberalism” that Saint-Simon’s industrialist vanguard emerges.<sup>98</sup>

The nobility, for this modern monarchical system to work, must serve as intermediary bodies which — despite, or perhaps because, of their subordinate and dependent position to royal authority — nonetheless prevent both despotism and anarchy. Montesquieu studies regimes as functioning in a manner akin to mechanical systems. Differently from social contract theorists, and similarly to Pettit above, his approach takes natural human sociability and hence the natural existence of states as its starting point, rather than positing a pre-social state of nature. Each governmental machine — each structure of civil and political laws — builds up over time according to the worldly conditions surrounding it, expressed as “the human passions that set it in motion”,<sup>99</sup> and a “principle” or “mainspring” serves as the prime mover among these animating relations. What moves monarchy most, between the self-

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necessary response to the failure of seigneurial courts to keep up to date with the evolving body of law (598).

<sup>98</sup> de Dijn, Annabel. *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>99</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 21.

negating virtue of republics and the self-preserving fear of despotisms, is the self-interestedness of *honor*.

For Montesquieu, monarchy comes closest to nature, since it is animated by the egoisms of its subjects alone. It “is like the system of the universe, where there is a force constantly repelling all bodies from the center and a force of gravitation attracting them to it. Honor makes all parts of the body politic move; its very action binds them, and each person works for the common good, believing he works for his individual interests.”<sup>100</sup> Unlike in republics, where a rigorous education raises love of country to the level of love of self, in monarchies “education begins when one enters the world,” and “the virtues we are shown here are always less what one owes others than what one owes oneself.”<sup>5</sup> “This glory,” and the selfish pursuit of it, “results in a spirit of liberty than can ... produce equally great things and perhaps contribute as much to happiness as liberty itself.”<sup>101</sup> Because honor, unlike virtue, is an expression of self-interest, Montesquieu views monarchies as highly compatible with another key animating condition of the modern world: the spirit of commerce. The belligerent *raison d'état* which characterised relations among states in previous epochs — the predilection for what Montesquieu calls the ‘spirit of conquest’ — was being tamed by the “gentle” logic of trade.<sup>102</sup> But honor does not mean the same thing as the egoism of

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<sup>100</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 27.

<sup>101</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 166.

<sup>102</sup> Istvan Hont warns us to resist the temptation to project the contemporary theoretical divisions between ‘realists’ and ‘liberals’ in the discipline of International Relations onto Montesquieu’s spirits of conquest and liberty. As Montesquieu was already aware, it was already clear in the eighteenth century that the ‘jealousy of trade’ was itself becoming a source of interstate conflict as imperialist great powers competed for markets. Modern monarchy, then, was less a way of *laissez-faire* the naturally ameliorative effects of market society than it was about harnessing the commercial spirit to productive ends through the formulation of appropriate laws and institutions. See Hont, Istvan. *The Jealousy of*

*homo oeconomicus*; it works, instead, by *supplementing* the modern predilection for truck and barter with a complementary political spirit. Montesquieu was thus a supporter of the buying and selling of titles, since this allowed ambitious *honnêtes hommes* who had amassed a fortune to have their honor recognized beyond their mere riches. But once they had become ennobled, they, like all nobles, should be denied the right to engage in commercial activity. As Montesquieu puts it, “it is contrary to the spirit of monarchy, to admit the nobility into commerce,” and flouting this maxim, according to him, weakened the English monarchy.<sup>103</sup>

Honor is thus a code of customs and traditions, which generate a desire for great acts by promising dignity and glory. “The principle of monarchy has been corrupted,” Montesquieu argues, “when the highest dignities are the marks of the greatest servitude ... when honor is set against honors and one can be covered at the same time with infamy and with dignities.” In the footnotes, Montesquieu illustrates this with examples from the reigns of Nero and Tiberius, describing how those Roman emperors degraded the triumph — ceremonies originally organised by prominent patricians to mark their victories during the republic — by holding them in celebration of informers who broke up conspiracies against the despots’ rule.<sup>104</sup> A healthy monarchy, then, is one in which the prince resists the temptation to empty the significance of honor by putting *honours* to use against custom and tradition. Honor must remain an independent symbolic fund that is always available to be mobilized

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*Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge MA: Harvard Bellknap, 2005. 28ff.

<sup>103</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 350.

<sup>104</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 116-8.

against royal arbitrariness. In Sharon Krause’s phrase, “honor preserves the balance of power that sustains modern monarchies by maintaining a balance of obedience and disobedience to sovereign authority.”<sup>105</sup> In exactly the same terms that Pettit uses to describe the motivation for invigilation above, Krause insightfully describes how honor brings to those who are moved by it an “awareness of [one]self as arbiter but not as legislator ... which separates honor from autonomy in the Kantian sense.”<sup>106</sup> Krause goes on to show how, despite his openness to the selling of landed titles, the fact that honor was rooted in the existence of noble privilege makes it an unreliable source of liberty in societies without such distinctions, and she turns to Tocqueville’s effort to ‘update’ honor’s invigilating function by studying the democratic world of Jacksonian America. In a similar spirit, we turn now to Saint-Simon and Constant who sought the source of non-domination in a post-revolutionary monarchy which, despite, according to its constitution, “endeavoring to renew the chain of time,” could not but question the efficacy of its traditional codes of conduct.

### **Sacerdotal usurpation and the stultification of vigilant intelligence**

Benjamin Constant – against revolutionary terror, Bonapartist dictatorship, clerical reaction, and liberal ‘industrialism’ – articulated a non-sovereign conception of usurpation. This may come as a surprise if we follow Pettit’s genealogy of republicanism: as we saw, for him, Constant’s famous distinction between modern ‘liberal’ and ancient ‘republican’ freedom marks a turning point, when the former – as

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<sup>105</sup> Krause, Sharon. *Liberalism with Honor*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. 49.

<sup>106</sup> Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, 55.

individual protection from interference – definitively detached itself from a vulgarized view of the latter – as collective promotion of participation.<sup>107</sup> It is against the persistent influence of this stylized opposition, between freedom as non-interference and freedom as popular sovereignty, that neo-Roman republicans have sought to revive the concept of non-domination. But while Constant did, indeed, take the safeguarding of property holders’ rights to conduct economic transactions as the basic task for government, he *also* stressed the indispensable need for a certain form of participation – or better, involvement – in the brave new commercial age. “Political liberty,” he declared in his famous 1819 lecture, “by submitting to all the citizens, without exception, the care and assessment of their most sacred interests, enlarges their spirit, ennobles their thoughts, and establishes among them a kind of intellectual equality which forms the glory and power of a people.” Only through the generalized spirit of “active and constant surveillance” disseminated by such political liberty would commercial man’s dangerous absorption in the pursuit of selfish interests be overcome.<sup>108</sup>

What was the nature of this political liberty based on intellectual equality, and what exactly was the usurpation against which it acted as a bulwark? To answer

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<sup>107</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 16. In fairness to Pettit, he does denote the arbitrariness of any such demarcation in the history of ideas. That said, he is silent on the distinct role Constant reserves for ancient liberty in the modern age, in what – as we will see – fits nicely into Pettit’s system as a contribution to thinking about the firm link between contestatory civic vigilance, the mixed regime, and republican liberty. But it is worth noting that the neo-republican invocation of Constant as the inaugurator of the perspective that the only ‘modern’ liberty is non-interference and the erasure of the ancient/early modern idea of liberty as non-domination is notable enough that Bryan Garsten frames his rehabilitation of Constant (discussed below) against it. See Garsten, Bryan. ‘Religion and the Case Against Ancient Liberty: Benjamin Constant’s other lectures.’ *Political Theory*, 2010, 38(1), 4-33. 5.

<sup>108</sup> Constant, Benjamin. ‘On the Liberty of the Ancients compared to That of the Moderns.’ In Biancamaria Fontana (ed.), *Constant: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 366-7.

these questions, we must begin by examining *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation* (1813/14), published by Constant in four editions across the transitional months as Napoleon Bonaparte's Empire fell and the Bourbon king Louis XVIII was restored. The pamphlet's fourth edition came out just after the promulgation of the Charter of 1814 that would set the framework for the Restoration constitutional monarchy, and it became something of an opening salvo for the so-called 'liberal opposition' in the coming battle over how to preserve, interpret and improve the document. His skewering of the Napoleonic post-revolutionary democratic dictatorship served as a rallying cry for the eternal vigilance required to hold the inherently self-corrupting tendencies of modern freedom at bay.

Constant sought to demonstrate how Bonaparte's conquests had been possible in an era when *doux commerce* and the enlightenment it facilitated had rendered the martial spirit obsolete and had shown the civilised world the advantages of liberty. Clearly leaning on Montesquieu, Constant argues that war and commerce name two different means of achieving the same end: "possessing what is desired." But the historical record of the application of each approach — the greater degree of risk associated with war — "necessarily" demonstrated the superiority of commerce as the "milder and surer means."<sup>109</sup> In this modern age, moreover, the patriotic desire for glory had been superseded by awareness of the interconnectedness of commercial nations, and it was now impossible to deny the purely self-interested motivations for waging war. The modern "system of conquest", therefore, had to found itself on a

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<sup>109</sup> Constant, Benjamin. 'On the Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation.' In Fontana, *Constant: Political Writings*, 53.

corrupting influence: it required the destruction of “all natural emotions that stem from sensuality”, “turning the progresses of civilization against civilization itself.”<sup>110</sup> This glory-less military spirit can only be propagated, in other words, through the top-down inculcation of military discipline. The more it permeates society, the more the hard-won habits of liberty and enlightenment uniting the body politic are destroyed, and the more, finally, society is forced to take on the appearance of a uniform mass.

Centralized authority must ceaselessly stamp out the “germ that is ready to sprout” of “communal honor”, and “individuals ... cast like atoms upon an immense, flat plain, detach themselves from a fatherland that they can nowhere see.” “Thus,” Constant writes, “conquest in our days ... pursues the vanquished into the most intimate aspects of their existence. It mutilates them in order to reduce them to uniform proportions.”<sup>111</sup> Constant is clear that the “anachronistic” system of conquest introduced by Napoleon, despite its unprecedented intimacy, could only sustain itself through a consistent destruction of naturally arising liberty, and was thus inherently unsustainable. And yet the system of usurpation he detected operating alongside conquest indicated a threat far more pervasive because it, at least potentially, conformed to the spirit of the times.

Napoleon did not merely *destroy* the checks on his power that would have prevented him from arbitrarily intervening in the liberty of his subjects. He also, and for Constant far more perniciously, recognized that the outward appearance of liberty and popular sovereignty would legitimate his rule. Constant used the concept of ‘usurpation’ to describe the novel ways in which the *democratic* pretensions of (what

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<sup>110</sup> Constant, ‘Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,’ 57.

<sup>111</sup> Constant, ‘Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,’ 76-77.

would later become known as) Bonapartism set it apart from those earlier despotic regimes described by Montesquieu. Napoleon's empire usurped political liberty's *forms* and turned them against it: draconian press censorship stifled opposition while acclamatory plebiscites asserted popular authority. Where "despotism ...rules by means of silence, and leaves man the right to be silent," Constant stresses how, as in the earlier description of conquest's psychological effects, usurpation "pursues him into the most intimate sanctuary of his thoughts..."<sup>112</sup> But worse, when it gets there it also "condemns him to speak." Thus, at the same time as "it was necessary to stifle inside the country all intellectual life," Napoleon also "provided, extorted, or paid for acclamation which sounded like the national voice."<sup>113</sup> In usurping the institutions of political liberty, in other words, Bonapartism also usurped what Constant saw as our most intimate faculties.

Constant argues that it was this usurpation of *intelligence* that represented the greatest danger to liberty, since it threatens to destroy progress itself. Although he at first insists that usurpation, like conquest, is an "anachronism" doomed by the enlightening spirit of the age, he becomes much more ambivalent about such teleological progress as his analysis unfolds. In his chapter on 'the effects of arbitrary power upon intellectual progress,' Constant describes how, when usurpation permits only "sonorous declamation upon indifferent objects," "the man whose stifled opinion languishes, is not excited for very long, even by his own interests; a kind of stupor comes over him." Since "man's intelligence cannot remain stationary," it becomes

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<sup>112</sup> Constant, 'Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,' 95-97.

<sup>113</sup> Constant, 'Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,' 162.

“indignant at seeing itself excluded from its proper sphere [and] wants to take revenge, by a noble suicide, for the humiliation inflicted upon it.”<sup>114</sup> Worshiping that toward which we are indifferent, in other words, inflicts such immense shame upon our most intimate human faculties that they snuff themselves out, leading to a state of stupefaction. The torpor of intellectual usurpation is so immense, in other words, that civilizational development itself comes to a halt — even the base interest in truck and barter is crushed under its weight.<sup>115</sup> But Constant seems to be making a big assumption here: Why, for him, does humanity’s ‘intelligence’ also seem to carry with it a sense of honor that prevents it from continuing to expand when trained on things that do not matter to it? If, as we saw, Montesquieu recognized and even embraced the extent to which liberty-defending honor was rooted in custom, is Constant not making a regressive step here by somehow naturalizing the sources of civic vigilance as co-foundational with the capacity for thought?

To answer these questions, which get to the heart of Constant’s theory of the motivational requirements for civic vigilance, we must turn to his writings on religion. Constant consciously modelled these writings as filling a gap left by Montesquieu, who, despite writing the “masterpiece of the eighteenth century,” “only examined religion in passing.”<sup>116</sup> His work on religion, which focused on ancient polytheism, occupied him for most of his adult life, culminating in a magisterial study — *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes, et ses développements* — that he

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<sup>114</sup> Constant, ‘Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,’ 124.

<sup>115</sup> Constant, ‘Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation,’ 122.

<sup>116</sup> Constant, Benjamin. *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes, et ses développements*. Paris: Bossange, 1824. Vol. I. 117.

considered his life's greatest achievement. It was in this erudite investigation into ancient polytheism that Constant sought to find "in our most intimate sentiment, new support for our most sacred rights."<sup>117</sup> What he discovers is a field of struggle between two diametrically opposed forces: rational self-interest, on the one hand, and religious sentiment, on the other. The motivation to invigilate abuses of power — to supervise and influence its exercise — is, for Constant, based on this latter capacity, and must be protected from the encroachments of the former.

The first volume introduces the study of religious sentiment as a continuation of the work of Montesquieu, whose recognition of natural human sociability — and hence the irrelevance of contractarian explanations of society's origins — Constant insists should also be extended to religious belief. The spirit of commerce, with its ameliorating effects of mutual exchange and communication, was, as we saw, the source of modern society's potential superiority over an ancient world in which conquest was still the predominant mode for societies to attain their needs. Religious sentiment, for Constant, names another level of commerce that Montesquieu did not explore: "... the need that man feels to enter into communication [*se mettre en communication*] with invisible powers." Simply put, Constant identifies a certain experience of the sublime as the source of this feeling: being "plunged into an ocean of new thoughts, disinterested, with no relation to the narrow combinations of this life." The "immensity" of nature, the "spectacle" of virtuous action, sacrifice, and courage, and the "resistance to tyranny" all, for Constant, "awaken and nourish ... this

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Garsten, 'Religion and the Case Against Ancient Liberty,' 9.

mysterious disposition” which contradicts all our self-interested labors.<sup>118</sup> Against earlier ‘natural historians of religion’ like David Hume, who attributed its emergence to “interest and fear,” Constant argues that religious sentiment needs to be studied as a separate, and contradictory, cause of positive religions.<sup>119</sup> “The sentiment which leads man to address himself to invisible beings,” Constant observes, “to place more importance on his relations with the world they inhabit than with the most immediate advantages of the present world” is not self-preserving fear, but “the practical application” of this separate religious sentiment.<sup>120</sup>

Since man is also a social animal, though, he needs to “make permanent and regular the means of communication he believes to have discovered” between himself and the invisible powers, to ensure that this communication can gain the approbation of other people in his community on which his self-esteem depends.<sup>121</sup> For Constant, the crucial question, then, was whether religious form was sufficient to express religious sentiment. “In each age,” he says, “the form that is established naturally is good and useful; it only becomes fatal when individuals or castes seize and corrupt it [*s’en emparent et la pervertissent*] in order to prolong its life [*sa durée*].”<sup>122</sup> He divides religious forms into two categories based on whether or not such seizure and corruption have occurred: the ‘independent’ and the ‘sacerdotal’ (or ‘priestly’). The latter form distorts religious sentiment, cultivating the kind of fear-motivated egoism which Montesquieu saw as the characteristic principle of despotism. It inflates the

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<sup>118</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 40.

<sup>119</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 318.

<sup>120</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 34.

<sup>121</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 40-1.

<sup>122</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 26.

self-interested aspect of positive religion at the expense of its ability to genuinely put one into communion with the invisible powers. This is because “sacerdotal corporations” refuse to allow religious forms to develop alongside what Constant sees as the gradual, natural refinement of human intelligence and emotion. “Sentiment distances the object of worship to better adore it,” he argues, while “interest brings it closer to better use it.”<sup>123</sup> Priests prevent the distance between objects of adoration necessary for self-perfecting worship – that adoration which keeps track with the expansion of human intellectual and emotional power – from arising, by stressing the self-interested and fearful elements of the human relationship with invisible powers.

Just as Montesquieu had attempted to disclose the spirit underlying the laws, Constant painstakingly traces how — despite the long-term consistency of religious forms — the human needs underlying them can, indeed must, change over time, as religious sentiment keeps track with the gradual expansion of intelligence.<sup>124</sup> And, although scathing in his critiques of sacerdotal religion and its effects on humanity, Constant — faithful to his predecessor’s rigorous method of socio-environmental explanation, and against the paranoid style of the anticlerical *philosophes* — also insists that, in its emergence, “the sacerdotal order is not at all an effect of fraud ... [but] is inseparable from religion itself. It is not at all the priests who constitute it; they are formed by the force of things.”<sup>125</sup> There is no sacerdotal conspiracy, but instead —

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<sup>123</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 318.

<sup>124</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, Bk. 1, Ch.IX *passim*. It is here that Constant lays out in a long footnote the differences between his own thesis on the astronomical origins of clerical power and Dupuis’ popular 1794 account (see footnote 5 above). Dupuis’ fatal error is to not distinguish between priestly and popular religion, attending only to evidence from priestly sources. He thus cannot notice how the link between religion and cosmology only applies to religious *form* and not religious *sentiment*. See p.185, fn.4.

<sup>125</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, p.321.

consistent with his well-known opinions on the behavior of political representatives in general — this kind of domination comes about due to the motive to maintain power which inevitably accompanies the attainment of office.<sup>126</sup> But this still does not answer the question as to how priests attain power in the first place.

Constant grounds his discussion of the sacerdotal monopolization of science in a speculative history that traces the emergence of priestly authority to a specific social function: astronomy. Communities like desert nomads or fisherfolk relied on the kind of navigational precision that only attentive understanding of the movement of the stars could give. “This necessity constitutes, at the very origin of societies and while the majority of the people are still savage,” Constant explains, “corporations which make the study of the stars their occupation, the observation of nature their aim, and the discoveries they make about these two objects their property.”<sup>127</sup> Limits are placed on the exercise of intellectual activity by non-members of sacerdotal associations, through transformation of stars from useful objects of *astronomy* into fetishistic objects of *astrolatry*. The natural impulse to create fetishes – to imbue objects with religious sentiment’s invisible power and thereby make it manageable – is channeled into the observation of stars in such a way as to ensure that an aura of mystery surrounds this practice and prevents innovating human curiosity from improving it, as this would undermine the priest’s power. Constant is clear that it is the specific way in

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<sup>126</sup> Pettit himself quotes this idea expressed in Constant’s 1810 *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*: “You choose a man to represent you because he has the same interests as you. By the very fact of your choosing him, however, your choice of placing him in a different situation from yours gives him a different interest from the one he is charged with representing [viz., maintaining that power you have given them].” See Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 200.

<sup>127</sup> ‘Du développement progressif des idées religieuses’ (1826). In Maurice Gauchet (ed.), *De la liberté chez les modernes : écrits politiques*. Paris : Gallimard, 1997.

which pre-existing fetishistic forms of worship are applied to the stars that constitutes the oppressive character of priestly religion.<sup>128</sup> But the key point is that it is “impossible to transform stars or elements into individual fetishes”; the movement of the stars is specialized knowledge that non-priests have not had the opportunity to acquire, and so priests are necessary as “representatives of the entire nation” before the stars.<sup>129</sup> Priestly power perverts religion to preserve itself: “... that which is most pure in [religious] sentiment, the need to sacrifice oneself to what one adores, is transformed in the hands of priests [*dans les mains des prêtres*] into a cause of frenzy, of stultification [*d’abrutissement*], and of cruelty.”<sup>130</sup> When the capacity to directly communicate with the gods is lost, the actions of the gods become untethered from human agency. When we make sacrifices to them, we are no longer giving them something they need. Instead, sacrifices become mere signs of our submission to an overwhelming power.

On Brian Garsten’s telling, Constant thought this historical argument about the astronomical roots of priestly power “one of his greatest discoveries.”<sup>131</sup> But does Constant see a way out of sacerdotal domination, once it has been set up? The prospects, in general, do not look good. The struggle between spiritual and temporal powers in antiquity is *not* dialectical: Constant is clear that the human spirit would have remained under the arbitrary limits of sacerdotal authority were it not for some other cause. The priesthood, once constituted, “is not content with this exclusive

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<sup>128</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol II, 20, fn.1.

<sup>129</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 21.

<sup>130</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 207.

<sup>131</sup> Garsten, ‘Religion and the Case Against Ancient Liberty’, 12.

exercise of religious functions. It arrogates a considerable part of political and civil authority,” examples of which Constant then goes on to list.<sup>132</sup> The powers are so great that, initially, military and political power appear as an emanation of the priesthood. Eventually, however, the diverse branches under priestly command come to see themselves as relatively independent, and secular powers declare open rebellion. This “inevitable” power conflict pitting temporal power against spiritual power always ends to the advantage of spiritual power, since, “when the struggle begins, not between consciences but between powers, religious sentiment must declare for whoever best takes the form of conscience, and who, without visible arms, also least resembles power.”<sup>133</sup> The crucial point here is that, after a sacerdotal body has stamped its form on religious sentiment, any threat to its authority is always at a disadvantage since it can always mobilize the spirit of sacrifice which it has captured against its enemies.

It is only “when religion is independent,” Constant tells us, that “religious sentiment can arm itself against the usurpations of the priesthood. It believes itself to have an interior mission: it is, in its intimate conviction, its own authority.”<sup>134</sup> Constant argues that, in the absence of priests, morality is able to gradually penetrate established religion. The Greeks, “alone among all peoples ... were free of the power of priests,” because — as the title of one chapter alludes to — astrolatry was foreign to them.<sup>135</sup> The fundamental change in the nature of adoration which astrolatry induces, in other words, did not take place among them. The Greek gods begin, like other gods,

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<sup>132</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 70.

<sup>133</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 129, 186.

<sup>134</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. I, 186.

<sup>135</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 211. See also p.229: ““If astrolatry had not been absent, the Greeks would not have been an exception to the common rule” of sacerdotal authority.

as collective fetishes.<sup>136</sup> But, because there is no fixed body of representatives who have monopolized the right of communication between heaven and earth, the nature of these gods is able to transform along with the needs of the society worshipping them. Constant shows how, from Homeric times to the high watermark of Attic theatre, the gods, initially wholly absorbed in their own selfish desires, gradually became the guarantors of human justice. The initial indifference of the gods to human affairs, in other words, was beneficial since it *allowed* their pre-existing forms to be imbued with a new, gentler meaning as the Greek peoples transitioned from a society based on the spirit of conquest to one made gentler by the spirit of exchange. In independent polytheism, “all the qualities attributed to gods are human qualities on a larger scale ... nothing shocks the reason contemporaneous to it.”<sup>137</sup>

Priestly polytheisms, in forcing the gods to take an interest in human conduct prematurely, prevent the spontaneous accord between religious sentiment and public morality from naturally arising. In the “living religion” of Greek polytheism, “science is disguised as fable” — “a meeting of circumstances never reproduced in history allowed it to never stray from the natural march of religious ideas.”<sup>138</sup> Because no priests were there to artificially organize religion, society could “consecrate” for itself religious practices and symbols from other times and places, “imbu[ing] these vestiges of barbaric ages with a gentler and brighter color [*d’un coloris plus doux et plus brillant*].”<sup>139</sup> Constant rhapsodizes over the importance of this example for the

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<sup>136</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. III, 281.

<sup>137</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 275.

<sup>138</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 332-5.

<sup>139</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 336.

present: “The victory that they won over the sacerdotal corporations which oppressed the rest of the world was the signal of the high destinies intended for man by the benevolent being who created him. We owe to the Greeks the life of the mind and the force of morals ... Guard with care this priceless depository: Ancient Greece was able to acquire it [*a su le conquerir*], let modern Europe know how to defend it.”<sup>140</sup> In a final warning at the end of his description of the heights of Greek religion in Volume II, which appeared in 1825, Constant insists that “it is less impossible than one might think to bring back generations dominated by selfishness and softened by luxury to the situation of those ancient peoples whom an all-powerful order kept in abjectness and childhood.”<sup>141</sup> In the Restoration public sphere, these consistent polemics about the clerical usurpation of religious sentiment carried powerful political implications. Most obviously, Constant was denouncing the alliance between throne and altar among the powerful ultraroyalist faction to his right. Especially after the ascension of Charles X to the throne in 1824, the ‘ultras’ pursued a strong program of re-Christianisation based on the revival of clerical authority.<sup>142</sup> With their philosophy of legitimism, the ultras hoped to restore widespread belief in the divine right of kings (although, as we shall see, in surprisingly ‘modern’ ways).

But Constant’s anti-clericalism was also, and to an arguably even greater degree, directed against a rising faction within the liberal opposition: the so-called

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<sup>140</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 341.

<sup>141</sup> Constant, *De la religion*, Vol. II, 343.

<sup>142</sup> The Restoration was characterised by a huge missionary movement aimed at ameliorating the shortage of priests throughout France that the revolution had engendered – Helena Rosenblatt describes the Catholic church’s anxiety at a “new kind of popular piety” sweeping the country. Rosenblatt, Helena. *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 168-172.

‘industrialist’ publicists, led by political economists like Charles Dunoyer and Jean-Baptiste Say. These publicists began from a similar premise to Constant — that society had reached a new age characterised by a spirit of industry — but, from this, reached vastly different conclusions. The key difference was that the industrialists, responding to charges that the ‘negative’ thrust of Enlightenment thought had engendered revolutionary disintegration, asserted that the time had come for a *positive* philosophy to reconstruct social bonds. The problem, as Constant put it in an 1826 lecture, was that, in arguing that “we are entering an epoch in which it is more urgent to coordinate than to dissolve,” the industrialists “substituted the idea that one must coordinate doctrines, opinions, and efforts” for that of “guaranteeing to each of [society’s] members the most liberty possible ... to develop their faculties without obstacle, and to find, in this development, the greatest sum of physical wellbeing and intellectual enjoyment [*jouissances intellectuelles*] which it is in their nature to attain.” In striving to articulate a new doctrine with which to facilitate the tranquil coordination of productive activity, in other words, they threatened to quash the free intellectual development that Constant attributed to true religious sentiment.<sup>143</sup> In this way, the industrialists were, for Constant, worse than the legitimists: like Napoleon, they did not simply dominate by stifling thought, but instead invoked an ersatz “privilege of science” while simultaneously proscribing the very faculty of “free examination” upon the generalised access to which scientific investigation rests.<sup>2</sup> They were, quite simply, usurpers.

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<sup>143</sup> Constant, “Du développement progressif des idées religieuses,” 559-562.

### **Saint-Simon and the industrial priesthood**

Calls for the general organisation of intellect against which Constant protested were part of the industrialist liberals' broader commitment to the political enfranchisement of a new aristocracy that would better reflect the actual conditions of society. As an 1817 article in the industrialist journal *Le Censeur européen* put it, "public functions needed to be exercised by those who contribute most to national prosperity," since only they possessed the actual material resources required "to form a barrier powerful enough to protect the population against governmental despotism and the threat of anarchy."<sup>144</sup> In calling for the enfranchisement of such an intermediary power, industrialists invoked Montesquieu's theory of modern monarchy. The principle of industry on which such power would be based was, crucially, akin to *honour*, not virtue. The force animating the industrial regime would be self-interest rather than self-sacrifice. But Constant's critiques of astrolatry were even more germane to his critiques of the industrialists' sacerdotalism than he thought, in a way that (as far as I can ascertain) he never really spelt out. This is because one of their major publicists explicitly framed his industrialist liberalism around a priestly corporation authorised by astronomical understanding, and his use of the term *avantgarde* describes precisely the kind of political activity undertaken by this "spiritual power." I am speaking, of course, about Saint-Simon.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Quoted in de Dijn, *Liberalism in a Levelled Society*, 82.

<sup>145</sup> It should hopefully be clear by this point, but the terms 'industrialist' and 'industrialism' carried very different meanings than they do today. As Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau stresses, "for Saint-Simon, 'industry' is above all work, useful work, material and moral production. 'The industrial' is opposed to the idler, not the proletarian. He is one who uses their capacities (be they intellectual, manual, financial, etc.) and who, in doing so, is rendering service to himself at the same time as use to society." Pétré-Grenouilleau, Olivier. *Saint-Simon : l'utopie ou la raison en actes*. Paris : Payot & Rivages, 2012. 21.

“Let us unite; and, in order to reach the same goal, we each will perform a different task. *It is we artists who will serve as your vanguard.* The power of the arts is in effect the most immediate and rapid of all powers. We have all kinds of weapons ... the dramatic scene is open to us, and through it, above all, we are able to exercise an electric and victorious influence.”<sup>146</sup> So *l’artiste* addresses his collaborators, *l’industriel* and *la savant*, in what is generally considered the first use of the term ‘*avant-garde*’ to describe either political or aesthetic human activity. This call for an avantgarde appears in an 1824 prospectus, published upon the ascension of Charles X, with the lofty aim of creating a new synthesis of the defunct ultra and liberal journals of, respectively, Chateaubriand and Constant. In this proposal, Saint-Simon attributes the demise of the *Conservateur* and the *Minerve* to their having been outstripped by the progress of public opinion: mutual antagonism between right and left to revive either royal or popular sovereignty had finally given way, on Saint-Simon’s reckoning, to a general embrace of the Charter. His journal would be wield the ‘artistic’ weapons of the written word to ensure that the coalition of productive and scientific forces could attain their rightful place at the apex of power. In this section of the chapter, I analyse how Saint-Simon theorised the work of this vanguard as a particular kind of priestly power, bound up with his understanding of the role of scientific authority.

In this strand of industrialism, Saint-Simon set the precedent for an explicit invocation of astronomical sacerdotal authority that would go on to shape the positivist movement of later decades. What set Saint-Simon apart from other

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<sup>146</sup> de Saint-Simon, Henri. *Oeuvres complètes*. Introduction, notes and commentary by J. Grainge et. al. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013. Vol. IV, 3121.

industrialist calls for natural aristocracy – and the conceptual edifice upon which his call for an avantgarde rests – was that his political proposals grew out of a previously-established commitment to “positive philosophy.”<sup>147</sup> Prior to his career as an industrialist publicist, Saint-Simon was devoted to the grandiose project of devising a single principle with which to organise all human knowledge. The ultimate goal of this project was to resolve social and political upheaval by demonstrating how all knowledge accumulated since the scientific revolution could ultimately be derived from a single law. Saint-Simon’s vision, like Constant’s, was fundamentally anticlerical, pursuing the eradication of the clergy’s political power and, with it, the removal of obstacles to the kind of intellectual activity necessary for progressive public opinion to tame state sovereignty.

Saint-Simon’s interest in philosophy came relatively late in life. He asserts, in a quasi-autobiographical article from 1817, that it was participating in the American Revolutionary War in his early twenties that inspired him to adopt the “goal” of “study[ing] the forward movement of the human spirit, in order to work subsequently for the perfecting of civilisation.”<sup>148</sup> But this belies the reality that it took almost

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<sup>147</sup> When contrasting Saint-Simon to Constant, Rosenblatt portrays the former’s increasing obsession with finding a general principle for the reorganisation of society as a loss of faith in a liberal pluralism once shared with the latter. But connecting his earlier studies on science to his later liberal industrialism shows that, in fact, the articulation and proselytization of a single universal political principle was the consistent goal of Saint-Simon’s entire career as a publicist – thus the increasingly ‘authoritarian’ nature of industrialism was more a return of his basic commitments than an abandonment of his pluralism. See Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 222.

<sup>148</sup> Saint-Simon, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. II, 1478. Saint-Simon was an officer in the French expeditionary force that helped the Continental Army take Yorktown and effectively win the war in 1781. We can conjecture that the famous 14-week march of the Continental and French armies from Newport, Rhode Island to Yorktown, Virginia — now a designated National Historic Trail called the “Washington—Rochambeau Revolutionary Route” — would have furnished Saint-Simon with a striking image of history on the march (even though Saint-Simon himself arrived in Yorktown via naval transport from the French West Indies Fleet). I bring all this up to stress a distinction that will become clearer as this chapter progresses: the imaginary of historical progress underlying the language of avant-

another two decades — and an almost picaresque series of unsuccessful business ventures, including a failed scheme for a Panama Canal — for Saint-Simon’s formal studies to commence. For three years, beginning in 1799 going into his fortieth year, Saint-Simon attended the newly-established *École Polytechnique*. This prestigious institution — set up by *citoyens savants* and *grande organisateurs* of the nation-in-arms Gaspar Monge and Lazare Carnot — was, like the men who ran it, not only at the cutting edge of scientific discovery but also imbued with a public-spirited ethos emphasising the application of new ideas.<sup>149</sup> As his most recent biographer illustrates, Saint-Simon’s studies were not at all oriented around addressing a specific research question; with his wife he hosted a regular salon attended by prominent scientists, and he took upon himself the grandiose task of putting the accumulated knowledge of these luminaries on a “positive” footing.<sup>150</sup> This naive ambition, unsurprisingly, was largely met with indifference from his learned colleagues. Nonetheless, as we shall see, it would shape not only his own political efforts but also those of generations to come.

In seeking to unify the physical and human sciences, Saint-Simon’s syncretic vision took as its central metaphor the image of the ‘organised body’ (*corp organisé*). In combining the theories of physicists, physiologists, and philosophers, he wanted to show that human society was nothing but the most complex of physical organisms, and that, therefore, its movements should be interpreted through the same single

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gardism has sources other than the apocryphal Hegelian image of Napoleon as the world spirit on horseback at Jena in 1806.

<sup>149</sup> For an insightful account of this institution and its central place in Restoration-era political culture, see Tresch, John. *The Romantic Machine*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012.

<sup>150</sup> Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Saint-Simon*, 129-132.

principle that Isaac Newton had shown to govern physical laws: universal gravitation. If Constant thought he was making a revelation when he showed the affinity between the industrialists and the ultraroyalists, Saint-Simon was candid on this point: in an 1807 text, he expressed great admiration for the legitimist publicist Louis de Bonald's desire to bring "systematic unity" to human progress.<sup>151</sup> The basic difference, though, was that Saint-Simon believed this unity could be grounded in the "the current state of enlightenment"; where Bonald sought to reconstruct an "exaltation for deism", then, Saint-Simon saw "the strongest unitary character" in the "unity of causes" given by the idea of gravitation.<sup>152</sup>

One of the defining characteristics of the scientific revolution was the establishment and dissemination of Newtonian physics. The three laws of motion derived from the principle of universal gravitation allowed scientists to make accurate predictions about the movement of bodies both terrestrial and celestial, furnishing theoretical proofs for the earlier astronomical observations of Galileo and Copernicus that the earth was not the centre of the universe but a mere satellite orbiting the sun. It was now possible to conceive of earth's neighbourhood as a harmonious solar system, the movements of the spheres kept in check by a single law: gravity. This was the

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<sup>151</sup> The main difference between Bonald and Saint-Simon was not between clericalism and anticlericalism – both recognised the need to reconstitute 'spiritual power' – but instead between deism and 'mechanism'. In this way, Bonald was still very much a creature of the eighteenth-century enlightenment, while Saint-Simon presaged the scientism of the new century. While Bonald proposed a 'Temple of Providence' as the organizing symbol of his new religion, Saint-Simon envisioned a 'Temple of Newton'. There was a scientific, progressive character of Bonald's legitimism, and he struggled against the explicitly theological arguments of more devout legitimists like Joseph de Maistre. In the words of Klinck, "Bonald had foreshadowed a view of progress which the positivists, Saint-Simon, and Comte would make famous." See Klinck, David. *The French Counterrevolutionary Theorist Louis de Bonald (1754-1840)*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996. 97.

<sup>152</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. I, 400.

system of classical mechanics. But Newton was also clear that this orderly movement could not arise spontaneously; while his mathematical formulations demonstrated that the superior gravitational force of the sun could give rise to a *static* equilibrium, they also suggested that the gradual effects of lesser mutual gravitational interactions among planets would eventually lead to disequilibrium in the solar system. Hence Newton reserved a fundamental role for divine intervention — the famous ‘clockmaker God’ — as a non-physical agent responsible for periodically correcting the predicted long-term disturbances in the equilibrium of the physical solar system. It was the achievement of Pierre-Simon Laplace to demonstrate, in 1786, that these planetary perturbations were always minor and self-correcting. The clockmaker cosmological conjecture was thus, after Laplace, no longer necessary; gravitation could finally be considered a properly universal principle. The creation of celestial bodies, however, remained a merely speculative hypothesis for Laplace. He surmised, in the conclusion to his popular 1796 treatise *Exposition du système du monde*, that the condensation of stellar nebulae – the great clouds of stardust – were the source of new heavenly bodies.<sup>153</sup>

For Saint-Simon, the obviation of Newton’s watchmaker God in the celestial mechanics of Laplace indicated a way to conceive of the universe as a system of bodies organising and dis-organising in perpetual motion, all governed by the single principle of gravity, that had huge *political* implications. Key here was what Saint-

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<sup>153</sup> This hypothesis, in fact suggested earlier by numerous figures, was most famously proposed by Immanuel Kant in his early *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), and is thus often referred to as the “Kant-Laplace nebular hypothesis.”

Simon called the “general struggle between solids and fluids”<sup>154</sup> — a cosmological model that he sought to apply to human organisation, both at the physical and societal level. In a series of open letters addressed to the powerful *Bureau des longitudes* in 1808, Saint-Simon proposed a new ‘world system’ which took both Newton and Laplace to task for their “anachronistic” and “absurd” commitment to the idea of a stable, unchanging solar system. Saint-Simon praises Laplace (at that time chancellor of Napoleon’s senate) for demonstrating that the friction Newton feared would result from the presence of fluids in between solid celestial bodies — that is, matter in its gaseous state gradually slowing down the movement of matter in its solid state — was not a real problem. But he goes on to critique Laplace for not going far enough: instead of embracing the idea that fluids and solids existed in equal proportion, as Saint-Simon argued it would be logical to do, Laplace clung to Newton’s idea that solid bodies must move in a void.<sup>155</sup> In a systematic introduction to his world system published shortly thereafter, Saint-Simon describes a plenist universe completely filled with equal parts of solid and fluid matter. There are two corresponding “hemispheres”, with our solar system located in the solid one, since matter tends to solidify over time rather than becoming more fluid as it would in the other hemisphere. “In certain periods,” he explains, “the matter which exists in the two parts becomes merged. There is a general disorganisation, which is followed by a general reorganisation on the same basis.” Finally, Saint-Simon goes on to explain that, since “man is a small

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<sup>154</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol.I, 700-709.

<sup>155</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol.I, 360-1.

world,” the gravitational principle according to which planets form in our solidifying hemisphere also applies to human affairs.<sup>156</sup>

In *Memoir sur la science de l’homme* (1813), one of the final ‘scientific’ texts before his reinvention as a Restoration industrialist agitator, Saint-Simon crystallised the theories he had developed over the previous decades. The text is a plea for a physiologist collaborator who, alongside Saint-Simon, would cause “politics [to] become a positive science.” The politicians of the future — their prospective pupils in the science of the human body — “[would] no longer regard the problems they have to solve as anything but questions of hygiene.”<sup>157</sup> It is hard not to bristle at this apparently eugenicist vision, but, as with the rest of Saint-Simon’s oeuvre, we should take care to interpret how idiosyncratically he uses this term. A hygienic politics is one that ensures the circulation of life through the organised body of human society, by deducing how to restore the equilibrium between fluids and solids. Physiologists, Saint-Simon believed, had only just started thinking about the role of fluids in the human body, and new discoveries in this field promised to have far-reaching effects.<sup>158</sup> Most importantly, Saint-Simon thought that physiologists, as first astronomers and then chemists after them had done, would discover how the universal principle of gravitation operated on their object of study: life itself.<sup>159</sup>

This physiological understanding of the principles underlying life on earth would have important implications for politics, since, on Saint-Simon’s account, the

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<sup>156</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol.I, 374.

<sup>157</sup> Saint-Simon, ‘Memoir on the Science of Man’, in Taylor, Keith (ed. and trans.), *Henri Saint-Simon 1760-1825: Selected Writings*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1975. 113.

<sup>158</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol.II, 1122

<sup>159</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol.II, 1169-1175.

intelligence of each animal was an outcome of its organisation. At the purely corporeal level, there was surprisingly little distinction between human beings and other animals; it was only when one took complex social organisation into account that a vast gulf in intelligence opened up. He cites as inspiration Condorcet's *Tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1794), but rejects the "philosophical prejudice" that "man is the sole animal who has the property of self-perfection" — for Saint-Simon, intellectual perfectibility is merely the outcome of a virtuous cycle of "action and reaction" set off by humans' initially minor advantage as "the best organised" animal.<sup>160</sup> The task Saint-Simon took upon himself in the *Memoir*, then, was to reconstruct how this organisation might have developed over time.

The speculative history of human organisation is presented as a series with twelve terms. The latter half of the series is characterised by a succession of "general ideas" — Saint-Simon's term for the religious and scientific systems which he takes to be the organising principles of all knowledge. In the words of Frank Manuel, this history "compress[es] the essence of positivism into capsule form":<sup>161</sup> the schema of a universal history in which ever more phenomena are rendered explicable according to general scientific laws, culminating in a science of society. Each successive general idea indicates a more perfected way of understanding cause and effect, and hence of the expanded capacity of the social body to organise itself. Idolatry, polytheism, theism, and, finally, an as-yet-unnamed political-scientific system heralded by Newtonian physics. In each term of the series, Saint-Simon argues that an advanced

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<sup>160</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol.II, 1087-8.

<sup>161</sup> Manuel, Frank. *The New World of Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon*. South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 1963. 117.

scientific capacity arises; agents who foreknow what will become the general idea in the next term.

The crucial turning point in this positivist historical schema is, just as in Constant's history of religion, the astronomical discoveries made by ancient Egyptian priests. Egypt achieved a "second point of departure for human intelligence" and "the first step in general science," since it was the first society (on Saint-Simon's telling) with a widespread consciousness of cause and effect. But within that society, there was a "clear division between thinkers and believers," between priests and non-priests: the latter continued to worship fetishes, believing in the causal power of sensuous objects, while the superior knowledge of the former allowed them to devise a more organised, polytheistic religion. The "arduous work" of the Egyptian priests to observe and accumulate knowledge about the "march of the stars," for Saint-Simon, represents a crucial milestone in human history when the "sacerdotal power and the scientific capacity were identical in their essence."<sup>162</sup> Whenever priestly authorities cease to represent the "most instructed" members of a society, it is up to the genuine bearers of scientific capacity to replace them and, in doing so, to prepare the way for the next "general idea" in the series. This is precisely the situation Saint-Simon argues the world is facing in the nineteenth century. Humanity would enter the twelfth term of their developmental series when knowledge became reorganised on the basis of the belief that the universe is ruled by a single immutable law, and it was up to the bearers of this understanding to acquire the spiritual authority necessary to generalise this awareness. As the address to Napoleon in his final scientific work declared, "... I have

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<sup>162</sup> Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol.II, 1134.

called this first sketch of my plan for the reorganisation of European society *Study on Universal Gravitation* because the new philosophical theory must be based on the idea of universal gravitation, and because the new political system of Europe must be a consequence of the new philosophy.”<sup>163</sup> But Napoleon did not respond, and the task remained for a “much smaller class of people ... to create ideas and to deepen them, until we find a solid base for reconstructing ... the intellectual edifice.”<sup>7</sup>

I contend that it was this kind of “small class” that Saint-Simon was referring to in his 1824 call for an industrialist vanguard. Crucially, Saint-Simon conceived the industrial regime as a system both industrial *and* scientific, articulating two distinct conditions for its realisation. The continued centrality of Saint-Simon’s scientific vision is evident in an 1821 statement of the two fundamental conditions of the industrial constitution. First, unsurprisingly, is the orientation of society toward a “grand industrial common goal” by a political system which allows for the self-direction of industrial functions. Complementing this is the condition “that the observation of the laws of nature is fully active in relation to all the different orders of phenomena nature presents, enabling the unification of particular scientific knowledge into a general system of the study of nature, corresponding to the general system of action on nature.”<sup>164</sup> The industrial society, in other words, can only be achieved by realising the earlier dream of scientific synthesis. Like Constant, he sees himself as trying to analyse the social system in a way “that results from the nature of things in themselves, from which, in the last analysis, political laws must derive as much as

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<sup>163</sup> Saint-Simon, *Selected Writings*, 124.

<sup>164</sup> Saint-Simon, *Selected Writings*, 127.

scientific laws, as the illustrious Montesquieu put it so well.”<sup>165</sup> The cooperation of the industrial and scientific capacities would usher in the twelfth age of humanity, and to do so it had to replace honour with industry as the mainspring of modern monarchy.

We are now in a better position to think about the “electric influence” Saint-Simon saw, in his 1824 prospectus, as the task of his industrialist vanguard. Two premises are important here: first, that, in complex bodies, it is the circulation of fluids among solids that brings life, and; second, nervous fluids correspond to imaginative activity, while observation and reason were the ‘solid’ aspects of human mental activity. The ‘alliance’ with the producers of the ‘dramatic scene’ would provide the activating fluid element to the solidified rational processes conducted by the scientists and industrialists, bringing the industrial system to life. In the prospectus, Saint-Simon complains that, among the changing ideas that have inspired the human imagination across the ages, the “idea most generally and for the longest time deemed noble has been that which, despising life as a worthless, unimportant commodity worth the price of some poetic fiction, is called military glory.” Since “the general ideas of the present era are peaceful ideas,” and their “exaltation is necessary to impart in them a character of loftiness and nobility.”<sup>166</sup> “What fairer picture to enflame the imagination,” he writes, “...than that of humankind forever united in fraternity of pleasures and work, this practical morality of all ages. What more beautiful destiny for the arts than to exercise over society a positive power, a real priesthood [*un véritable sacerdoce*], and to dash forward in advance of all intellectual faculties toward the age of their greatest

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<sup>165</sup> Saint-Simon, *Selected Writings*, 142.

<sup>166</sup> Saint-Simon, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. IV, 3123.

development!” With the aid of the scientists, and in service of the industrialists, Saint-Simon declares, they “must make every effort to take into ... their hands public instruction, which can only prosper under their double influence and their immediate direction.”<sup>167</sup> It is clear, then, that Saint-Simon was heavily invested in fomenting a new sacerdotal power that would replace feudal glory with peaceful industry as the guiding imaginative idea.

Examining his pedagogical proposals reveals how central astronomy was to securing this industrial imaginary. As Saint-Simon put it, “the system of human knowledge has always been based on astronomical knowledge, and astronomical knowledge has always served as its base ... Now, from this fact, it results that the perfection of the conception of the world system leads necessarily to the perfection of the entire mass of human knowledge.”<sup>168</sup> Saint-Simon insisted that French educational institutions adopt this system that promised to transform politics into a positive science, preparing a detailed curriculum for the elite *École normale* to achieve this end. His proposed philosophy course “recapitulat[es] the march of human intelligence in the scientific field.” It thus begins with astronomy, as the science of “perfect solids”, and ends, in the fourth and final year, with physiology, the study of “the principle of action” as an “effect of the circulation of nervous fluid.” “The mind is satisfied,” Saint-Simon writes of the culmination of this systematic education, “by the idea of a material communication between our eye and a star.”<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Saint-Simon, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. IV, 3124.

<sup>168</sup> Saint-Simon, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, 704.

<sup>169</sup> Saint-Simon, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, 946-957.

In implementing this education system, grounded in a science of man and cosmos unified under a single principle, Saint-Simon hoped that the operation of this spiritual power would bring “solidity” to the constitutional Charter and ensure its contract between king and nation was representative of the actual state of French society. While supporters of the Charter made reference to Montesquieu’s positive appraisal of the English constitution, Saint-Simon argued that Montesquieu would have been much less enthusiastic about England as a model had he been alive to see the political “crisis” the United Kingdom had fallen into. This was because, in the wake of Waterloo, it had become apparent that their institutions were directing social forces in two opposing directions. “The industrial force which was introduced in the English social organisation, as the force limiting the feudal force,” Saint-Simon writes, “must become the directing force in France.”<sup>170</sup> The equal right of participation is, for Saint-Simon, “proof of the vagueness and uncertainty which still shroud political ideas,” and it is only adhered to because politics has not yet become a “positive science.” When this happened, the “conditions of the capacity will become clear and fixed, and the cultivation of politics will be entrusted exclusively to a special class of scientists who will impose silence on all twaddle.”<sup>171</sup> Thus, the mixed constitution with its honour-based contestatory culture would be transcended, thanks to the spiritual work of Saint-Simon’s vanguard bringing organised forms into harmony with the actual state of industrial society.

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<sup>170</sup> Saint-Simon, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. IV, 2921.

<sup>171</sup> Saint-Simon, *Selected Writings*, 230.

### **Blanqui's astronomy without astrology**

A year later, in 1825, Saint-Simon died, and his growing body of devoted followers took up his final text – *La nouvelle christianisme* – as a call to found a new religion.

Under the newly-ascended ultraroyalist monarch Charles X, it was becoming increasingly difficult to believe in the emancipatory potential of the Charter. Finally, when King Charles tried ousting a resistant parliament and replacing it with loyalists in July 1830, Three Glorious Days of fighting on Parisian barricades – supported by the liberal press – brought an end to the Restoration monarchy.

After the insurrection, a new constitution was drafted by a rump of the Chamber of Deputies. But the deputies refused to organise a constitutional convention and, in the days leading up to the constitution's ratification, republican demonstrators surrounded the Palais de Bourbon demanding one. Constant, one of the highest profile republican sympathisers in the Chamber, helped hold the crowds at bay. The king's sovereignty, in the July Monarchy which emerged from this strained process, was framed as elected by and contracted with neither the people nor the nation, but the deputies acting "in the universal interest." For republicans ascribing to principles of national or popular sovereignty, whose barricade building was officially acknowledged as having toppled the old regime, it was difficult not to view King Louis Philippe and his ministers as usurpers, and secret societies which had fought alongside the moderate deputies against Charles X now reorganised in the name of overthrowing the new regime. Usurpation of sovereignty is, no doubt, what is being referred to in a speech given at a meeting of *La Société des Amis du Peuple* recorded by Henrich Heine: "Citizen Blanqui ... gave a long discourse full of mockery against

the bourgeoisie, those shopkeepers who chose Louis-Philippe as king ... in their own interest rather than that of the people, who were not complicit in such an unworthy usurpation.”<sup>172</sup> A year and a half later, delivering a report on the political situation to the *Société* before commencing his first of many prison sentences, Blanqui argues that “this shameful usurpation ... would never have occurred with impunity if [the people] had found men capable of guiding their blows.” The workers on the barricades, Blanqui observes, had not been able to generate their own leaders because their long struggle against Charles X had been shared with the middle classes. But, having been duped once, the workers would not be duped again. The July monarchy would inevitably engender a new insurrection because it straddled the “two principles [which] divide France — the principle of legitimacy and the principle of popular sovereignty,” the “old organisation of the past” and that which “rallies all men of the future.”<sup>173</sup> In seeking to show the legitimists that they were not a threat to order, the government, Blanqui observes, increasingly submitted to their demands. The lines of division in the “war” between rich and poor — monarchical legitimacy and popular sovereignty — were thus already re-emerging, only this time the workers, clear on the distinction between their friends and their enemies, would find their own leaders and win undiluted control.

Almost four decades and many failed insurrections later, Blanqui would again insist on the need for democratic leadership to resist usurpation. Explicitly invoking the Saint-Simonians and positivists, he writes in an 1869 draft for his *Critique sociale*,

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<sup>172</sup> Quoted in Géffroy, Gustav. *L'Enfermé*. Paris: 1919. 57.

<sup>173</sup> Blanqui, Auguste. ‘Report to the Society of the Friends of the People,’ in P. Hallward and P. Le Goff (eds.), *The Blanqui Reader*. London: Verso, 2018. 29.

“the communists have never ceased to constitute the boldest vanguard of democracy, while those pursuing their speculative hypotheses have competed with each other in the platitude of their submission to each regressive government.”<sup>174</sup> The problem with the Saint-Simonians and positivists against which the communist vanguard must struggle, as Blanqui frames it in an earlier notebook entry, is their “usurping presumptuousness.” They want to “create an imaginary social organism, a priori or in the abstract, and impose it from above on the basis of its authority as an indisputable science.” As an alternative, Blanqui insists that “the new social organism ... is the work of everyone, a project that proceeds over time, through trial and error... We can remove the obstacles in its path, and help to carve out a downward slope, but we should never pretend that we can create the river itself.”<sup>175</sup> At the end of the 1860s, then, Blanqui turns to the language of vanguardism to describe an anti-usurping democratic leadership. Now, however, in the drastically different context of a positivist-dominated republican opposition in a liberalising plebiscitary empire, it is, I argue, not the usurpation of popular sovereignty but the usurpation of popular involvement that Blanqui is worried about. The struggle between a sovereign proletariat and a usurping alliance of bourgeois and noble legitimists is no longer at

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<sup>174</sup> Blanqui, ‘Communism: The Future of Society’, in *Blanqui Reader*, 257. The term *avant-garde* had, of course, become ubiquitous in the decades since Saint-Simon. Victor Hugo, for example, describes “the four vanguards of the human race going to the four cardinal points of progress.” *Les Misérables* (1862), Book II, 206. Earlier, the republican caricature in Honoré de Balzac’s *The Unwitting Comedians*, had stressed that “the Communists, the humanitarians, the philanthropists you understand, all these people are our vanguard.” Balzac, *Les Comédiens sans le savoir* (1846), 361. But Blanqui’s use of the term is more precise, insofar as it appears in a polemic against Saint-Simon’s successors, in a way that appropriates and subverts their sacerdotal authority. Indeed, as

<sup>175</sup> Blanqui, ‘The Sects and the Revolution,’ in *Blanqui Reader*, 177.

the centre of Blanqui's strategy. Instead, it is the struggle to preserve the liberty of intelligence against the latest iteration of sacerdotal usurpation.

Before going any further, I need to account for why it is plausible to even suggest a link between Blanqui's notion of usurpation and that of Constant, precisely (one assumes) one of those bourgeois liberal deputies he saw as betraying the people in 1830. When commentators parse the shaping of Blanqui's ideas, they take as formative his participation in the secret societies of the late 1820s known as the Carbonari. "Blanqui, awakened to politics under the Restoration, took up the lifestyle [*les moeurs*] of a conspirator of the Restoration era," writes his first biographer Gustave G effroy, "and the Carbonarist cell became for him the ideal type of secret society, of possible opposition."<sup>176</sup> Such groups — with their mysterious initiation rites and oaths of fraternity — have tended to dominate scholarship on opposition to the Restoration more generally. The radical republican legend of "Gracchus" Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals achieved consecration in the 1828 memoir of its last surviving instigator, Phillipe Buonarroti. "Humanity might owe its complete redemption" to the Jacobin dictatorship, wrote the Italian revolutionary hero, "had subsequent events not destroyed all," since "a people so strangely elongated from the order of things ... had need of extraordinary means to replace it in a condition in which it would be possible for it to exercise effectually and not in mere fiction, the plenitude of its sovereignty."<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> G effroy, *L'enferm e*, 36.

<sup>177</sup> Buonarroti, *Buonarroti's History of Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality* (trans. Bronterre O'Brien) (London: 1836), 26, 101. The English translation by Bronterre O'Brien is itself a fascinating insight into the British labor movement of the 1830s, with O'Brien using this reflection on the revolution as a

But, as Robert Alexander has recently indicated, this focus on the conspiratorial republicanism of figures like Buonarotti means scholars have paid much less attention to the surprising overlap between legal and illegal opposition groups during these years. In his words, attending to the broad spectrum of resistance and reform currents reveals how the “insurrectionary tradition was a significant component of the Liberal Opposition” itself.<sup>178</sup> Such an overlap is present in Blanqui’s own experience. Beginning in 1829 after finishing his studies in medicine and law at the Sorbonne, the young Blanqui worked as a parliamentary stenographer at the liberal daily *Le Globe*.<sup>179</sup> As he was getting involved in secret societies, then, he also would have been paying careful attention to the speeches of parliamentary deputies, among whom Constant sat on the leftmost bench as member for the heavily protestant Bas-Rhin department. In Géffroy’s words, Blanqui — rejecting the prevailing Romantic tastes of his contemporaries — was “more interested in ... the doctrinaire debates in the Chambers,” and at *Le Globe*’s office he “talked little and listened much.”<sup>180</sup> A couple of years prior to Blanqui taking up his post there, Constant had published excerpts from *De la religion* itself in the newspaper.<sup>181</sup> None of the commentators on Blanqui’s life and thought take seriously the idea that the prolific struggles of a figure like Constant during this period may have left a mark on the young revolutionary’s

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medium for articulating his own analysis of the events and (like his French contemporaries) of developing more general tools for political analysis.

<sup>178</sup> Alexander, Robert. *Re-Writing the French Revolutionary Tradition: Liberal Opposition and the Fall of the Bourbon Monarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 14ff.

<sup>179</sup> The editor at *le Globe*, Pierre Leroux, was a Saint-Simonian who would go on to formulate his own streak of romantic socialism that became influential in the 1830s and 40s. Legend has it that Saint-Simon, at the time he was writing about the vanguard, considered co-editing *le Globe* with Leroux.

<sup>180</sup> Géffroy, *L'enfermé*, 42-3.

<sup>181</sup> Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 205.

thought. But if the older Blanqui's writings show, in the words of another biographer, "a medley of ideas gleaned from a mass of doctrines,"<sup>182</sup> why are we to suppose that intellectual boundaries drawn a century later would apply to this undeniably eclectic thinker?

In the six months left of his life after July 1830, Constant would emerge as an implacable critic of the limits placed by the July monarchy on freedom of speech and assembly. His insistence on extending these rights to Parisian workers, in particular, made him unpopular with his colleagues in the government, who gave his coveted position of Minister of Public Instruction to an incompetent rival and denied his candidacy to the Academie française. But he remained more popular than ever among the greater public. The most visible mourners at his huge public funeral procession in January 1831 were republican students and workers — the event was placed under strict surveillance for fear that it would turn into an armed insurrection.<sup>183</sup> Blanqui may well have been in attendance, and we can only wonder whether he was one of the revolutionary youths who called for Constant's coffin to be brought to the Pantheon. Conjecturing further, we might finally wonder whether the rise of Napoleon III after the failed revolutions of 1848 — a turn of events which led Blanqui, like so many others of his generation, to rethink his political beliefs — also revived the memory of Constant's critiques of this second emperor's usurping uncle.

There are, of course, profound differences between Constant and Blanqui, not least among them the fact that, where the former thought a *laissez-faire* approach to

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<sup>182</sup> Spitzer, Alan. *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957. 287.

<sup>183</sup> Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*, 238-245.

religious education would dissolve clerical authority, the latter viewed an outright ban on priests serving as teachers as the only solution to the problem of usurpation. I am not, then, denying that a clear authoritarian streak runs through Blanqui that is missing from Constant.<sup>184</sup> And this substantive divergence, moreover, says nothing of Constant's vastly superior achievements as a constitutional framer, novelist, religious scholar, political journalist, and parliamentary orator. But to dwell on these differences would be to misunderstand my purposes in this chapter. To not recognise the extent to which Blanqui's perception of proletarian insurrection was not simply some unyielding *sans-culotte* atavism, but rather was shaped — at the very least *in part* — by the exchange of ideas among a complex anti-clerical coalition, is to submit to the same illusory belief in the existence of a transhistorical voluntarist emancipatory movement, clinging to a monolithic set of ideas. It is, in short, to think precisely as Blanqui's ubiquitous critics have accused him of thinking.

The plausibility of a link between Blanqui and Constant thus demonstrated, we can now trace the much more straightforward connection between Saint-Simon and the positivists of the 1860s. Despite their many disagreements, the role of astronomy in the march of human understanding remained a central plank in the ideas of Saint-Simon's most famous successor: Auguste Comte, the 'father' of positivism. Comte simplified the Saint-Simonian series into three stages of individual and species development: theological, metaphysical, and positive, or; childhood, adolescence, and

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<sup>184</sup> Although, as Garsten makes clear, if Constant is to be championed as the great herald of negative liberty, then his insistence on viewing certain beliefs and practices as belonging to the dustbin of history should trouble liberal canonisers working in the tradition of Isaiah Berlin – Constant is committed to his own streak of “positive liberty” with potentially authoritarian implications. See Garsten, ‘Religion and the Case Against Ancient Liberty,’ 6-7.

maturity, or; attribution of effects to imaginary causes, dissolution of such imaginary causes through logical speculation, and, finally, establishment of general laws through careful observation in service of real needs. Fetishism, the first sub-stage of the theological stage, "...consist[s] chiefly in the attribution to all external bodies of a life essentially analogous to our own, but almost always more energetic, according to their ordinarily more powerful action. The adoration of the stars characterises the highest degree of this first theological phase, which, at the beginning, hardly differs from the mental state in which the higher animals remain."<sup>185</sup> Adopting Saint-Simon's principle that the human mind, in its education, ought to recapitulate the development of scientific knowledge as a total system, Comte claims that "no science can better manifest this necessarily relative nature of all our real knowledge than astronomy, for, as the investigation of phenomena can only be carried out by one sense, it is very easy to appreciate the speculative consequences of its suppression or its simple alteration."<sup>186</sup> Comte used astronomy as a propaedeutic for scientific reasoning: overcoming the "fetish" of attributing supernatural causal power to the stars was the first step towards the formation of scientific reasoning in both the maturation of the individual and the rise of human civilization. Astronomy also exemplified philosophical reasoning itself: "However impossible may be the aim to reduce the phenomena of the respective sciences to a single law, supreme in each, this should be the aim of philosophers, as it is only the imperfection of our knowledge which

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<sup>185</sup> Comte, Auguste. *Traité philosophique d'astronomie populaire, ou exposition systématique de toutes les notions de philosophie astronomique, soit scientifiques, soit logiques, qui doivent devenir universellement familières*. Paris : 1844. 3.

<sup>186</sup> Comte, *Traité*, 16.

prevents its accomplishment. The perfection of a science is in exact proportion to its approach to this consummation; and, according to this test, astronomy distances all other sciences.”<sup>187</sup> In most perfectly identifying an underlying law able to explain all phenomena – Newton’s universal gravitation – astronomy could provide the model toward which sociology, and with it the organization of all human societies, might aspire. Comte’s ‘popular course in astronomical philosophy’ ran as a lecture series for fourteen years, with ordinary working Parisians encouraged to attend, and was published in 1844.

In many ways, Comte’s advocacy of positivist sacerdotal authority was more pronounced than Saint-Simon’s: when the former first announced what would become his philosophy of positivism, the latter published a critique of his erstwhile secretary’s suggestion that the spiritual authority might operate independently of the temporal.<sup>188</sup> Comte wanted to decouple the artist and the scientist from the industrialist base. In this way, he was able to welcome the 1851 coup of Napoleon III as the triumph of a “sociocratic regime” — the direct empowerment of society’s productive forces and the final shedding of what he saw, contra Saint-Simon, as the merely “metaphysical” baggage of parliamentary representative government.<sup>189</sup> Many adherents of Saint-Simon himself also viewed the state-funded development projects of the Second Empire as realisations of their master’s dreams. Prosper Enfantin, one of the original leaders of the Saint-Simonian ‘temple’ in the 1820s, wrote approvingly of Napoleon

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<sup>187</sup> Comte, Auguste. *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*. Trans. Harriet Martineau. London: George Bell & Sons, 1896. 152-153.

<sup>188</sup> See the ‘Introduction’ in Taylor, *Selected Writings*, 44.

<sup>189</sup> Quoted in Hazareesingh, Sudhir. *From Subjects to Citizens: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. 41.

III's empire-building in 1866, marvelling at how "we have embraced the Earth with our networks of railways, gold, silver, electricity! Spread the spirit of God and the education of humankind through these new channels, of which you are partly the creators and masters."<sup>190</sup> One prominent Saint-Simonian publicist went so far as to describe Napoleon III as "a Saint-Simon on horseback."<sup>191</sup>

Comte's protégé Emile Littré became a major public figure in France during the 1860s and the chief populariser of his master's positivist philosophy, responsible for delineating 'good' positivism – the philosophy of science we associate with the term today – from the 'bad' – Comte's later political experiments in the form of a 'religion of humanity.'<sup>192</sup> But, despite only being remembered today for his eponymous dictionary, Littré was very politically active in the republican opposition movement. Sudhir Hazareesingh, whose work on this period I have relied on heavily,

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<sup>190</sup> Prosper Enfantin, *Le Crédit intellectuel* quoted in Musso, Pierre. 'Network Ideology : From Saint-Simonianism to the Internet,' in J.L. Garcia (ed.), *Pierre Musso and the Network Society*. New York: Springer, 2016. 33.

<sup>191</sup> In Anceau, Eric. *Napoleon III. Un Saint-Simon à cheval*. Paris : Tallandier, 2008. 14. Glossing this epithet, and justifying why he deemed it worthy of subtitled his biography of the emperor, Anceau explains: "... [Napoleon III] believed, in effect, like Saint-Simon and his socialist disciples, in the advent of a society made happy thanks to material and moral progress, to the rapprochement between social classes, and to the establishment of a durable peace. But he was not content with speculation; he wanted to be a man of action and that is what he became. On horseback, by train, or by ship, he travelled more than any other sovereign of his time."

<sup>192</sup> Nathalie Richard relates how Littré's efforts to popularize Comte's ideas were helped by church polemicists' use of the epithet 'positivist' as a general indictment for anything in intellectual life deemed irreligious or immoral. The lightning rod of this cultural struggle was Ernest Renan's 1863 *Vie de Jésus*, a biography aiming to completely secularize and demystify its subject (its unprecedented sales figures went unmatched until 1914). This extreme popularity prompted the Catholic Church to not only wage a massive smear campaign against the book itself but also to invent "a group of enemies who subscribed to the common goal of destroying metaphysics and religion," and this intervention "transformed the philosophical invention of a 'positivist school' into a cultural event that resonated far beyond academic circles." Transmitted via the vast Catholic press network and, more significantly, the coordinated composition of church sermons, the avatar of the positivist enemy "reached an audience that was sometimes illiterate or did not read books, was rural as well as urban, unprivileged as well as aristocratic and bourgeois, feminine as well as masculine." See Richard, Nathalie. "The French Philosophical Crisis of the 1860s and the Invention of the 'Positivist School.'" In J. Feichtinger et al. (eds.). *The Worlds of Positivism*. New York: Springer, 2018. 165-6.

has convincingly demonstrated that, despite the ubiquitous paternalism of the imperial prefect, the last decade of the Second Empire — thanks to the institutionalisation of municipal elections — was marked by “the creation of a civic culture through the patient practice of local democracy.”<sup>193</sup> A pragmatic, moderate ‘municipal republicanism’ achieved hegemonic status across much of urban France, laying the basis for the regime that would finally put an end to the revolution that had begun almost a century earlier. But its comprehensive “sanitisation” under the positivist intellectual hegemony of figures like Littré left republican ideas “emptied ... of much of their substance,” and this, he argues, opened the door to their “appropriation” in future capitalist imperialist projects.<sup>194</sup> We should not be surprised that Jules Ferry, the disciple of Littré who finally inscribed the principle of *laïcité* into the French education system, was also a major architect of French imperial conquest during the Third Republic. “The old Comtean ideal of a technocratic elite appeared to be making a forceful return in Littré’s political thought,” Hazareesingh observes, “and it is hard not to conclude that local empowerment had been sacrificed at the altar of republican elite governance.”<sup>195</sup> This, then, would be a republic without civic vigilance, in which the social scientific harmonisation of interests under the shadow of Saint-Simon’s industrialist aristocracy held sway.

The shadow cast by the Third Republic’s founding violence — the bloody repression of the social-republican Paris Commune by the bourgeois-republican provisional government — has long made the fault-lines within the opposition to

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<sup>193</sup> Hazareesingh, *Subjects to Citizens*, 303.

<sup>194</sup> Hazareesingh, *Subjects to Citizens*, 81.

<sup>195</sup> Hazareesingh, *Subjects to Citizens*, 69.

Napoleon III appear as the inevitable outcome of irreconcilable economic interests. But the overlap between socialists and moderate republicans was significant, especially on the vital questions of education and the political role of expertise. Blanqui and his supporters, consistent with other republican opposition groups, saw the battle over education policy as key to France's emancipation from imperial domination. The repeal of the Falloux laws of 1851, which gave the church a significant degree of influence over public instruction, was seen as a key step on the road to the republic. After Blanqui's 1864 prison break, the growing Blanquist organisation was much more enthusiastic about the International Student Congress of 1865 than the International Workingmen's Association Congress of 1867. As Alan Spitzer puts it, at the former Congress "positivists and materialists united on resolutions demanding the radical reform of education."<sup>196</sup> Another biographer notes that, after the 1868 legalisation of public assemblies, the Blanquists were consistently found to agitate in public meetings on the question of *education libre* and the need to resist the false liberalism of a 'pluralist' public instruction that would have maintained a majority of clerical teachers.<sup>197</sup> And a perusal of Blanqui's notebooks from the entire decade shows the intense interest he took in education policy debates, transcribing entire parliamentary sessions from the *Journal des debats* alongside his own commentary on the need to abolish the "black armies" of church schoolmasters. "Education," Blanqui wrote in 1869, "as the prerogative of all ... alone will be able to

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<sup>196</sup> Spitzer, *Revolutionary Theories of Blanqui*, 276.

<sup>197</sup> Dommanget, Maurice. *Blanqui et l'opposition révolutionnaire à la fin du Second Empire*. Paris : A. Colin, 1960). 171.

create, through Equality, order, peace, freedom and happiness. It is thus the foremost necessity, the most important goal to pursue.”<sup>198</sup>

The question, then, was what a truly republican, secular education ought to look like, and Blanqui agitated against those republicans who strove — successfully, it turns out — to found it on positivist philosophy. In an article comparing Comte and J.S. Mill, Littré declares that, despite their differences, the two great thinkers agree that replacing theological and metaphysical beliefs with positive philosophy in the education of “the youth of the elite of humanity” is key to the liberation of humanity, and that — so long as these elites are not forcefully repressed — their beliefs will spread and become “the future of the multitude.” For this reason, against the violence and corruption of the older order, “there is no adversary more determined, more effective, more radical than the positive philosopher.”<sup>199</sup> But it also needs to be stressed that the struggle between Blanquist materialists and positivists did not simply map onto that between radicals and moderates, socialists and capitalists, or proletariat and bourgeoisie. We have, for example, this beautiful positivist clarion call from the socialist republican Tony Moilin: “The perfect happiness that the founders of religions promised to their faithful, this equality, this fraternity that the Conventionalists of

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<sup>198</sup> Blanqui, ‘Education and Freedom of the Press’, in *Blanqui Reader*, 141. Alain Decaux argues that the militant atheism Blanqui adopted at this time, which he shared with many bourgeois republicans, was an insufficient principle in the formation of social democratic policies. Decaux demonstrates this by discussing how, time and again under the Third Republic, left-leaning politicians wary of upsetting the capitalist class relied on anti-clericalism as a means of channelling radical sentiment away from the dreaded social question. This criticism, I argue, falls flat: Decaux fails to recognise the struggle that was being waged *within* anti-clericalism during the sixties, and that it was only the victory of figures like Jules Ferry — adherents of Blanqui’s real target, the ‘positivist religion’ usurping scientific enlightenment — that allowed the de-Christianizing attitude to become a cover for anti-socialist and imperialist political programmes. Decaux, Alain. *Blanqui, l’insurgé*. Paris: Perrin, 1976. 532.

<sup>199</sup> Emile Littré, ‘La Philosophie Positive : M. Auguste Comte et M. J. Stuart Mill,’ *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 août 1866, Seconde Période, Vol. 64, No. 4, 829-866, 866.

1792 wished to impose by violence, it is we, the men of 1869, who are destined to make it reign on earth ... The love of humanity ... is religion to we, who believe no more in the divinity of Christ and who recognise no other Providence than the fatality of the laws of science.”<sup>200</sup> The appeal to providential scientific progress as the key to finally achieving the republic – even the socialist one – was everywhere.

It was in this milieu, then — surrounded by the desire to, in a sense, embody Saint-Simon’s vanguard, and disseminate a vision of human progress via analogy to cosmic laws — that Blanqui himself invoked the language of a vanguard very differently: to describe how his “communist” position resisted the usurpations of intelligence by his positivist rivals. For Blanqui, the “marvellous classifications” of positivism display “outrageous pretention,” achieving nothing more than the “pleasant usurpations” of human achievement under the rubric of historical progress. Positivism “proclaims itself a philosophy. We like to call it a method. It is only a style, and in this respect, one of the most annoying diseases of the French language...” Positivist authors are “stricken with mental paralysis,” and their effort to have their “gobbledygook” recognised as the “language of philosophy and of science” threatens the real march of human intelligence.<sup>201</sup>

How did Blanqui understand the intelligence he wants to protect from the positivists’ “pleasant usurpations”? Like them, he describes the “physical order of things” as “the one guide that never goes astray,” even going so far as to suggest that “society has no right to rebel” against science.<sup>202</sup> And, as we saw with Saint-Simon

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<sup>200</sup> Tony Moilin, quoted in Hazareesingh, *Subjects to Citizens*, 105.

<sup>201</sup> Blanqui, ‘Fate, Fatalism, Fatality,’ in *Blanqui Reader*, 186.

<sup>202</sup> Blanqui, ‘Fate, Fatalism, Fatality,’ in *Blanqui Reader*, 185.

above, Blanqui has recourse to physiology as the key to explaining human behaviour — intelligence, sensation, thought, and will are all “the product of nerve cells.”<sup>203</sup> Again like Saint-Simon, he asserts that the perfectibility of human intelligence could be attributed to these essentially material nervous processes. But his account of that perfectibility is utterly different. Proposing a strict dualism between mind and matter, Blanqui argues that moral and material progress must be treated as radically distinct. How is this Cartesianism possible, for a resolute materialist who denied any separation between matter and spirit?

By embracing the idea of the brain as an assemblage of parts with diverse functions, Blanqui encourages us to radically rethink the idea of free will. “The will ... is a resultant of the whole set of faculties in motion” that “amounts to nothing more than passive and very humble obedience to irresistible impulses.”<sup>204</sup> The implications for ideas about association and organisation of this physiologically-determinist account of agency are diametrically opposed to Saint-Simon’s. “Fame, fortune, power, even honour, can all be at stake in the enterprise that unites [an association of men]”, but eventually — and in spite of momentary reprieves brought by intelligence reminding them of their common interests — “the violence of the passions gets the upper hand,” and “the observer is seized by terror at the sight of these deaf and blind machines that whirl and swirl, that collide, tumble, and finally collapse ... without the slightest hint or sign of their free will.” “From Peking to Paris,” Blanqui asserts, “... the same scenes are everywhere played out ... on the human stage, and all these

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<sup>203</sup> Blanqui, ‘Fate, Fatalism, Fatality,’ 186.

<sup>204</sup> Blanqui, ‘Fate, Fatalism, Fatality,’ 197, 200.

performances are given in honour of free will.”<sup>205</sup> Blanqui is stressing here that, in contrast to what the doctrine of free will would have us believe, no one is to blame for the terrible spectacle of the collapse of control. It is, in other words, something against which we must all remain eternally vigilant.

Blanqui figures this vigilance, as part of his polemic against positivist fatalism, as a strict separation between the progress of intelligence and the progress of natural processes. “Nothing could be as arbitrary and irregular as the march of human things,” he insists; “Nothing could be more different from the immutable and inevitable order of natural things.”<sup>206</sup> It is when this dividing line is contravened that usurpation of intelligence happens: “Thought has its own special mode of action, and this mode opposes rather than replicates that of matter ... [its] weapon is the weakness that relies on force but that is not so mad as to dream of *usurping* it.” As he goes on to say, “force is the prerogative of matter”, and “thought has no title to it, no right to it.”<sup>207</sup> The problem with positivism, then, is that it wants thought to usurp matter’s prerogative to use force, a prerogative to which thought has no right. “‘Thought, a special property of the brain,’ suppresses the immortality of the soul,”<sup>208</sup> certainly, but — for all Blanqui’s atheist and materialist braggadocio — his anticlerical anti-positivism carries echoes of Constant’s pietist imperative of always guarding intellectual and moral progress from its usurpation by the sacerdotal bodies that attribute human progress to forces beyond human control.

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<sup>205</sup> Blanqui, ‘Fate, Fatalism, Fatality,’ 200-1.

<sup>206</sup> Blanqui, ‘Commitment, Volition, and Free Will,’ in *Blanqui Reader*, 136.

<sup>207</sup> Blanqui, ‘Thought, Ideas, Morality,’ in *Blanqui Reader*, 130. Emphasis my own.

<sup>208</sup> Blanqui, ‘Fate, Fatalism, Fatality,’ 196.

The culminating move of this chapter, then, is to read Blanqui's *Eternité par les astres* as an astronomy without astrolatry, written as an exemplary act of resistance against the positivist priests who would usurp intelligence. This enigmatic text, penned from a fortress prison off the coast of Brittany as the Commune was being crushed in Paris, attempts to show how, in the infinite expanse of space and time, an infinite combination of material elements would mean that, at any given moment, countless copies of each moment of Earth's history were taking place simultaneously. The implication of this, Blanqui writes, is that "what we call progress is shut away on each Earth and disappears with it," — "... the universe endlessly repeats itself, and paws the ground without moving."<sup>209</sup> Walter Benjamin gave the most influential reading of this text, as a "surrender" to the "mythic anguish" of a voluntarist political actor before the deterministic progressive worldview of nineteenth century Europe. Blanqui, on Benjamin's telling, could see through his century's faith in "newness," recognising that capitalism's endless parade of innovations would be "as little capable of furnishing society with a liberating solution as a new fashion is capable of rejuvenating society."<sup>210</sup> But, as Philippe Le Goff has convincingly argued, Benjamin's wish "to detach contemporary struggles from any concern for progress creates a false dichotomy in Blanqui's politics." In other words, Blanqui is not a proponent of the coup d'état, of the untimely radical act flouting the phantasmagoria of progress *per se*; "the illusion" for Blanqui, as our above discussion suggests, is the more specific idea of "eternal progress across the eternal universe," and "the relative

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<sup>209</sup> Blanqui, 'Eternity by the Stars,' in *Blanqui Reader*, 328-9.

<sup>210</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Arcades Project*. trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge MA : Harvard Bellknap, 2002. 15.

insignificance [human] progress means for the cosmos does not diminish its significance for us.”<sup>211</sup> Radically detaching human progress from cosmic progress, in other words, is another way of saying that “progress must be made” and “made possible” — the power of agency to change the world is always a consciously-available choice, *in spite of* the infinitude of nature.<sup>212</sup> But where Le Goff’s recent monograph figures this late text as consistent with Blanqui’s early interest in restoring a popular sovereign will-forming capacity, I argue that Blanqui’s intervention against positivist priesthood is also, and at a more fundamental level, an attempt to prevent a popular contestatory culture of civic vigilance from being usurped.<sup>213</sup>

The rise of astrophysics, thanks to the new experimental technique of spectral analysis, meant that astronomy was no longer simply about measuring the movement of celestial bodies, but studying their chemical composition as well. As the pioneer of astrophysics had put it reflecting on his 1864 discovery, it could now be confirmed that stellar nebulae were “not an aggregation of stars, but a luminous gas.”<sup>214</sup> Blanqui

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<sup>211</sup> Le Goff, Philippe. *Blanqui and the Politics of Popular Empowerment*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. 178-181.

<sup>212</sup> Le Goff, *Blanqui and the Politics of Popular Empowerment*, 174-179.

<sup>213</sup> Blanqui, we must not forget, was active during what Mark Traugott calls the age of the ‘insurgent barricade’, arguably one of the most widely recognised contestatory cultures in world history. The barricade, in the language of social movements studies, emerged as the key ‘repertoire of contention’ throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. During this high watermark of 1830-1871 – Blanqui’s years as a professional revolutionary – ordinary people, when challenging established authorities, consistently deployed the tactic of barricade construction as if following a script, without having been exposed to any particular training or ‘ideological’ influence. Instead, in assembling to build barricades, “individuals’ choices depended on the totality of the beliefs and practices, images and narratives assimilated over a lifetime of contact with an insurrectionary culture that was inescapable in France, and [after 1848] would be in the rest of Europe.” The repertoire of barricade-building thus existed in this culture as both ritual and routine: i.e., it marked a break with the quotidian life, while at the same time drawing on basic habits and dispositions shared by ordinary people. This had much broader implications for the idea of democracy itself. Traugott, Mark. *Insurgent Barricade*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 227.

<sup>214</sup> See Becker, Barbara. *Unravelling Starlight: William and Margaret Huggins and the Rise of the New Astronomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Chapter 5.

took this discovery as a reason to return to Laplace's *Exposition de la systeme du monde*, and, carrying out "a simple deduction from spectral analysis and Laplace's cosmology," to propose a speculative astronomical hypothesis which would offer "neither revelation nor prophecy."<sup>215</sup> Blanqui begins from the same premise as Saint-Simon: that Laplace's nebular hypothesis leaves too much room for dead space. But Blanqui does not posit, as Saint-Simon did, the idea of fluid matter filling up this dead space. He instead makes *more* room for nothingness. Against Laplace, Blanqui posits a "fundamental separation" between stellar nebulae — "the excess of the gigantic", consisting of huge amounts of "incandescent" matter — and comets — "the excess of nothing," "formed of an indefinable substance that appears to share none of the properties of known matter."<sup>216</sup> He points out that, if comets were, as Laplace suggests, smaller, more mobile entities made up of the same fluid substance as stellar nebulae, they would possess an immense heat which would surely burn up the Earth's atmosphere when comets pass into our orbit. The fact that they, on the contrary, barely leave a trace indicates that "they do nothing" — comets should, on Blanqui's telling, not be given any explanatory weight.

This is an important distinction to make, because it takes away the most plausible account of the origin of the stellar nebulae themselves. Since comets, *pace* Laplace, are not merely fragmentary nebulae, the gradual collision of their paths in space cannot be the source of the much larger clouds of stardust that make up stellar systems. If celestial bodies are clumps of matter agglomerated by heat and attraction,

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<sup>215</sup> Blanqui, 'Eternity by the Stars,' 328.

<sup>216</sup> Blanqui, 'Eternity by the Stars,' 293-5.

Blanqui asks, without the explanatory crutch of comets we are forced to ask where the matter and heat come from which initiate this process.<sup>217</sup> The radiance of all celestial bodies means their heat and light dissipate with time — whence, Blanqui thus ponders, would come the heat and light necessary to bring constantly dying matter back to life? We are, in short, thrown back on the clockmaker problem: “the enigma of the universe continuously confronts our every thought.”<sup>218</sup> The crucial thing to note here is, therefore, that the gradual attraction of nebulous fluid matter — in absolute contrast to its role in Saint-Simon — cannot possibly, on Blanqui’s telling, generate new celestial bodies.

Instead of this orderly agglomeration, we find “pandemonium”, a “furious *melée*,” erupting when entire dead galaxies crash into each other, “reduc[ing] the solid masses to a vaporous state that is immediately seized by gravitation, which groups them into nebulae that are spinning onto themselves as a result of the impact, and hurls them onto a regular orbit around new centres.”<sup>219</sup> The image Blanqui paints here is arresting for its scale. Not an incremental attraction of fluids, but the conversion of countless solid celestial bodies across “whole corner[s] of the universe” into fluid form as they collide into “a vast atmosphere of flames, relentlessly crossed by the cataclysm’s lightning bolts that instantly volatilise both stars and planets.”<sup>220</sup> But Blanqui — recognising that “the notion of chaotic matter should not have reappeared in the nineteenth century” — insists that “the law of attraction presides over these

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<sup>217</sup> Blanqui, ‘Eternity by the Stars,’ 298.

<sup>218</sup> Blanqui, ‘Eternity by the Stars,’ 299. The terms of this conundrum would, of course, eventually shift thanks to the general theory of relativity and the big bang hypothesis.

<sup>219</sup> Blanqui, ‘Eternity by the Stars,’ 300.

<sup>220</sup> Blanqui, ‘Eternity by the Stars,’ 300-301.

radical transformations just as rigorously as it does over the most peaceful movements of the moon.”<sup>221</sup> The universe’s “perpetual torment” may be “a strange refutation of gravity’s regularity,”<sup>222</sup> but it does not at all contravene the laws underpinned by the principle itself. “Nature knows nothing of morality, and does not act in keeping with it.”<sup>223</sup> What therefore matters is our acknowledgment that a mechanical universe perpetually moving itself forward according to a single universal law cannot serve as a model for a free and stable human polity. The civic vigilance upon which liberty in a modern commercial society depends – even Blanqui’s (non-Marxian) communist one – requires the defence of public intelligence from such sacerdotal usurpations.

Across a long time span and a large cast of characters, this chapter has fleshed out an unfamiliar prehistory of ‘political vanguardism.’ It has challenged some basic logics about the emergence of liberalism and socialism in the nineteenth century, showing that the idea of a vanguard did not emerge to foment liberty as participation in popular sovereignty against liberty as non-interference. Blanqui, the most notorious ‘vanguardist’, used the term in a way that, like Constant, acknowledged ‘usurpation’ as a challenge threatening that key requirement of a republican democratic culture: a people willing to keep an eye on its state, and prevent its being hijacked by other influences. This was part of a broader transformation of anticlerical discourse, as it grappled with the rise of new cosmological visions that attempted to justify new monopolies of intelligence.

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<sup>221</sup> Blanqui, ‘Eternity by the Stars,’ 302.

<sup>222</sup> Blanqui, ‘Eternity by the Stars,’ 306.

<sup>223</sup> Blanqui, ‘Eternity by the Stars,’ 318.

## Chapter Two

In August 1917, the Russian revolutionary V.I. Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*, his most significant work of political theory, from hiding in Finland in the wake of an abortive insurrection. He had only arrived in the Russian capital of Petrograd less than three months before, when – in his notorious April Theses – he had urged his Bolshevik party to “preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies.”<sup>224</sup> Since the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy that February, the provisional government formed to oversee the establishment of a new Russian constitution had shared power with the soviets – the councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers that had formed across the empire, primarily in its urban centers. The organization of such soviets was a crucial feature of the 1905 revolution, and, in 1917, they played an even greater role: seemingly learning from the earlier failure of the tsarist regime to honor the constitutional reforms that their presence had pressured it to undertake in 1905, the soviets now not only initiated the transition to a new republican regime but militantly watched over the provisional government to ensure they were not rolled back. As Leon Trotsky, the Bolshevik leader who had made his name on the rostrum of the Petrograd Soviet in 1905, put it in his history of the revolution, this condition of *dvoevlastie* – dual power, or the “splitting of sovereignty” – “[foretold] nothing less than civil war.”<sup>225</sup> And it was the desire to push this civil war to its ultimate conclusion – the seizure of sovereignty by the

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<sup>224</sup> Lenin, V.I. “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution.” In *Collected Works*, 24:19–26. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964. Thesis 4.

<sup>225</sup> Trotsky, Leon. *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Max Eastman (trans.) New York: Pathfinder, 1992. Chapter 11.

proletariat over the bourgeoisie – that the Bolshevik slogan ‘All Power [*vlast*] to the Soviets’ connoted. This was a radical proposal. Russia’s other socialist parties, who both participated in the provisional government and attracted far greater support in the majority of the soviets, held out hope that the class struggle would be waged and won by attracting mass consent in a parliamentary republic based on universal suffrage. In *State and Revolution*, by contrast, Lenin argued that the parliamentary republic – the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie – must be “smashed” and reconstituted on a qualitatively different basis: the dictatorship of the proletariat, or, “subordination ... to the armed vanguard of all the exploited and working people, i.e. to the proletariat.”<sup>226</sup>

The problem that the events leading to Lenin’s exile in August 1917 raised was that the soviets themselves did not want sovereignty. With the resolution of dual power in favor of a ‘bourgeois dictatorship’ increasingly likely, no amount of “preaching,” it seemed, would convince the soviets to take the fatal leap of deposing the provisional government themselves. The slogan ‘All Power to the Soviets’ thus became ‘All Power to the Proletariat Led by Its Revolutionary Party – the Bolsheviks.’<sup>227</sup> Thus, when October rolled around and Lenin was smuggled back into the country, it was the Bolsheviks – through their influence on the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet – who would overthrow the Provisional Government and decree to the delegates assembled at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets that sovereignty was theirs. The dictatorship of the proletariat

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<sup>226</sup> Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. “The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution.” In *Collected Works*, Vol. 25. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964. III.3.

<sup>227</sup> Miéville, China. *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution*. London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2017. 189.

would exclude and suppress the bourgeoisie and – because it would act on behalf of the vast majority of society – it would in the process eradicate the exploitation and domination of class rule. Quoting the most popular pamphlet of Friedrich Engels, Lenin declared the endpoint of this dictatorship as a harmonious society in which the state itself becomes superfluous, since “the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things”<sup>228</sup>

Lenin’s portrayal of “soviet democracy” in *State and Revolution* is often read as an unhappy synthesis of Saint-Simon’s technocratic optimism and Blanqui’s proletarian populism. Empowering the working class to organize production outside of the imperatives of market and private property, he seems to argue, will render the real relations of social labor transparent to all. Politics will become a series of technical decisions relying not on deliberation or disagreement: instead, an objective division of labor will prevail across all of society, such that society will operate as “a single factory and a single office.”<sup>229</sup> The fatal flaw of this text, it would thus seem, is the endless pedagogical task confronted by this dictatorship of the proletariat: the vanguard party ends up monopolizing power in its attempt to inculcate such factory discipline across the whole of society, chasing the impossible fantasy of a rationally planned economy and the Saint-Simonian reduction of politics to the “administration of things.” For Rosanvallon, *State and Revolution* thus expresses Marxism’s inheritance of the worst anti-democratic tendencies of nineteenth century liberals. It suggests that “the abolition of political or economic mediation is redeemed by the

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<sup>228</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” I.4.

<sup>229</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” V.4.

identification of all individuals as part of one fused body,” and that “communism as a purified market, as a society of pure commerce among men, fulfils the liberal utopia, if at the price of the contradiction of a total social organism.”<sup>230</sup> And the agent who will actually undertake this is not, of course, the working class itself, but the tiny vanguard party elite claiming to represent it and acting – in Blanquist fashion – according to sheer voluntarist decree.

Lenin’s main polemical adversary in *State and Revolution*, as in many of his major texts after 1914, was Karl Kautsky, the leading theorist of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). While Kautsky did appreciate the potential role of workers’ councils in a social democratic political order – lending his support to the *Räte* that had played an important role in Germany’s 1918 revolution – he was a chief proponent of a kind of ‘mixed regime’ which would subordinate these organs to a national parliament. Kautsky’s arguments for this mixed regime are, from the perspective of classic democratic theory, hard to refute: since delegates in workers’ councils could only express the particular interests of the industries or social positions they represented, the Communist “soviet system” could never supersede the function of parliamentary government as representative of the general will. Council democracy was no substitute for a legislative assembly based on universal suffrage, Kautsky argued, since it did not address itself to the general consciousness of *citizens* but the particular consciousness of *workers*. Councils, for Kautsky, could only function – like other branches of liberal democratic government – as a kind of corrective check on the

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<sup>230</sup> Rosanvallon, Pierre. “Marx and Civil Society.” In Samuel Moyn (ed.). *Democracy Past and Future*, 160–88. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 185-6.

potentially flawed deliberative outcomes of an elected legislature. From this perspective, Kautsky is often credited with accurately predicting the usurpation of the 1918 Soviet Constitution's system of council democracy by its Bolshevik-monopolized executive committee. Similar appreciation for a mixed regime combining councils and parliament would be voiced in the symbolic register of Claude Lefort half a century later. Observing the brief resurgence of councils in the suppressed Eastern bloc revolutions of 1956 and 1968, Lefort – writing in 1976 – would come to appreciate the way such mixed regimes attempted to politically institute a “self-limiting” division of the social, offering a vision of social revolution that avoided the totalitarian voluntarism of declaring, as the Bolsheviks had done, the sovereignty of the councils.<sup>231</sup>

This chapter offers a different reading of soviet democracy as the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat in *State and Revolution*. It does so by analyzing more closely the idea of the proletariat as ‘revolutionary vanguard’ in the Marxist discourse that Lenin was intervening in and that, in many ways, found its chief popularizer and promoter in Kautsky, the ‘pope of Marxism.’ Ultimately, I hope to explain Lenin’s statement that the “armed vanguard of the proletariat” watching over a society-wide “factory” equated not merely to the “the abolition of parliamentarism” but, far more puzzlingly, “the preservation of representative institutions.”<sup>232</sup> Above all, I argue, Lenin was concerned with representative institutions as providing the kind of

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<sup>231</sup> Lefort, ‘The Age of Novelty,’ *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary* 1976 (29): 23-38. See also Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen, ‘The Self-Limiting Revolution and the Mixed Constitution of Socialist Democracy’ in *Council Democracy* (ed. James Muldoon), (Routledge: 2018).

<sup>232</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” III.3.

accountability that I have been associating with the socialist tradition of vanguardism: the subjection of the powerful to the ordinary vigilance of the proletariat. While the Bolsheviks undoubtedly concentrated sovereign authority in their promotion and defense of this system – and while this undoubtedly proved its undoing – its basic logic as I reconstruct it here is best understood not as a rejection of the principle of the separation of powers but instead as an alternative conception thereof.

I begin this chapter by engaging the reception of Lenin's construal of the relationship between proletarian vanguardism and soviet democracy in contemporary democratic theory. I show that theorists tend to focus on Bolshevik vanguardism as bound up with debates over sovereignty and constituent power, and the corrosive effects of the party form on the pluralism and spontaneity required for democratic forms of life. To see beyond this impasse, I suggest the fruitfulness of instead approaching this archive via the neo-republican Marxist framework developed by William Clare Roberts. While Roberts himself sees his republican reading of Marx as a rescue operation from the distorting influences of both Kautsky and Lenin, I explore the possibilities of seeing the ongoing relevance of a republican framework in the period of 'orthodox Marxism.' I do this by isolating the "unrestraint" of participants in commodity exchange as the specific form of impersonal domination generated by capitalism. I then read Kautsky's conception of the proletarian vanguard as a means of resisting and overcoming such unrestraint – institutionally embodied, for him, in the SPD – and analyze Lenin's complex inheritance of this model both before and after the SPD's apparent betrayal of its orthodox Marxist mission with its support for the First World War in 1914. Finally, after examining the post-1917 split between

Kautsky and Social Democracy, on the one hand, and Lenin and Communism, on the other, I return to Lenin's theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Building on Roberts' interpretation, I focus on Marx's discussion of the superintendence of machines in industrial labor, showing how this kind of vigilance becomes a crucial justification for "proletarian" independence as a new paradigm of liberty.

### **The Proletarian Vanguard and Constituent Power**

In late 1920, in a report on the work of the Council of People's Commissars before the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Lenin declared that "Communism equals soviet power plus electrification of the whole country." Echoing the Saint-Simonian tones of *State and Revolution*, Lenin described the inauguration of this electrification campaign as "the beginning of that very happy time when politics will recede into the background, when politics will be discussed less often and at shorter length, and engineers and agronomists will do most of the talking." The "program of the Party" should be to "convert every electric power station we build into a stronghold of enlightenment to be used to make the masses electricity-conscious, so to speak."<sup>233</sup>

On Hannah Arendt's influential telling, this formula illustrates "an entirely un-Marxist separation of economics and politics," the idea that "liberation from the curse of poverty would come about through electrification, but the rise of freedom through a new form of government, *the soviets*."<sup>234</sup> The instrumentalization of councils by revolutionary parties, epitomized in Russia but played out in all twentieth century

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<sup>233</sup> Lenin, V.I. *Sobranie Sochinenii*. Vol. 36. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1965. 15-16.

<sup>234</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006. 55-56.

revolutions, stemmed not from bad faith on the part of professional revolutionaries but, rather, from their belief that “the end of government was the welfare of the people, and that the substance of politics was not action but administration.”<sup>235</sup> The Marxist logic of economic development and the experience of political action, Arendt suggests, could not be combined as easily as Lenin assumed.

For democratic theorists, council democracy and Lenin’s vanguard party politics are diametrically opposed due to the councils’ alternative to prevailing conceptions of popular sovereignty. Contemporary democratic theorists have tended to see the Bolshevik’s manipulation of the participatory spirit of the councils as hopelessly bound up in a sovereigntist conception of constituent power. As Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen has recently suggested, the concrete multifarious forms of the councils points beyond the prevailing imaginary of an abstract, formless and unitary democratic subject. He sees in the 1918 Soviet Constitution a different way of figuring constituent power that was ultimately instrumentalized by the will to power of ‘party communism.’ Key here are Articles 14, 15, and 16, which not only enshrined the abstract freedoms of expression and assembly, but also explicitly declared public funding for “working people and the poorest peasantry” to established their own press organizations and meeting halls. “By constitutionally providing the material and concrete means for participation in public life,” Popp-Madsen writes of these Articles, “the councils themselves seek to preserve the constituent power in constituted form.”<sup>236</sup> “By integrating the concrete and plural groups of the revolution into the

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<sup>235</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 265.

<sup>236</sup> Popp-Madsen, Benjamin Ask. *Visions of Council Democracy: Castoriadis, Lefort, Arendt*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 190.

constitution as the foundation of public authority,” Popp-Madsen argues, the 1918 Constitution thus undermines the myth of a lawless sovereign constituent power existing in the state of nature.”<sup>237</sup> Drawing on Arendt, he argues that the distinct experiences of differently-placed constituent subjects is maintained by this grounding of democratic constituency in concrete councils rather than an abstract image of ‘the people.’

Massimiliano Tomba has likewise recently sought to rescue the democratic potential of the 1918 Constitution from the vanguardism of the Bolshevik party. Tomba contrasts the “insurgent universality” of the soviets as sites of popular power that – drawing on pre-modern forms of local authority – could not easily fit into the linear temporality and statist sovereignty of hegemonic modernity. For him, the Bolshevik party’s identification of the soviets with the dictatorship of the proletariat imposed a top-down historical schema onto these expressions of a bottom-up universality. Specifically, this arose from the orthodox Marxist belief that the radical peasants would inevitably lack the class consciousness to sustain their own empowerment and therefore had to be led by the more ‘advanced’ industrial proletariat and its party. This denied Marx’s famous preface to the final Russian edition of *Capital*, where he described the traditional forms of peasant organization as a potential source of communist revolution, as well as his long-hidden letter to the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Vera Zasulich affirming the potential of this strategy. Tomba ultimately links authentic support for the provisions for soviet power in the 1918

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<sup>237</sup> Popp-Madsen, *Visions of Council Democracy*, 186.

Constitution to the SRs and their radical peasant base, arguing that this was forsaken by the Bolshevik's commitment to a modern, instrumentalist view of sovereignty.<sup>238</sup>

Antonio Negri's critique of constituent power has been particularly influential on this point. As Negri puts it, since Machiavelli, the "movement of constituent power" has been understood as an "indefatigable" process in which "the labor of society will clash with the dead labor accumulated by power."<sup>239</sup> But what for the early moderns was merely an affective or phenomenological social life force — the formation of a popular sovereign subject as a creative political project — becomes, in Marx's time, something concretely realizable through the process of economic production. Negri highlights the theological limits underpinning the modern conception of constituent power. The onto-theological belief in a rationally decodable social field — faith in "the material adequacy of the political with respect to the social" — always forecloses the openness of the multitude's potential — of democratic power as such — by allowing it to fall back on state sovereignty as the rational expression of constituted authority.<sup>240</sup> Lenin's responses to the Civil War became, for Negri, the "concluding" expression of these limits, as the Bolshevik party "enclosed every constituent emergence within the alienated and perverted instruments of the dynamic system" based on their own rationalistic temporality.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Tomba, Massimiliano. *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Chapter 4.

<sup>239</sup> Negri, Antonio. *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 304.

<sup>240</sup> Negri, *Insurgencies*, 304, 311.

<sup>241</sup> Negri, *Insurgencies*, 314-5.

What all these democratic theorists share is a critique of orthodox Marxism's 'economic determinism' that stretches back from Lenin to Kautsky. The problem was that posit that industrial labor furnishes wage laborers with both special insight into, and unique interest in overcoming, the most fundamental forms of exploitation in capitalist society. The experience among ever-more workers of having their surplus labor stolen dialectically awakens a desire to overturn the rule of the capitalists exploiting them. References to this privileged position of the industrial proletariat litter Kautsky's most widely-circulated pamphlet, *The Class Struggle*. The most explicit statement comes in the final section of the pamphlet, in which Kautsky justifies the socialist party's claim for leadership over the whole people:

The proletariat, as the lowest of the exploited strata, cannot free itself from exploitation and oppression without destroying all exploitation and oppression. It is therefore their sworn enemy, in whatever form they may appear, and it is the vanguard [*Vorkämpfer*] of all the exploited and oppressed.<sup>242</sup> (V.14).

The logic here is simple: analysis of the relative exploitation of different strata of society justifies the proletariat's claim to the status of most oppressed and this, in turn, legitimates its *political* position as the most 'advanced' fighter against oppression in general. "The meek shall inherit the earth"; "the last shall be first and the first shall be last" – the idea of Marxism as a secularization of these basic Christian tenets is a truism, to which Kautsky's fascinating historical analyses of Christian primitive

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<sup>242</sup> Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, available <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1892/erfurt>. There is no complete English translation of *Der Klassenkampf* available, and so I have relied on the English and German electronic versions available at [marxist.org](http://marxist.org) in order to cross-reference translations. See Karl Kautsky, *Der Erfurter Programm in seinem grundsätzlichen Teil erläutert*, available at <https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/kautsky/1892/erfurter/index.htm>.

communism in both the early Church and the Reformation bear approving testament.<sup>243</sup> But what distinguished Social Democracy from these premodern religious movements was the economic structure of industrial capitalism, which would finally tip the balance of power in favor of the oppressed. The party's task was to scientifically verify the proletariat as the protagonist of this inevitable historical process.

Democratic theorists have long been dismantling the normative and strategic efficacy of this kind of representative claim based on reified sociological categories, perhaps most famously – if controversially – captured in Hannah Arendt's image of the 'invasion' of the political by the social.<sup>244</sup> The great interpreters of democratic modernity have often aimed at rescuing the plural, contingent, and intersubjective dimension of political life from the techno-scientific urge to objectively identify the sources of authority in a pre-political object called 'society' and thereby place them beyond popular contestation.<sup>245</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantale Mouffe bring many of these currents together in their study of the economic determinist foundations of Second International socialism. Since their account of this "vanguard authoritarianism" remains influential among radical democratic theorists, it deserves unpacking here.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation* (1897) and Kautsky, *The Foundations of Christianity* (1908).

<sup>244</sup> See Arendt, *On Revolution*, Chapter 2: 'The Social Question.'

<sup>245</sup> A useful round-up of some contemporary trends in radical democratic theory that bring this outlook together can be found in Marchart, Oliver. *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

<sup>246</sup> For a recent account, see Disch, Lisa Jane. *Making Constituencies: Representation as Mobilization in Mass Democracy*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. Chapter 7.

Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis of the Second International is the focal point of the first two chapters of their ground-breaking 1985 text, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. They chart the generational shift from Marxist orthodoxy — which, on their telling, seeks to ground all politics in “essentialist” economic identities like proletariat and bourgeoisie — to a ‘discovery’ of the indeterminacy of the political in Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, which acknowledges the ways in which class identities are transformed by the give and take of political praxis. The main target of Laclau and Mouffe’s polemic is the “vanguard manipulation” implicit in the idea of “proletarian hegemony” that was central to orthodox Marxist politics. The “authoritarian conception of hegemony” — which, they argue, became dominant with the rise of the Soviet-led Third International but was already implicit in the Second — seeks to build alliances between different constituencies based on an imaginary of already-constituted class identities, always subordinating everything to the single proletarian identity category. It imagines the formation of emancipatory political power as the gradual accumulation of diverse popular forces around a “wholly classist and ‘rupturist’ identity”. Using the language of structuralist linguistics, Laclau and Mouffe argue that vanguard manipulation links each popular identity — peasant, woman, minority nationality, etc. — in an “ad nauseam” chain of signifiers which only comes to an end in the “final class core”. The identity going under the name “proletariat” serves as the stable referent giving meaning to the whole series.<sup>247</sup> Class identity is thought to express *economic interests* constituted on a “different terrain”

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<sup>247</sup> Laclau, Ernesto. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Second edition. London: Verso, 2014 [1985]. 64.

than that of the political struggle in which the agents themselves are engaged. Historically, they argue, this Leninist conception of hegemony resulted in a troubling “paradox”: “at the very moment when the democratic dimension of the mass struggle was being enlarged, an ever more vanguardist and anti-democratic conception asserted itself in socialist practice.”<sup>248</sup> This is because, in order to maintain the stabilizing role of the proletariat in the face of an increasingly diverse mass movement, its fictitious “ontological privilege” had to be transferred from the base to the leaders. A capacity to make objective knowledge claims was needed to interpret the true interests – and hence the true identity – of the working class in any given moment. This “authoritarian practice ... maintains that there is a ‘for-itself’ of the class accessible only to the enlightened vanguard — whose attitude towards the working class is purely pedagogical.”<sup>249</sup> This model of the enlightened pedagogical attitude in the representative relationship is captured in the conception of the party as “bringing consciousness from without” – i.e., an objective standpoint removed from the class struggle – first formulated by Kautsky and then repeated by Lenin.<sup>250</sup>

To escape this “inevitable” authoritarianism, Laclau and Mouffe thus present an alternative “deconstructive logic of hegemony.” This more democratic mode of hegemony attempts to break the direct link between economic interests, sociological perspectives, and political practice, thereby opening onto genuinely pluralist and intersubjective modes of democratic alliance-formation. Beginning from the premise

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<sup>248</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 56.

<sup>249</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 59.

<sup>250</sup> Lenin famously uses the phrase in *What is to be Done?* (1902). For an extended discussion, see Shandro, Alan. *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony: Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle*. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2014. Chapter 4.

that “fundamental interests in society cannot be logically deduced from determinate positions in the economic process,” their democratic, deconstructive hegemonic politics takes the “suturing” together of disparate identities and interests into a diverse, non-hierarchical popular bloc that – crucially – imagines its unity not as the expression of any underlying sociological reality, but rather as an outcome of contingent political articulations.<sup>251</sup> This would become their task of left populism: instead of putting the proletariat at the center of the popular party, they propose ‘the people’ as a symbolic construct, always aware of its sociological ungroundedness and therefore open to rearticulation as the political forces constituting it transform.

Many critiques of this symbolic post-Marxism have been developed in the decades since its articulation, from both liberal and Marxist quarters. Everything hinges on Laclau and Mouffe’s turn to ‘discursivity,’ away from the material practices underlying the democratic bloc-formation they celebrate. Without an effort to analyze the material sites of political practice in which claims are articulated, Laclau and Mouffe fall back on the state as the default arena around which organization can be pursued. For this, Andrew Arato has critiqued their ‘ultra-vanguardism’ – like Leninists, they embrace a populist monopolization of the legitimate means of force as the principle aim of “democratic” politics (**GET REF**).<sup>252</sup> As Jean Cohen puts it, left populism’s conception of equality as “identification” based on an “excluded other” falls for the dictatorial politics of Carl Schmitt “hook, line and sinker” (**GET REF**).

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<sup>251</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 84.

<sup>252</sup> Arato might be repeating here Merleau-Ponty’s withering critique of Sartres’ “ultra-Bolshevism.” See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973. Chapter 5.

The result is an antithesis between the populist leader as the only articulation of a collective will and the actual enactment of democratic forms of life based on participation and involvement. For deliberative theorists like Arato and Cohen, the turn to civil society's pluralism and association, as channels of *influence* rather than unifying *rule*, is the only alternative to populist democracy.

What I want to suggest is that the historical discourse of 'vanguardism,' when treated as analytically distinct from either party politics or populism, is conceptually bound up with both an identitarian politics of sovereign rule *and* a pluralist politics of associational influence. The problem for contemporary democratic theorists is that the former aspect of vanguardism has come to eclipse the latter, which it is my goal here to recover. Moreover, attending to this key moment of historical disagreement over the concept of the vanguard can help clarify the difficulties in achieving and sustaining associational influence in political life.

In contrast to other democratic theorists, then, I want to challenge Laclau and Mouffe on a terrain that few commentators have hitherto sought to scrutinize – their historical interpretation of Second International socialism – while also maintaining their important focus on the aesthetics of democratic leadership.<sup>253</sup> Laclau and Mouffe laudably profess the desire to “recover some of the variety and richness of Marxist discursivity in the era of the Second International” by revealing the “plurality” which

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<sup>253</sup> Disch similarly seeks to bring the historical dimensions of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* back into democratic theory. Perhaps symptomatically of its reputation as an archive devoid of political thought, Disch focuses exclusively on Laclau and Mouffe's much shorter discussion of French revolutionary Jacobinism (a discussion quite derivative of previous thinkers like Arendt and Lefort) in the conclusion of their text, ignoring the two whole chapters they devote to the Second International. See Disch, *Making Constituencies*, Chapter 7.

later Marxist-Leninist ideology foreclosed. Their goal is to revive this archive such that it might become a vital intellectual “reference point for political analysis” in the era of the New Left. But the way they analyze this discourse, in terms of an internal logic that unfolds as the gradual penetration of the social determinist “void” haunting classical socialism, cannot achieve the “pluralizing” aim they set out for themselves. Their “genealogy” of the Second International is staged such that everything culminates in a “shrinking” from the “theoretical advance” that would have brought its theorists to see the “autonomy of the political” as Laclau and Mouffe themselves theorize it — the revelation, that is, of class identity as a *symbolic* identity in which signified overflows signifier.<sup>254</sup> Ironically, then, Laclau and Mouffe retain the conceit common among certain Second International theorists of treating intellectual history as a progressive ‘catching up’ of theory to practice: just as the latter celebrated Marx and Engels for ‘completing’ the utopia of socialist intellectuals by identifying the proletarian agent that would realize it, Laclau and Mouffe almost canonize *themselves* as taking “Marxist discursivity” to its logical conclusion by showing how a social democratic left must ‘finally’ acknowledge the horizontal plurality of social movements as its constituency.

### **Commodity Fetishism and Elite Incontinence**

It is this discourse of vanguardism – the discourse out of which arose what would become the ‘Leninist vanguard party’ – that I take as my point of departure in this chapter. Much ink has, of course, been spilt on the relationship between the orthodox

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<sup>254</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, 52, 11.

Marxism of the Second International and the Marxism-Leninism of the Third. Most familiar to political theorists is the stylised opposition between the determinism of the Second International, on the one hand, and the voluntarism of the Third International, on the other. It is tempting to view these alternatives — social democrats waiting in vain for the inevitable formation of a class conscious proletariat and communists hubristically pushing the dialectic forward with little regard for historical conditions — as two sides of the same coin, expressing either the theoretical and practical confusion of Marxism itself or, for those seeking to rescue Marx from his vulgar epigones, the mistakes of what Michael Heinrich calls “worldview Marxism.”<sup>255</sup> But this focus has led to a relative neglect of the continuities between the Second and Third Internationals, and it is only very recently — with the disputes of the twentieth century well in the rearview mirror — that scholars have begun to pay attention to a sensibility of “revolutionary social democracy” that was current throughout Central and Eastern Europe, both in the lead up to and the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>256</sup>

The French *avantgarde* — as well as the German *Vorkämpfer* and the Russian *peredovoy borets* (literally ‘advanced fighter’, but also ‘pioneer’) — were established terms of art in the parties of Central and Eastern Europe that belonged to the Second Socialist International (1889-1914). This discourse of revolutionary social democracy anticipated the coming democratic transformation of the German, Austrian, and

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<sup>255</sup> See Heinrich, Michael. *How to Read Marx's Capital: Commentary and Explanations on the Beginning Chapters*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021. Chapter 1.

<sup>256</sup> I borrow the term ‘revolutionary social democracy’ from Blanc, Eric. *Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics across the Russian Empire (1882-1917)*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022. I engage more with Blanc’s study below.

Russian imperial autocracies dominating the region. Socialist parties saw their task as politically educating the sole agent they believed capable of adequately leading these revolutions: the industrial proletariat. Only under proletarian hegemony, they thought, would the movement to democratise political institutions be accompanied by the concurrent democratisation of economic institutions that would provide the solid social foundation needed to sustain a genuinely free republic. Socialist parties wanted to organise the proletariat to embrace its role as vanguard of the democratic revolution, and it was in order to continue working toward this objective after the collapse of the Second International that the revolutionary currents including Lenin and the Bolsheviks called for a Third International.

The party theoretician Karl Kautsky's commentary on the manifesto adopted at the 1891 Erfurt Congress – *Der Klassenkampf [The Class Struggle]* – was the most widely distributed socialist text during the period of the Second International, and I thus provide an interpretation of this text along with subsequent elaborations of its conceptual underpinnings. The social and cultural history of the SPD has been extensively documented, with studies showing the increasingly marginal role the principles Kautsky laid out in the Erfurt programme would come to play as the institutional prerogatives of the parliamentarians and trade union bureaucrats eclipsed the ideological principles of Marxist orthodoxy. Instead of either trying to present Kautsky as the monolithic voice for an entire movement, or writing him off as an irrelevant ideologist, my goal here is to closely read him as giving most incisive utterance to the vanguard idea. I show that, while democratic theorists' evaluation of Kautsky as an economic determinist – his reduction of politics to a conflict between

sociologically-defined classes – is largely correct, it is correct in a surprising way. It is not the case for Kautsky, as is often assumed, that the proletariat's position as the class most exploited by the means of production furnishes it with a simple *interest* in undertaking the universally-emancipating work of overthrowing capitalist production. Kautsky instead privileges the 'proletarian standpoint' as the only attitude with enough *disinterest* to adequately engage in parliamentary representative government. In this way, *Der Klassenkampf* offers a distinct account of what I call 'intellectual continence': the self-restraint required for a mass constituency to impose supervision and discipline on elite representatives. His orthodox Marxism was not an abstract social theory, but a strategic wager on the kind of community most likely to possess such continence, identifying and idealising this exemplary virtue among the activists already engaged in the workers' movement. The socialist party's goal was to encourage this self-organised movement to recognise – against prevailing assumptions about the class and cultural status of leaders in capitalist society – its own potential as the popular party (*Volkspartei*) that would lead a democratic majority to found a republic.

Both Kautsky and Lenin took from Marx a conception of industrial labor as affording those who carried it out with a superior capacity for watching over complex processes. In this very broad sense, they were, indeed, economic determinists, transposing this capacity for superintendence developed in the economic realm into the political realm. But, rather than viewing this as an invasion of the autonomy of the political, my goal here is to reconstruct what aspects of political life these "orthodox Marxists" might have been trying to preserve and expand. I begin by examining

Marx's own statements in the first volume of *Capital* about the ways in which large-scale industrial production furnishes a new model of emancipation.

My focus on the political implications of industrial labor as the development of a capacity for *supervision* clearly contrasts with more familiar Marxist approaches to the political capacities of the industrial proletariat. This is the idea that the experience of selling one's commodified labor and working in a factory provides a unique "standpoint" from which the proletariat can reconstruct a post-capitalist world in which social relations are mediated in a less dehumanizing way. I am speaking here of Georg Lukacs' influential theory of class consciousness. Lukacs is particularly relevant to our purposes not only due to his status as one of the foundational thinkers of Western Marxism, but – more specifically – because he systematically thinks through the metaphor of the "state machine." Lukacs' writings on the proletarian transcendence of the capitalist state's alienating effects were published in the early 1920s as interventions aimed at expounding the philosophical bases of a world communist revolution he saw as still underway. His reconstruction of Marxist praxis was, in other words, a self-conscious effort at giving intellectual ballast to Lenin's strategy – one that, to be sure, would come under withering critique from Bolshevik leaders like Bukharin and Zinoviev, but that nonetheless hoped to influence the actual political work of the Third International.<sup>257</sup> Moreover, if – as I discuss below – Kautsky can be approached as a Weberian realist with regard to the state, then the

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<sup>257</sup> On this relationship, see, for example, Rockmore, Tom. "Lukács as Leninist." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Leninist Political Philosophy*, edited by Tom Rockmore and Norman Levine, 281–310. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018.

crucial role played by Weber in Lukacs' account of the stakes of communist revolution – and his connection of this account to a critique of “Kautskyism” as the theoretical foundation of the social democratic opportunism that the early Comintern saw as its main rival – seems to provide an explanatory key to the political disputes that interest us here. In other words, then, it is most tempting to boil down the disagreement between Kautsky and Lenin to which *State and Revolution* bears testament to a disagreement between Weber and Lukacs. Such an interpretive move makes it relatively easy to make sense of the concept of the proletarian vanguard – especially, as we shall see, its insufficiencies as a model for emancipatory politics – but, as I hope to show, it ultimately papers over the broader stakes of their dispute.<sup>258</sup>

Lukacs' takes as his point of departure Marx's notion of “commodity fetishism.” For him, domination under capitalism stems from the dehumanizing effects of commodity exchange. The capitalist mode of production is characterized by the privileging of exchange value over use value. The worth of an object is not derived primarily from its capacity to fulfil the concrete function for which it was produced; instead, its value is abstractly calculated in terms of the amount of capital it can generate as a marketable commodity. “Reified consciousness” is the name Lukacs gives to this prevailing habit of seeing the world in terms of the “ghostly objectivity” conditioned by the social practice of commodity exchange. Crucially, for Lukacs, this reified consciousness has to extend to all aspects of social life for capitalist production to proceed. Political institutions were required to support the investment of ever-larger

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<sup>258</sup> This is precisely the approach taken in Gray, Phillip W. *Vanguardism: Ideology and Organization in Totalitarian Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

sums of capital in the industrial production of commodities. It is at this point that Lukacs turns to Weber: “The modern capitalist concern ... requires for its survival a system of justice and an administration whose workings can be *rationally calculated*, at least in principle, according to general laws, just as the preferable performance of a *machine* can be calculated.”<sup>259</sup> Like Weber, Lukacs sees alienation in the industrial spirit of modernity: an “inhuman, standardized division of labor” that engenders a “divorce between work and the individual capacities and needs of the worker,” whether that worker is a laborer in a privately-owned factory or a civil servant in a state bureaucracy.<sup>260</sup> But Lukacs does not follow Weber in viewing the responsible operation of this alienating machine as the necessary condition of the politician’s work.

For Lukacs, the “standpoint” of the proletariat suggests a dialectical solution to the alienating “contemplative stance” brought about by the capitalist division of labor. The direct experience of selling commodified labor affords the proletariat with a standpoint that strips them of the illusory relations that other classes rely on to find meaning in the world of capitalist commodities. The atomization suffered by all classes of the division of labor in bourgeois society is counteracted by the proletariat’s unique insight into the concrete totality undergirding the fetishistic abstraction of relations between commodities. By selling his labor as the only commodity he possesses, he “integrates it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialized process that has been rationalized and

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<sup>259</sup> Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Nachdr. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2013. 96.

<sup>260</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 98-99.

mechanized, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity.”<sup>261</sup> For the laborer integrated into capitalism’s division of labor as a commodity, the everyday experience of being reduced to mere object renders it impossible to cling to the contemplative stance of projecting a transcendent subject over against the reified “ghostly objectivity” of commodity relations. This leads to two antithetical “class meanings” of the “qualitative” transition to factory production. From the bourgeois standpoint, the factory system is perfectly assimilable to the “quantitative” world of calculation and speculation of exchange values. But from the proletarian standpoint, commodified factory labor reveals the “qualitative, living core” beneath the “quantifying crust,” and it becomes “possible to recognize the fetish character of every commodity based on the commodity character of labor power: in every case we find its core, the relation between men, entering into the evolution of society.”<sup>262</sup> Lukacs thus argues that the formation of the industrial proletariat is a decisive step in the development of capitalist society, implying “the abolition of the isolated individual” such that “the abstract, universal form of the societal principle as it is manifested can be increasingly concretized and overcome.”<sup>263</sup> The dialectical promise of industrial labor as the “zenith” of alienation, then, is that it prepares the proletariat to begin constructing an emancipated world beyond it.

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<sup>261</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 166.

<sup>262</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 169.

<sup>263</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 171.

But he also stresses that the performance of industrial labor is “only the *beginning* of the complex process of mediation whose goal is the knowledge of society as a historical totality.”<sup>264</sup> As his contributions to the early Comintern debates on party strategy show, Lukacs believed that organizational work was required to sustain and expand the proletariat’s consciousness of the social totality. The disciplined struggle of the vanguard party was both meant to guide the development of this consciousness and, in turn, be guided by it. “This discipline can only come into being as the free and conscious deed of the most conscious element, of the vanguard of the revolutionary class,” Lukacs writes; “Without an at least instinctive understanding of the link between total personality and party discipline on the part of every single party member this discipline must degenerate into a reified and abstract system of rights and duties and the party will relapse into a state typical of a party on the bourgeois pattern.”<sup>265</sup> Again, the reference here is to both Weber and the ‘Kautskyites’: where the discipline of a revolutionary organization proceeds from and facilitates its members’ “proletarian consciousness,” the opportunist social democratic party operates – mechanically – along the lines of the political organizations described by Weber as leading to the “proletarianization of the soul” of their members.<sup>266</sup> The discipline required of the vanguard party, for Lukacs, equates to a defense of the proletarian standpoint as the “realm of authentic freedom,” the active and dis-alienated

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<sup>264</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 169.

<sup>265</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 320.

<sup>266</sup> Weber, Max. ‘The Politician’s Work.’ In *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*. New York: New York Review Books, 2019.

“whole personality,” from the corrosive effects of the passive and alienated “contemplative stance” patterned on the mechanical division of labor.

Generations of Western Marxists have critically responded to Lukacs’ effort at philosophically defining an autonomous subjectivity that could overcome the alienation embodied in capitalist society’s instrumental-rationalist political institutions. But in disagreeing with him on how to reconstruct modernity’s emancipatory potential, whatever theoretical deficiencies have been diagnosed in Lukacs tend to be projected back into the political project he identified himself with: the October Revolution and the Leninist vanguard party that carried it out.

I want to approach the dispute between Lenin and Kautsky from a very different conception of ‘commodity fetishism,’ the key Marxian category structuring Lukacs’ account of capitalist domination and proletarian emancipation. William Roberts has recently argued for reading the section on commodity fetishism in part one of *Capital* as primarily concerned with defending a conception of neo-republican liberty. Not only does this move make Marxist categories newly legible to mainstream approaches in contemporary political theory; it also, Roberts suggests, “makes possible a recovery of the political theory that is the obscure origin of ‘Western’ Marxism.”<sup>267</sup> It does this by reconstructing fetishism as a *political* rather than *epistemic* problem, as obstacle to a distinctively republican conception of freedom as non-domination rather than autonomy.<sup>268</sup> Arguing explicitly against Lukacs and those who came after him, Roberts claims that the problem with fetishism is not its role in

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<sup>267</sup> Roberts, William Clare. *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 83.

<sup>268</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 85.

“subject formation,” but instead the corrosive influence it has on individuals’ capacity to make choices based on reasoned deliberation. “Deliberate choices are ineffective” under capitalism, Roberts writes, “because the market *compels agents to fall in line with the social division of labor*, which is not and cannot be an outcome of deliberate choice.”<sup>269</sup>

Recall that freedom, for republican thinkers, lies in the absence of domination, conceived as the *possibility* of interference by the arbitrary will of another. The key question is, therefore, how to explain why capitalist society is dominating, and it is in order to do this that Roberts engages with the concept of commodity fetishism. He shows that the problem with commodity fetishism is not – as Lukacs would have it – that of an abstract, instrumental rationality ‘alienating’ humanity from its laboring activity. Relating to objects as commodities – privileging their exchange value over their use value – cannot be understood as a form of domination *stricto sensu*, since this relation does not involve the presence of an arbitrary will. If fetishism is a form of domination, this should rather be thought of as a “relation of all-round dependence on one another’s production and consumption” – the constant thwarting of reasonable desires and demands by decisions made according to the ultimately arbitrary imperatives of the market.<sup>270</sup> The quantitative abstraction of entering into commodity exchange does not produce domination at the level of the individual transaction. As both Marx’s contemporaries in the First International (namely, Proudhon) as well as our contemporary neo-republicans (namely, Pettit) make clear, the influence of a seller

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<sup>269</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 83. Emphasis added.

<sup>270</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 93.

making a market offer to a buyer is not an attempt to control the buyer – it is a form of discursive suasion to which the buyer has the option to refuse consent, certainly not the imposition of an alien will. But as Roberts helpfully elucidates, Marx does not focus on the level of the individual transaction. Rather, he cares about “all of the unknown buyers and sellers whose choices have established the parameters of this transaction.”<sup>271</sup> Marx thus contributes to a long tradition of republican thinkers concerned with how, in a commercial society, the capacity for individuals to exercise the basic capacities of citizenship: deliberative control over decision-making. The language of neo-republicanism, in particular Pettit’s image of the dominated agent having to keep a “weather eye” on the dominating agent in deciding on all her actions, helpfully illustrates what is at stake for Marx in commodity fetishism. It is similar to what Soren Mau has called the “mute compulsion” of the market.<sup>272</sup> Under this form of compulsion, “individuals fall under the control of the social movement, the changing relations of interdependency, of people” – thus “commercial society leaves us unfree because it renders us systematically irresponsible for our economic life.”<sup>273</sup> Saying that freedom is impaired by market exchange can instead, on Roberts’ reading of Marx, simply mean that the macro-regularities of the market outweigh the role of other beliefs and desires in their decision-making.<sup>274</sup>

Because “a competitive market affects the decision making of everyone who enter into it to sell their products,” “the dominant class in modernity, the class of

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<sup>271</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 99.

<sup>272</sup> Mau, Søren Mads. *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*. London ; New York: Verso, 2023.

<sup>273</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 93, 101.

<sup>274</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 96-7.

capitalists, is as subject to this impersonal domination as are the laboring classes.”<sup>275</sup>

This is not to say – with Lukacs – that the bourgeois class are ‘bearers’ of functions in a structure of economic relations that robs them of all agency and turns them into blind cogs in some alienated machine. Instead, commodity fetishisms’ “muting of the discursive mediation of social life” simply means that those who are more influenced by an unpredictable and changing web of market transactions going on behind their back are less likely to be able to enter into consistent decision-making processes. Such agents *have* agency. The problem is that it is more difficult for them to reliably act on values and principles that have been arrived at through collective practices of deliberation.

With Roberts’ conception of freedom from commodity fetishism as republican non-domination in mind, we are now in a position to return to the political vanguardism of both Kautsky and Lenin. I will return to Roberts shortly, to see how the question of the state fares in his neo-republican reading of Marx. But first it is worth provisionally mentioning here that it is possible to read both Kautsky and Lenin as primarily concerned with the unsuitability of ‘bearers’ of market commodities as representatives of political constituencies, an observation derived from precisely this concern with capitalists’ propensity to be influenced by this kind of impersonal domination. Kautsky’s parliamentary strategy was not a Weberian capitulation to the bureaucratized political institutions of the capitalist state, just as Lenin’s wager on class dictatorship via council democracy was not an attempt at transcending the alienation of this division of labor. Instead, as is the case for Marx, both are fruitfully

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<sup>275</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 102.

read as acting from a concern with securing political arrangements that would ensure the liberty of the many by limiting and overcoming the impersonal domination of the market.

The stakes of this reassessment must be stated first, however, since Roberts firmly demarcates his Marx of the First International from the ‘Marxists’ of the Second and Third Internationals. As with a host of other scholars, Roberts locates the original sin in the writings of Kautsky.<sup>276</sup> And it is hard to disagree with him that Kautsky’s commentaries on Marx’s social theory – more widely read in his day than the volumes of *Capital* itself – did much to popularize the “illusion” interpretation of commodity fetishism, a point that contemporary value-form theorists all make. This derives primarily from a citation in the intellectual predecessor of the value-form readers of Marx Roberts follows, namely, the Soviet I.I. Rubin’s 1928 *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, where he critiques the transformation of commodity fetishism into “a propaedeutic to political economy” in not only Kautsky’s *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* but the continued influence of this view on the major Bolshevik theorists of the 1920s.<sup>277</sup> But while he was never embraced as Communist orthodoxy by leading party theoreticians, Rubin shared with other innovative Marxist philosophers of the 1920s ridiculed by Bukharin and Zinoviev as “professors” – ‘Western’ luminaries like Korsch, Lukacs, and even Benjamin – a primary and deeply-felt hostility to Kautsky and the other social democratic Marxists. There was thus good reason for him to treat Kautsky only as the great popularizer of

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<sup>276</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 86, fn.124.

<sup>277</sup> Rubin, Isaak Ill’ich. *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*. Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1990. 6.

misunderstood notions about the labor theory of value and commodity fetishism.<sup>278</sup>

Without denying that *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* did, indeed, excessively simplify Marx, it is crucial not to assume – as Roberts and other contemporary Marxists who follow Rubin tend to do – that shortcomings in Kautsky’s political *practice* necessarily follow from these theoretical errors. Moreover, just as numerous passages in Marx seem to support the “misguided” notions attributed to him, it is also crucial not to ignore the aspects of Kautsky’s theory of proletarian organizing that exceed or even contradict this picture. The question is, how much does the illusion interpretation of commodity fetishism determine the political principles of the two key figureheads of ‘traditional’ Marxist practice? Kautsky was, of course, committed to both the illusion interpretation of commodity fetishism *and* the productivist interpretation of the emancipation of labor. But did this preclude him from appreciating the kind of domination outlined in Roberts’ republican reading? Might we not detect *both* in his glosses of Marx, and examine the extent to which the latter ultimately influenced the political work carried on under the banner of traditional “Marxist” orthodoxy?

As the declaration of German Social Democracy’s embrace of Marxism, Kautsky’s commentary on the 1891 Erfurt programme celebrates the *Communist Manifesto* as the announcement of socialism’s transformation from an attempt to “bring the proletariat salvation from above” to the recognition of its authentic “task”: “to give the class struggle of the proletariat the most purposeful [*zielbewußt*] and

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<sup>278</sup> Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, 131-2, 6.

expedient [*zweckmäßig*] shape possible.” Kautsky described this task of “shaping” as the “political struggle,” and throughout his life he saw the indispensable arena for this formative work as parliament. In a direct retort to Engels’ critique of the Erfurt program, he described parliament’s “rights to make or reject laws and to overthrow ministries” as “more than, as one has expressed it, a fig leaf of absolutism.” “As long as the modern great state [*der moderne Großstaat*] exists,” Kautsky writes, “the center of political activity will always lie in its parliament.”<sup>279</sup>

On Massimiliano Salvadori’s telling, this privileging of parliamentary struggle rendered Kautsky’s conclusions “singularly analogous to those of Max Weber on the relationship between firm, state and parties,” a ‘realist’ regarding the necessity of grappling with the complex rationality of modern bureaucratic systems.<sup>280</sup> Only the rational structure of electoral parliamentary institutions could allow a verifiable representation of proletarian strength, and, therefore, allow the class struggle to be waged on terms that attracted the general consent of all social classes. From his very earliest responses to the 1917 Revolution, Kautsky emphasized this “traditional theme of the need to endow any great state with a general technical-political instrument of leadership [which] could only be a Constituent Assembly and therefore a parliament.”<sup>281</sup> Indeed, although Lenin framed him as “reneging” on Marxism’s core commitment to transcending parliamentary democracy, Kautsky (according to Salvadori) had affirmed consistent commitment to “political democracy as an

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<sup>279</sup> Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, V.9.

<sup>280</sup> Salvadori, Massimo L. *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880-1938*. London ; New York: Verso, 1990. 21.

<sup>281</sup> Salvadori, *Kautsky Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution*, 425.

instrument for assuring knowledge of society and ascertaining the will of its citizens” as far back as the turn of the century.<sup>282</sup> This conviction that only free and fair elections could both – before the transition to socialism – accurately gauge the strength of the working class and – after it – accurately account for the complex composition social interests would, as we shall see, make him one of the most vociferous Marxist opponents of the nascent Soviet state.

For Kautsky, socialist parties institutionally embodied the hard-won lesson that “revolution” would only happen when the proletariat’s representatives had learnt to administer modernity’s complex social division of labor. Anything else was a regression to the romantic anti-capitalism away from which Marx was supposed to have guided the workers’ movement. But, against a large literature that sees Kautsky as a mere spokesman for the SPD’s “integration” of the working class into bourgeois society, the Marxist kernel of the Erfurt program remained the idea that *only* the proletariat could actualize the emancipatory potential of modern liberal democratic institutions. If the proletariat needed parliamentarism to shape it, then parliamentarism in turn needed to be shaped by the proletariat. It was in this sense that Kautsky described the party of the working class as the vanguard of democracy.

With this out of the way, we can finally return to Kautsky’s justification for a proletarian politics of organizing the parliamentary vanguard. If Marx was a theorist of liberty as non-domination, then it made sense for those he trusted to carry on his work in the international socialist movement to emphasize parliamentary politics as the “center of gravity” for their political efforts. This did not, at heart, derive from a belief

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<sup>282</sup> Salvadori, *Kautsky Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution*, 17.

that winning a majority in representative assemblies would provide an arena for the proletariat to emancipate society by subjecting the sovereign will of the modern state to the interests of society's most oppressed. Rather, it was based on the question that William Selinger has recently argued centrally preoccupied theorists of parliamentarism up till the end of the First World War – “how to establish liberty in a modern European state that contained a professional military and centralized political authority” – and the “powerful answer” of “mak[ing] the centralized authority clearly subordinate to a representative assembly”<sup>283</sup> In the discourse of the Second International, the proletariat was not a universal subject in an *epistemic* sense – its position in the socioeconomic structure did not give it qualitatively unique insight into the general interests of all social groups. Its importance was grounded, instead, at the level of *organization*: its mass organizations possessed a relatively robust capacity to subordinate the administrative state to the deliberative assembly. A representative assembly with the ‘power of the purse strings’ was not merely a constitutional check on executive authority, but, more expansively, a means of resisting domination by affording citizens a sense of control over their government. But parliamentarism, Selinger argues, also raises its own dilemmas to do with the accountability and stability of the assemblies meant to watch over the standing army and the state bureaucracy themselves; he demonstrates that the disciplinary function of political parties, while not the only solution, was considered a key means of resolving these parliamentary pathologies. Obviously, Kautsky’s conception of parliament is very far

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<sup>283</sup> Selinger, William. *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 7.

from the classical focus on deliberation and the conciliation of diverse opinions. But the wager is that strengthening “independent” proletarian representation in this realm would remove *obstacles* consistently thrown up by capitalism’s impersonal domination to such deliberative oversight.

The principle difference between Kautsky and liberal parliamentarians is, of course, the ultimate belief that commercial society – far from contributing to the eradication of the administrative state’s dominating effects – instead exacerbated them. Robust subordination of the state to a properly representative assembly, then, would require transcending the capitalist mode of production. It is here that we return to Roberts’ reading of *Capital*, particularly the final section on primitive accumulation. Helpfully, Roberts’ invokes Benjamin Constant’s thesis – familiar from the previous chapter of this dissertation – that the spread of *doux commerce* was leading to the obsolescence of ‘the spirit of conquest and usurpation.’ Commerce rendered states “dependent” on credit, thereby preventing them from pursuing the expensive projects of military adventurism abroad or excessive centralization domestically. Marx, Roberts points out, takes Constant’s notion of the state as a “dependent agent” of capital seriously, but argues that it results in the opposite tendency. Trying to displace the Saint-Simonian belief in commerce generating a more peaceful ‘industrial age,’ Marx saw “usurpation and conquest ... [as] the inevitable consequence of the dependence of the authority of the state upon wealth as capital.” “As capital’s agent,” Roberts continues, “the state does capital’s dirty work, executing and enforcing the expropriations that capital cannot itself carry out ... Where the state can, by conquest and plunder, create conditions that can be capitalized, it can be

expected to do so.”<sup>284</sup> As is well known, the Marxists of the Second International were unable to agree on the extent to which revolution meant abolishing this state or simply seizing control of it, and we turn to the major rift that arose from this ambiguity below.

For now, though, what concerns us is the way in which for Kautsky – at the broadest level – the social democratic party as the organization of the industrial proletariat was an exemplary representative of parliamentary freedom, and was well-positioned to empower itself by virtue of that freedom. “The proletariat is ... more favorably situated in regard to parliamentary activity than other classes ... as far as their attitude toward politics is concerned, they are raised far above the farmers and small capitalists.”<sup>285</sup> Another pamphlet by Kautsky would elaborate on these ideas two years later. There, he describes parliament as the key to political freedom in the modern state, and the party discipline imposed by the proletarian form of life as, in turn, the key to successful parliamentary struggle. This is because, firstly, “activity in [workers’] organisations necessarily creates the qualities required by a parliamentarian: eloquence, broad horizons, an understanding of organisational and administrative matters and legal training.”<sup>286</sup> But “more important” is that the fighting proletariat “knows how to keep [parliamentary deputies] under its control.”<sup>287</sup> “In the bourgeois parties, party discipline is in reality the discipline of small cliques who stand above the disjointed mass of voters,” Kautsky writes, while

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<sup>284</sup> Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 219.

<sup>285</sup> Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, V.9.

<sup>286</sup> Kautsky, ‘Parliamentarism and Democracy’ [1893/1911] in Ben Lewis (ed.), *Karl Kautsky on Democracy and Republicanism*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. 131.

<sup>287</sup> Kautsky, ‘Parliamentarism and Democracy,’ 134.

“in Social Democracy, it is the discipline of an organization which encompasses the entire mass of the fighting, intelligent proletariat and which is increasingly expanding across the working classes.”<sup>288</sup>

These goals were, for Kautsky, mutually-reinforcing: the SPD would become a *Volkspartei* to the extent that these proletarian virtues became associated with political life in general:

The spirit of comradesly cohesion, of cooperative discipline, of opposition to capital, peculiar to the large industrial proletariat, is spreading more and more in [the general masses'] ranks; but there is also spreading in its ranks that insatiable thirst for knowledge peculiar to the proletariat.<sup>289</sup>

It was not only the socialist reorganization of the economy that depended upon this diffusion of this proletarian spirit among the population, but – more fundamentally – the survival of parliamentary freedom itself. Acknowledging the desire for more direct democratic forms stemming from dissatisfaction with the propensity for party deputies to engage in self-seeking behavior once elected, Kautsky forcefully argues that “times of decaying parliamentarism” necessitate a redoubled commitment to this strategy, not a turning away from it. “The bourgeoisie feels that it is lost if parliamentarism becomes a truth; it no longer seeks salvation in this system, but in militarism and absolutism ... in eastern Europe at least, this struggle is becoming one for

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<sup>288</sup> Kautsky, ‘Parliamentarism and Democracy,’ 135.

<sup>289</sup> Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, V.12.

parliamentarism and against absolutism and militarism.”<sup>290</sup> Or again, as he put it slightly differently in a later pamphlet:

Today the bourgeoisie has come so far that it can only resist the rule of the sword by arming the proletariat. It can only delay the increasingly threatening and ever-encroaching dictatorship of the proletariat with the rule of the sword. It can no longer master both of these factors.<sup>291</sup>

Simply put, the organized working class was the only reliable defender of parliamentary democracy. Kautsky was at pains to reject the idea of direct participatory democracy as unviable in complex modern societies. The crucial object was the right over political representatives “which the capitalist enjoys in relation to his officials: that is to say, the right to choose to keep tabs on them.”<sup>292</sup> Alongside the familiar Weberian point about the “proletarianization of the soul” in mass parties (so beloved by mid-twentieth century elite interest group theorists), then, we find a second claim about political proletarianism: a superior capacity for disciplining elites.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Kautsky, ‘Parliamentarism and Democracy,’ 152.

<sup>291</sup> Kautsky, ‘The Republic and Social Democracy in France,’ in Ben Lewis (ed.), *Karl Kautsky on Democracy and Republicanism*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. 210.

<sup>292</sup> Kautsky, ‘Parliamentarism and Social Democracy,’ 112-113.

<sup>293</sup> This resonates with Natasha Piano’s recent re-examination of the ‘Italian school of elitism’. If these Second International-affiliated thinkers, such as Roberto Michels, are normally read as celebrating the ‘iron law of oligarchy’, Piano finds on careful examination that their observations of the tendency for power in organisations to concentrate ‘upwards’ in entrenched bureaucracies were written as *warnings* to maintain the discipline-enforcing function of socialist parties’ mass bases. See Piano, Natasha. “Revisiting Democratic Elitism: The Italian School of Elitism, American Political Science, and the Problem of Plutocracy.” *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (April 2019): 524–38.

Kautsky's affirmation of both the need for representative institutions as well as the proletariat's superiority at wielding and defending them extended to his conception of the press. The socialist conception of independence extended to the vaunted idea of journalistic independence. Again, the scale and complexity of economic and political life requires that the "formation and proclamation of public opinion, the exchange of ideas on public affairs" be delegated to newspapers and the professionals who publish them. But "a subscriber to a newspaper has even less influence on his newspaper than the voter has on parliament" – the corruption endemic in capitalist representative systems is thus intensified in this sphere. This is why theoretically coherent propaganda publishing was so central to the Erfurtian strategy. The socialist tasks toward press and parliament, Kautsky argues, should not be the expression of "empty outrage" at the corruption of these institutions, but "subjecting [them] to proletarian discipline." It is precisely the lack of such discipline that he identifies as "the cancerous sore of the socialist movement in France" – "the 'freedom of criticism' of the socialist journalists and deputies, their independence from the proletarian organisations and the possibility that their policies clash with these organisations."<sup>294</sup>

Unlike other parties, the SPD felt it could claim to more fully represent the interests of mass constituencies, because the class that constituted its core membership — the industrial proletariat — were best positioned to watch over the actions of party representatives. It is hard not to read back into the Erfurtian paean to the proletariat's superior political capacities the idea of a "pre-political" epistemic superiority threatening to the deliberative function of representative institutions. In a capitalist

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<sup>294</sup> Kautsky, 'The Republic and Social Democracy in France,' 267.

society under the sway of commodity fetishism, the industrial proletariat's special position in relation to the means of production makes it the escape route from the dehumanizing effects of modernity's dangerous infatuation with instrumental rationality. Kautsky seems to believe that performing wage labor in industrial production generates a social consciousness that somehow transposes directly into a political consciousness. But the effort to establish the socialist party as revolutionary vanguard, via the claim of proletarian hegemony, did not simply rest on the manipulative presentation of one class – an identity defined by a set of economically-determined interests – as a master signifier, a key to solving the riddle of all social conflicts under capitalism. Putting the proletarian party at the heart of the movement for democracy was instead, for Erfurtian socialists, rooted in a perceived need for *independence* from the kinds of corrupting influences that they saw as plaguing other political parties. Kautsky's strategy for the party, then, was based on the basic observation that democratic political representation was impossible when representatives were making decisions under the influence of capital. The SPD and its proletarian base stood out from other participants in parliamentary politics in that it could uphold the dispositions and habits necessary for maintaining liberty in a representative system. Or, to put it more precisely, it had the *potential* to stand out – it was party leaders' job to realize this potential, turning the party into a model democratic agent. Only an independent proletarian party had the discipline to successfully marry parliamentary liberty with mass democracy.

Everything hinges on Kautsky's conception of the principle of independence as actual party model.<sup>295</sup> *Der Klassenkampf* can be read as an appropriation of prevailing conceptions of independence in the workers' movement. This is borne out in the overall structure, which begins with a chapter on the 'The Passing of Small Producers [*Der Untergang des Kleinbetriebes*]' . As the first step in presenting the party's program, Kautsky prioritizes dispelling the notion that a union of small-scale artisanal producers could serve as Social Democracy's model of freedom and independence. He attempts to show how the "small man" cannot seek "independence and freedom" in property, which in fact "makes him more dependent than the propertyless wage-laborer."<sup>296</sup> But "there are only too many quacks" among capitalist producers who, while actually destroying the conditions for his continued existence, "appear as [the small man's] friends and seek with them means of maintaining the small economies." Kautsky's goal is to demonstrate the impossibility of pursuing freedom via the independence afforded by small business ownership, and the consequent necessity of a "proletarian" independence, embodied by the SPD, as the only adequate foundation for the expansion of freedom in modern society. The artisan individually empowered by her capacity to direct her own labor must be debunked as a paradigm of freedom, and an image of the large-scale solidarity exemplified by the industrial proletariat must take its place.

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<sup>295</sup> The relevant German terms are *Unabhängigkeit* and *Selbständigkeit*. The latter term, used more commonly in Kautsky's writings, connotes the kind of mental or spiritual independence that is the outcome of education.

<sup>296</sup> Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, I.4.

Above all, in the complex division of political labor of capitalist society's bureaucratic institutions, this meant devising organizational means of subjecting participants in deliberative assemblies to disciplinary restraints that would resist the impersonal domination of the market. But if the Erfurt program expanded by Kautsky lauds the party of the industrial proletariat as possessing the enlightenment and discipline needed to achieve such restraint, we are left with the question of where such capacities come from. For Kautsky, the industrial proletariat are a world-historical novelty precisely because associative factory labour "educates" them in the "voluntary, joyful discipline, which is the precondition of co-operative, socialist production, but which is also a precondition of every successful struggle of the proletariat against exploitation in capitalist production." Industrial workers' status as the 'fighting proletariat' – as *Vorkämpfer* of the revolution – depends upon this factory discipline.

But it is not the 'proletarianization of the soul' that the party is supposed to manipulate, as the second conclusion Kautsky draws from these premises shows: the industrial proletariat's superior capacity for *thought*. In a section of *Der Klassenkampf* on 'Socialism and Freedom', Kautsky declares that "it is the despised, ignorant proletarians in whom the philosophical spirit of the brilliant thinkers of the Athenian aristocracy is reborn."<sup>297</sup> He cites the ancient distinction between *polis* and *oikos* — that "lack of leisure" makes "a good education impossible", which doomed Greek shopkeepers and craftsmen to ignorance of public affairs and hence justified their political disenfranchisement. For the petty-bourgeoisie and wealthier peasants under

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<sup>297</sup> Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, IV.10. I cite from this section throughout this paragraph and the next.

capitalism, opportunities for better work output and therefore a higher standard of living tended to become the main object of intellectual striving. In a capitalist society predicated on the commodification of goods and services, the acquisition of any skill would be subordinated to the value form. “The labour market for educated labour is today as overstocked as the market for manual labour,” and thus “[the educated’s] first care is not the development of their intellect, but the sale of it.” Even among the traditionally educated classes, therefore, “education has become a commodity” and, consequently, “the philosophical sense is dying out.” The “aristocracy of the mind” [*Aristokratie des Geistes*] has given way to a “*Proletariat der Intelligenz*”. Only their “presumption” [*ihre Anmaßung*] distinguishes this proletarian intelligentsia from other wage workers – “they have ceased to be the intellectual leaders of the bourgeoisie and have become its clown-fighters [*ihre Klopffechter* – literally ‘knock-fencers’, troupes of acrobatic play-fighters].”

But the same machine labour which prepared the proletarian for disciplined political activity also “stultified” his mind, excluding him from this degradation of education. There was no way for the machine labourer’s intellect to improve his own labour process, since the intellectual work of devising such improvements had been wholly centralised in the development of machines. Paradoxically, then, the drudgery of industrial labour allowed for an absolute separation between work and leisure time. It was, for Kautsky, only *unskilled* labourers that could still experience education in its “higher” uncommodified form, and, through this, genuinely develop the “philosophical sense.” Intellectual “stultification” in the economic sphere, for Kautsky, leads to a corresponding intellectual enrichment in leisure time. Labour is no

longer coterminous with “life” but is rather opposed to it, and the untapped intellectual powers of the proletariat are turned toward a “thirst for knowledge” which is “entirely disinterested.” Untethered from the attempt to solve particular problems relating to individual financial security, the proletarian’s “gaze is directed at the whole; he seeks to understand the whole of society, the whole world,” writes Kautsky; “The most difficult problems attract him the most”, and “it is often hard to bring him down from the clouds to solid earth.” It was the capacity for the proletariat to authentically participate in intellectual struggles that distinguished it from the presumptuous bourgeois *Klopffechters*, whose theoretical production was motivated by a desire to deny and escape their own precariousness rather than to understand it.

Kautsky’s descriptions of the ‘intellectual continence’ of the working class hew very closely to Marx’s long Chapter Fifteen of *Capital* Volume One on ‘Machinery and Large-Scale Industry.’ This chapter is notoriously difficult because it is quite ambivalent about the ways in which mechanized labor ‘forms’ the proletariat. It is worth quoting Marx at length here in order to lay out this ambiguity:

Large-scale industry, through its very catastrophes, makes the recognition of variation of labor and hence of the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labor into a question of life and death .. That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation, must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labor required of him; the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of

one specialized social function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn.<sup>298</sup>

Of the “totally developed individual” prepared by machine production, Kautsky’s *Economic Theories of Karl Marx* has the following to say:

“Machine production forms the basis on which a new race will arise, far removed from the one-sided limitation of handicraft and manufacture, not the slave of nature, like the man of primitive communism, not buying spiritual and physical strength and beauty with the oppression of lawless slave herds, like classical antiquity; a race, harmoniously developed, joyful and capable of enjoyment, master of the earth and of the forces of nature, embracing all members of the community in fraternal equality.”<sup>299</sup>

It is, then, very easy to read a dialectical inversion *à la* Lukacs into this passage and, indeed, into Kautsky’s blushing gloss thereof. Capitalism prepares its own gravediggers at the absolute zero point of the industrial division of labor, where – by stripping away possibility of rationally representing the proletariat’s function in society’s productive forces – total dehumanization is dialectically sublated into a horizon of total humanization in which a fully human personality can be developed

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<sup>298</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital Voume I*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Classics, 1990. 618.

<sup>299</sup> Kautsky, Karl. *Karl Marx’ Oekonomische Lehren*. Stuttgart: Dietz Verlag, 1893. II.10.6.

beyond any fragmented representation of a society of functional capacities.<sup>300</sup> Against ‘anti-humanist’ readings that separate the scientific outlook of the mature Marx from his earlier writings about autonomy, this seems to be the part of *Capital* that comes closest to the gushing prophecies in *The Communist Manifesto* about the emancipatory promise of “all that is solid melt[ing] into air.” Indeed, it is one of the few moments in *Capital* where Marx quotes that earlier pamphlet.

But there is a crucial difference here. Capitalism does not merely “sweep away” the traditional division of labor which bound each laborer to a particular function for life – it “reproduces this same division of labor in a still more monstrous shape.”<sup>301</sup> When Marx quotes the *Manifesto* on bourgeois society’s dissolution of the division of labor, then, he specifies that, under capitalism, this is accompanied by the conversion of the worker in the factory to the “appendage of the machine,” and outlining in detail the negative effects of machine production on society more broadly. There is only the imperative to deploy machines in service of human needs, and the insistence that capital will always produce a human surplus population to ensure that they continue to exploit workers.

It was the ambiguous goal of preparing the working class to initiate this changed relationship to mechanized systems that the Second International took upon itself. In the rest of this paper, we will examine the epochal rifts that would form

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<sup>300</sup> The classic study on the ambiguous role of the SPD construction of proletarian culture as either appropriating or establishing an alternative to the Imperial German *Bildungsbürgertum* can be found in Lidtke, Vernon L. *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. For a more recent study, see Hake, Sabine. *The Proletarian Dream: Socialism, Culture, and Emotion in Germany, 1863–1933*. De Gruyter, 2017.

<sup>301</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 614.

among Kautskyist socialists during the breakdown of the Second International and the rise of the Third, as disputes over what forms of working class self-activity constituted the appropriate “shape” of the class struggle. This raised questions not only of who belonged to the working class, and how it should relate to other classes, but also of where leading “intelligent” and “disciplined” forms of working class political action would arise, and what they would look like. To round out this section, though, I want to briefly point out the extent to which the Erfurtian ideal of a working class popular party openly claiming leadership in the struggle for democratic institutions shaped Lenin’s vision of Bolshevism. Lars T. Lih has convincingly shown that the so-called ‘founding document’ of the Leninist vanguard party, *What is to be Done?*, was in fact an attempt at remaining faithful to this ideal in the context of a more intense autocracy lacking parliamentary institutions altogether. Lih advances a strong claim that Lenin remained captivated by the “Erfurtian drama” his entire life, for the most part reducing his theoretical utterances to elaborations on Kautsky’s basic script of securing proletarian hegemony in the democratic revolution.<sup>302</sup> Other contemporary commentators have challenged this strong reading, as shown below, but for now the broader indebtedness of Bolshevik strategy to Kautsky must be unpacked.

*What is to be Done?*, Lih explains, was a fairly uncontroversial statement of Erfurtian political principles that, by the time the pamphlet appeared in 1901, were not challenged by any significant tendencies within Russian Marxism. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was fairly secure in its steadily improving position

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<sup>302</sup> Lih, Lars T. ‘A Russian Erfurtian’. In *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context*. 111-158. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006.

in the Russian workers' movement, which was growing increasingly militant, and *What is to be Done?* – culminating in its ringing endorsement of an All-Russia Social Democratic newspaper – was aimed at galvanizing and professionalizing the long-standing work of activists (*praktiki*) centred around the exiled editorial board of the journal *Iskra*. In a tsarist Russia without the right to assemble, the 'broad horizons' necessary for independent proletarian leadership would have to take shape around the illegal press. In the pamphlet's central section, Lenin describes how the Russian working class can become "the advanced fighter [*peredovoi borets*] of democracy". Building on numerous previous references to the success of German Social Democracy, Lenin cites the example of Wilhelm Liebknecht – a founding SPD leader – as editor of the party newspaper during the period when German socialists, like those in Russia, were forced to operate illegally. Without access to the parliamentary stage to galvanize proletarian agency, Lenin argues, Social Democrats can (and *should*) build their own stage through the publication and dissemination of a single national newspaper. The goal is to achieve a situation where Social Democrat activists become "leaders capable of guiding all manifestations of the all-sided struggle." Proletarian hegemony – the party's role as tribune – was predicated upon the ability to demonstrate its leadership to other groups that did not already identify as socialist. "It is not enough just to call oneself vanguard, an advanced detachment – one has to act so that *all* other detachments see and are compelled to admit that we are indeed moving out ahead. And we ask the reader: are the representatives of the other 'detachments' really such fools simply to accept our word about being a 'vanguard'?"

The task of “propaganda and agitation in all strata of the people” is “alleviated for the Western-European Social Democrat by popular assemblies and meetings that anybody who wants can attend; it is also alleviated by a parliament in which the Social Democrat speaks before deputies of all classes.”<sup>303</sup> For the mass party in conditions of political freedom, “universal (in the literal meaning of the word) monitoring of each step made by a party man during his political career creates an automatically acting mechanism that provides what in biology is called ‘survival of the fittest.’ ... Just try putting this picture into the framework of our autocracy!”<sup>304</sup> Thus, ‘universal monitoring’ must be substituted for the norms of *konspiratsiya* — secretive selection rather than open election. This problem of ‘universal monitoring’ would take on a different colour once democratic freedoms had been achieved in Russia. But by the time the Russian republic emerged in February 1917, intervening events — namely, the SPD’s support for German militarism — had convinced Lenin that alternative forms of such monitoring activity were needed.

As Lenin stressed in *State and Revolution*, back in 1891 — before Kautsky had even published his commentary on the Erfurt Programme — Engels had already indicated the basic insufficiency of its conception of parliamentarism as the primary arena of political struggle. The Programme “*lacks* precisely what should have been said,” namely, that the Reichstag was a “fig leaf of absolutism” and that only the demand for “a unified republic” — “for the concentration of all power in the hands of the people’s representatives” — could establish the conditions for “the specific form

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<sup>303</sup> V.I. Lenin, “What is to be Done?” in Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 673-836. 748.

<sup>304</sup> Lenin, “What is to be Done?”, 799.

for the dictatorship of the proletariat”: “complete self-government in the provinces, districts and communes through officials elected by universal suffrage” and “the abolition of all local and provincial authorities appointed by the state.” In his subsequent writings, Kautsky would largely agree with Engels, frequently highlighting the inadequacy of parliament in a way that the Erfurt Programme’s other primary authors — SPD leader Auguste Bebel, and especially the ‘revisionist’ Eduard Bernstein — would not. But the question of how to imagine the ‘specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat’ was transformed during the First World War and its aftermath. The retroactive justification of the War by its victors as a struggle between ‘democracy and dictatorship’, articulated in US President Woodrow Wilson’s project for a League of Nations, fundamentally altered the discursive terrain of socialism itself.

Commentators usually mark August 4, 1914 — the SPD’s Reichstag vote on ratifying the extension of unlimited war credits to the imperial government — as the moment when international socialism irrevocably split between revolutionary and reformist currents. Admittedly tepid support for anti-militarist and anti-imperialist principles at the party’s 1907 and 1912 congresses notwithstanding, party leaders finally demonstrated through their patriotic ‘war fever’ that they accepted the fundamental legitimacy of the nation-state. Less commented upon, however, is what Karl Radek called the “second August 4th” — the support among socialist leaders after the War not for nationalist belligerence but rather for its apparent opposite:

Wilson's international campaign for a peacekeeping League of Nations.<sup>305</sup> War and peace were — in Lenin's formulation — two sides of the same imperialist coin: it was the League's hegemonic project of transforming peace and self-determination into political goals consistent with imperialism against which the Bolshevik push for a Third International was opposed.

The key point here is that support for the League had nothing to do with a misguided theoretical outlook based on Erfurtianism — the problem was rather that, to paraphrase the contemporaneous KPD activist Ruth Fischer's words, the party had no theory at all. Kautsky himself attempted to thread the needle between his conflicting loyalties to party and principle by advocating abstention from the initial war credits vote, but even this stance of neutrality would lower his standing in the party; by 1916, he had been removed from his long-time post as editor of the party theoretical journal *Die Neue Zeit*, and by 1917 he had joined forces with other critics of the SPD's continued pro-war stance to form a new party: the Independent Social Democrats, or USPD (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*). It would not be long before this new party's commitment to an independent proletarian policy would be put to the test. First in Russia from February 1917, and then in Germany and Austria from late 1918, the long-anticipated breakdown of the Eastern and Central European military autocracies finally began under the immense strain of the war. The question of whether the proletariat was mature enough to claim leadership over this revolutionary situation became impossible to avoid. The project of the League of

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<sup>305</sup> Quoted in John Riddell (ed.), *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power: Documents: 1918-1919*. New York: Pathfinder, 1986. 478.

Nations changed the terrain on which this question would be answered. In February 1919, Kautsky and other USPD leaders were involved in an effort to revive the dormant Second International as a method of influencing the Paris peace negotiations that would remain underway until the autumn of 1920. Their meeting at Bern affirmed that war “could only be banished by the establishment of the League of Nations.”<sup>306</sup> In response, the Bolsheviks hastily put together a founding meeting for a Third International that March; Zinoviev, who would soon become the organisation’s leader, described the League of Nations in a *Pravda* article commemorating the meeting as an international of the bourgeoisie “whose aim is to strangle nations.”<sup>307</sup>

The Bolsheviks’ cynical view of the League’s imperialist function is well known, since it resonates with other ‘realist’ accounts of the self-interest underlying such idealistic international institutions. During the League’s crisis-ridden twenty-year existence, E.H. Carr’s analysis of the statist power politics undergirding Wilsonian idealism would prove foundational to the discipline of international relations itself.<sup>308</sup> But more recently, scholars have moved past this stylised opposition and begun to analyse the deeper implications of this moment for democratic theory. Adom Getachew has characterised the League founders’ project as a “counterrevolutionary moment,” in which Wilson (working with the South African statesman Jan Smuts) “[laid] claim to the revolutionary principle of self-determination” and “recast [it] as a racially differentiated principle, which was fully compatible with imperial rule.”<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Quoted in Riddell, *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power*, 542.

<sup>307</sup> Quoted in Riddell, *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power*, 619-620.

<sup>308</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: 1919-1939*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016[1939].

<sup>309</sup> Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 40.

Getachew shows how the League — despite opposing “imperial aggrandizement” among the “old Empires” of the East — was in fact “modelled” on the civilizing mission of the British Empire. For Wilson and Smuts, Britain supported “freedom and equality” in its colonies while at the same time maintaining “an appropriate equilibrium attentive to differing capacities and levels of development,” and this racist equilibrium would inform the League’s operation.<sup>310</sup> Nationalities whose purported racial characteristics placed them below the threshold for full independence were granted the level of self-determination for which they were deemed sufficiently ‘mature’. But if Wilson and Smuts placed different nationalities at different stages of the organic acquisition of the cultural habits needed for self-government, they also characterised democratic maturity as a peculiar feature of Anglo-Saxon racial stock that was only able to authentically develop in Britain and its settler colonies including the United States. This “process of unequal integration” meant, in practice, an indefinite period of “‘autonomous development’ for much of the world” under the “tutelage” of the imperial powers.<sup>311</sup>

In addition to the “darker races” of the global South, this racist conception of self-determination also applied to the newly-emancipated nationalities of Eastern Europe and the socialist leaders claiming to represent them. Loss of faith in the democratic agency of the masses undermined the commitment of party elites to the Erfurtian principle of proletarian political independence outlined above and, in the polarised post-War discursive field, drew them into the orbit of Wilson’s racist and

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<sup>310</sup> Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*, 48-49.

<sup>311</sup> Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*, 52.

pessimistic conception of self-determination. Eric Blanc, in his study of all major Social Democratic parties in the multi-national Russian Empire – from Finland to Georgia to the Jewish Labour Bund cites the earlier failed 1905 Revolution as central to this loss of faith. If empire-wide strikes, peasant uprisings and the formation of the first soviets had compelled the autocracy to move toward constitutional government, the working class proved unable to preserve the newly-won political freedoms during the reactionary backlash which followed. Blanc describes the subsequent “flight of the intelligentsia” as a disillusionment with proletarian potential – after the failure of 1905, “the hegemony of revolutionary social democracy inside of the intelligentsia was done for good.”<sup>312</sup> The belief that workers’ parties lacked the maturity to govern alone without forming blocs with the bourgeoisie was thus pervasive among intelligentsia socialists who re-entered political life after the February 1917 Revolution: “lack of confidence in the working class [and even “disenchantment with democracy”]... constituted a major shift away from the traditions of 1905.”<sup>313</sup> Bringing Blanc’s analysis back to our own interest in parliamentarism, this newfound loss of the sense that viable new forms of liberty-enhancing assembly would arise from proletarian activism was accompanied by a parallel enthusiasm for ‘Western’ — and especially Anglo-American — democratic traditions. Kautsky’s earlier ambivalence about the future of parliamentary authority disappeared, and with it, too, went an openness to learning from ‘the East.’

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<sup>312</sup> Eric Blanc, *Revolutionary Social Democracy*, 96. Blanc points out that this lack of faith is usually attributed to one of the few who maintained it: Lenin.

<sup>313</sup> Blanc, *Revolutionary Social Democracy*, 98.

It is against this backdrop that USPD-affiliated writers, from Bernstein and Kautsky to the Menshevik leader Martov, portrayed “Bolshevism” as ignorant of the requirements of proletarian independence. Leninist self-determination was a “reversion” to a pre-Marxist theoretical immaturity. This fit into the interrelated categories of spatial and temporal figures of democratic immaturity, that fell outside the ‘discovery’ of the *political* struggle which began with the proletariat’s “training” in parliament: the barbarism of the East was analogised to the “pre-Marxist” socialism of Auguste Blanqui — the destructive model of revolutionary agency associated with the undisciplined insurgent barricade-building of nineteenth century France.

Kautsky’s 1919 response to Trotsky delegitimised the October Revolution by appealing to this key Second Internationalist trope of ‘Blanquism’: the violent, futile pursuit of revolutionary activity without the prior formation of a sufficiently enlightened working class majority. Blanquism was dangerous because, without mass support, putschists would have to fall back on political violence to achieve their emancipatory goals. The Paris Commune of 1871 — which Lenin had claimed as model for the soviet system — presented, for Kautsky, a completely different picture. Terroristic elements among the leaders of the Commune, Kautsky argues, were overwhelmingly outnumbered by those affiliates of the First International who repudiated terrorism on principle.<sup>314</sup> As a result, the French Civil War — unlike the contemporary Russian one — was the only civil war in history in which one side maintained non-violence in the face of the violence of their enemies. He thus attempts

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<sup>314</sup> Kautsky, Karl. *Terrorism and Communism: A contribution to the natural history of revolution*. Routledge revivals: London, 2011 [1920]. 111.

to sunder Russian Communism from the Parisian Communards, denying the former the legitimacy they hoped to derive from the latter.<sup>315</sup> Kautsky attributes this to a “spirit of humanity” which, although it “animated the working classes of the nineteenth century,” had now been largely eradicated due to the “brutalising effects of War.”<sup>316</sup> The millions of people newly proletarianised as a result of the conflict had not had time to be adequately enlightened or led by Social Democratic parties due to the economic and political privations of total war. Thus, “the minority with superior education and skill, who had hitherto led the proletariat, gradually lost its power of leading, and in its stead there arose the blind passion of ignorance.” As in 1793, the urgent improvement of the proletariat’s desperate situation, regardless of any collateral damages to the economy overall, took precedence.<sup>317</sup> Kautsky thus describes the October Revolution as an eruption of primitive intellectual and moral forces:

“[Marxist workers in Russia were] ... dead or swept away by the backward masses who had suddenly awakened to life. It was pre-Marxist ways of thought that gained the upper hand, ways such as were represented by Blanqui, Weitling, or Bakunin ... [the Revolution] awoke afresh only primitive ways of thought; and also allowed brutal and murderous forms of political and social war to come

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<sup>315</sup> Traverso’s recent elaboration of the contemporary left’s ‘realm of memory’ diagnoses a profound ambivalence that echoes Kautsky’s separation of October 1917 from February 1871. The emancipatory currents associated with global protests and street assemblies have not, by and large, taken up the twentieth century’s traditions of armed revolutionary struggle. Traverso describes the current interest in the Paris Commune “as an extraordinary experience of self-government and commonality rather than a prefiguration of the October Revolution” as “exciting.” At the same time, though, “we must not forget either that it ended in massacre and that the Russian Revolution was also, among other things, an effort to overcome its shortcomings.” As the trajectory of many recent uprisings has shown, “the question of power” with which the Bolshevik attempt to further the lessons of 1871 grappled “proved to be inescapable”, whether for participants in the Arab Spring or elsewhere. See Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History*. London: Verso, 2021. 30-1.

<sup>316</sup> Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 120, 153.

<sup>317</sup> Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 154.

to light, forms which one had been led to believe had been overcome by the intellectual and moral rise [*Hebung*] of the proletariat.”<sup>318</sup>

Kautsky’s criticism of Blanquism is here much stronger than it had been previously, and brings him much closer to the revisionist perspective of Eduard Bernstein that he had earlier polemicised against.<sup>319</sup> Bernstein and Kautsky were leading USPD delegates at Bern, and both opposed a motion to forego condemning the Bolshevik’s revolutionary dictatorship until more information was available. Under the threat of this ‘cult of violence’, Kautsky now embraced a distinction between socialism’s ‘constructive’ and ‘destructive’ strands most forcefully articulated in Bernstein’s *Preconditions of Socialism* (1899).

Lenin, for his part, had tried to refute accusations of Blanquism back in September 1917, as the legitimacy of Russia’s provisional government was wavering. In a letter aimed at convincing Bolshevik Central Committee members to prepare for the possibility of insurrection, he stressed that there was a difference between placing irrational faith in sudden coups d’état and merely reflecting on “the treatment of insurrection as an art.”<sup>320</sup> Lenin claimed that Marxists — unlike Blanquists — could only consider insurrection when the “objective conditions” existed for its success. “Our victory is assured,” Lenin wrote, since “we have the following of ... the

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<sup>318</sup> Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 156-7.

<sup>319</sup> As late as 1909, Kautsky wrote that “in their recognition of the necessity of capturing political power Marx and Engels agreed with Blanqui,” defending this ideal of proletarian dictatorship [*politischen Alleinherrschaft des Proletariats*] against the idea that revolution was “an outgrown barbaric method, which has no place in our century of democracy, ethics and brotherly love.” See Karl Kautsky, *The Road to Power*, Chapter 1. Available at Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1909/power/ch01.htm>. Accessed July 5th 2022.

<sup>320</sup> V.I. Lenin, ‘Marxism and Insurrection.’ Available at Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/13.htm>. Accessed July 5th 2022.

vanguard of the people, which is capable of carrying the masses with it.” Lenin was justifying a Bolshevik boycott of that month’s Democratic Conference — a ‘pre-parliamentary’ meeting of leaders of Russia’s various socialist parties in response to the fracturing of the provisional government — rejecting the idea that they represented the “majority of the revolutionary people” and were able to make decisions on their behalf. He urged his comrades to not only recognise but embrace the idea that “the power of decision lies *outside*” parliamentary institutions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate whether or not Lenin was correct on this count; the key point, though, was that — in the face of apparently moribund leadership in established institutional spaces, the soviets became a vital source of new democratic authority.

For Kautsky prior to the war, Germany’s lack of a ‘revolutionary tradition’ akin to the French was actually beneficial to the development of a class-conscious social democratic worker movement. In France, it was all too easy for bourgeois opportunist republicans to ‘dupe the workers’, invoking the memory of 1793 when the whole people struggled together against clerical reaction in order to obscure the very real contradictions among them. Thus, while the Czech-born Kautsky was geographically a ‘European’ thinker, we can also productively view him as nonetheless a distinctly Eastern one. As Delia Popescu has recently argued, discussing the failure of post-Soviet political analysis to adequately engage with Eastern European political thought, it is generally assumed that the region is “derivative and aspirational” vis-à-vis the West.<sup>321</sup> Kautsky’s account of the shortcomings of Western

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<sup>321</sup> Delia Popescu, ‘Eastern Political Thought as a Conceptual Tool,’ in Jenco, Idris, Thomas (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

socialists in France, Britain and the US, in a way obscured by his reputation as a quietistic parliamentarian, refuses to turn the West into a model for the East. Instead, he acknowledges the unique advantage held by those countries which never experienced a ‘heroic’ bourgeois revolution – in which middle and working classes fought side by side – and could therefore develop independent proletarian political movements. We can understand as similar the assessment of Germany itself made by figures like Lenin after August 4th, 1914, when Kautsky became committed to shoring up the Western model of democratic development.

The reader may be reminded here of Antonio Gramsci’s familiar account of the distinct tasks of communist parties in East and West. Recall that for Gramsci, writing in 1920s Italy, whereas the parties in the East had merely to bombard the ‘fortress’ in which a relatively weak bourgeois were holed up by seizing control of the state and its means of coercion, Western communists were forced to struggle through the layered ‘trenches and redoubts’ of a bourgeoisie whose cultural hegemony had disseminated throughout civil society. But Gramsci’s classic contrast obscures more than it reveals here. By reading both Kautsky and Lenin as ‘Eastern’ thinkers, I attempt to break out of the persistent habit of reading as unique to advanced Western liberal democracies the laborious construction of a hegemonic democratic movement. This is borne out in Kautsky’s own writings. His contribution to an early edition of *Iskra*, the first all-Russian Social Democratic newspaper, lauded their growing movement by declaring that “the revolutionary centre is moving from the West to the East.” In tones highly reminiscent of the pamphlet which had helped launch *Iskra* the previous year — Lenin’s *What is to be Done?* — Kautsky celebrated the “new generation of heroes”

rising up to galvanise the nascent class struggle in the rapidly industrialising tsarist autocracy, praising the “passionate thirst for knowledge” that put them ahead of their inspiring but theoretically-unsophisticated agrarian populist forebears.<sup>322</sup>

### **The Dictatorship of the Proletariat: Superintending the State Machine**

Lenin invoked this earlier, Eastward-looking Kautsky in one of the pamphlets distributed to all delegates at the Second Comintern Congress held in Moscow in the summer of 1920. The Second Comintern Congress is often seen as foundational to Leninist vanguardism’s dictatorial core insofar as it established “democratic centralism” — the executive authority of a tight-knit Central Committee between plenary congresses — as a requirement for any party wishing to affiliate with Comintern. As stated in Condition No.12 of the notorious ‘twenty-one conditions’ for membership: “In the present epoch of acute civil war the Communist Party will only be able to fulfil its duty if it is organised in as centralist a manner as possible, if iron discipline reigns within it and if the Party centre, sustained by the confidence of the Party membership, is endowed with the fullest rights and authority and the most far-reaching powers.”<sup>323</sup> Democratic centralism would, in subsequent years, come to be one of official Marxism-Leninism’s organising principles, and historians seeking the intellectual origins of this official doctrine decided (somewhat arbitrarily, it turns out)

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<sup>322</sup> Karl Kautsky in Day and Gaido (eds.), *Witness to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 63.

<sup>323</sup> Trotsky in Adler, Alan, ed. *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*. London: Ink Links, 1980. 95.

to invoke *What is to be Done?* as the first articulation of this principle in writing.<sup>324</sup>

On this telling, ‘democratic centralism’ supposedly first articulated in *What is to be Done?* fatally compromised the Bolshevik party’s ability to actually nurture soviet democracy, despite their professions that such institutions had superseded parliaments as the new locus of popular power.

In this final section of the chapter I show how this focus on democratic centralism as the core innovation at the Second Congress covers over the positive and inspiring model inherited from Kautsky of disseminating an image of independent proletarian power through coordinated agency in representative assemblies — soviet, not parliament. What the familiar view of the Comintern’s founding forgets is the *actual* image of proletarian power at the heart of Bolshevik propaganda from this period: the soviets. The dictatorship of the proletariat, for Lenin, was not the simple seizure of the bureaucratic and military apparatuses, but the willingness to treat new working-class autonomous forms of organisation as possessing the *potential* to outstrip this apparatus, replacing it with something qualitatively different. Soviets, Lenin argues, allowed for the proletariat to *manifest* its constitutive features as exemplary political agent more efficiently than parliament could. This, indeed, was how Rosa Luxemburg wrote of the German councils or *Räte* that spread throughout the country as mass mobilisation toppled the Kaiser in November 1918. The workers’

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<sup>324</sup> Clear statements of the specific nexus between the 21 Conditions and a supposed Leninist doctrine of vanguardism include Pons, Silvio, S. A. Smith, Norman M. Naimark, Sophie Quinn-Judge, Juliane Furst, and Mark Seldon, eds. *The Cambridge History of Communism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 538 ; Nation, R. Craig. *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2009. 92-93.

parliament was the “symbol” for the new order, not the “outdated” constituent assemblies inherited from 1789.<sup>325</sup>

The failed January 1919 ‘Spartacist uprising’ — wrongly blamed on the Spartacus tendency led by Luxemburg within the USPD that had just broken away to form the KPD — is usually seen as evidence of the futility of applying Bolshevik-style ‘vanguardism’ in a country like Germany with a complex economy and civil society. But Luxemburg, like Lenin, was focused on working within the councils as the sites where an independent proletarian power able to better instantiate the promise of free representative government might arise.<sup>326</sup> James Muldoon’s recent book on the German council movement anachronistically projects a consistently proto-totalitarian ‘vanguardism’ into Bolshevik theory and practise at this crucial time, and so his account is well worth engaging here. Muldoon stresses the ‘positive’ conception of collective freedom shared among supporters of the councils “who were participatory socialists and valued the pedagogical dimensions of political struggle.”<sup>327</sup> He counterposes this to the authoritarian idea that revolution required the people “to be liberated by a revolutionary vanguard party.”<sup>328</sup> Despite initial support for the soviets, Bolshevik power rendered them merely “symbolic” – the administrative bureaucracy dominated by the party quickly became more powerful than the open, participatory

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<sup>325</sup> Luxemburg, in *Die Rote Fahne* 20th November 1918. Quoted in Riddell, *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power*, 542.

<sup>326</sup> Luxemburg and her fellow Spartacus League leader Karl Liebknecht famously attempted to stop this abortive uprising, making it more akin to the Bolsheviks’ opposition to the Petrograd workers’ insurrection of July 1917. While Lenin barely escaped the July days with his life, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were not so lucky in January 1919.

<sup>327</sup> James Muldoon, *Building Power to Change the World: The Political Thought of the German Council Movements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 52.

<sup>328</sup> Muldoon, *Building Power to Change the World*, 53.

plenum, such that “the position of the councils within the increasingly totalitarian one-party state was reduced to bureaucratised pillars of state power.”<sup>329</sup> The Bolshevik push to give “all power to the soviets” and turn them into “fighting institutions” for waging revolutionary war contradicted the desires of their members, many of whom “preferred to surveil government actions rather than remove the government entirely.”<sup>330</sup> Muldoon suggests that the dual power institutional framework offered at the time by Kautsky, in which the councils act as “permanent centres for the mobilisation of workers to ensure parliament was vigorously patrolled by an organised citizenry,” was superior.<sup>331</sup>

I argue that the Bolsheviks, in establishing the Comintern to oppose Kautsky’s theoretical clout among revolutionary working class activists, were not simply enacting an anti-participatory and anti-pedagogical model of liberation. An alternative claim about a disciplined, independent proletarian form of representation arose at the foundation of Comintern: the image of soviet power as a viable alternative to fulfil the basic functions of parliamentarism. This involved not simply forming a zealous putschist minority to impose their extreme will first on the working class and then on society as a whole, but instead — as Zinoviev put it — to persuade those socialists in the “centre” of the old International whose intellectual figurehead was Kautsky. “It is necessary to break away the most revolutionary forces from the centre,” Zinoviev wrote, “and that requires ruthless criticism and exposure of the centre’s leaders.”<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Muldoon, *Building Power to Change the World*, 38.

<sup>330</sup> Muldoon, *Building Power to Change the World*, 32.

<sup>331</sup> Muldoon, *Building Power to Change the World*, 102.

<sup>332</sup> Zinoviev, ‘The Hour for a Genuine Communist International Has Struck.’ In Riddell, *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power*, 617.

Zinoviev summed up the picture the Bolsheviks hoped to paint when, in 1920, he declared that Kautsky “ha[d] become a babbling Shyster for the Yellow press of the world,” whose ideas would no longer appeal to the “new breed of German worker ... being trained and steeled in strikes and uprisings.”<sup>333</sup> In his capacity as leader of Comintern, Zinoviev would finally persuade — in a four-hour speech at Halle — a large majority of delegates from Kautsky’s own party to join a Moscow-aligned German Communist Party (KPD). It must be stressed here that the stakes of this propaganda war were high; unlike stereotypical squabbling Marxist sects, these were parties with significant mass followings. After the Kaiser’s abdication in November 1918, the SPD’s role in both propping up military and bureaucratic hierarchies and crushing the German councils had bolstered support for the USPD. The mandate that had ushered the SPD into power — the mass agitation for reform of the imperialist military state — was constantly undermined by its leaders, who actively empowered the paramilitary *Freikorps* to exterminate council democrats allegiant to their own party in the name of securing order. In the face of this repression, by the June 1920 Reichstag elections, the USPD’s vote share was only a few percentage points behind that of the SPD. The Bolsheviks were thus eager to persuade this new popular force away from intellectual leaders who opposed the developments in Russia, Kautsky chief among them.

It was early in the German revolution – on December 17, 1918, as the Bolsheviks began to propagandize on behalf of the council movement in Germany seizing power – that Lenin’s *State and Revolution* was republished. While many have

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<sup>333</sup> Zinoviev, in Riddell, *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power*, 829-830.

commented on Lenin's statement about "organiz[ing] the whole economy on the lines of the postal service ... all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat," few have made sense of what he goes on to claim is the upshot of this "immediate aim": "the abolition of parliamentarism and the preservation of representative institutions."<sup>334</sup> The problem with the 'state machine' is not that the bourgeoisie are directing the state 'tool' toward the *wrong ends*, and that replacing them as the ruling class with the proletariat would allow the tool to be directed toward the *right ends*. Crucially, the point here is not to say that the bourgeois state is irredeemably "over-determined" by the objective structure of capitalism. I am not rehashing the Althusserian debates of the 1970s (debates that Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist turn to discursive hegemony were concerned with overcoming).<sup>335</sup> Here, again, Roberts' neo-republican reading of Marx as a theorist of non-domination is particularly helpful. As we saw him argue in the previous section, the "sense of structuralism" is not that the agency of the bourgeoisie is overdetermined, but rather that it makes them *incontinent* agents. Representatives of commodities "are fatally distracted from what they know to be the good."<sup>336</sup> The point of instituting the dictatorship of the proletariat, then, is to overcome this fatal distraction.

Giovanni Zanotti helpfully points out how this is a "*duplication of the concept of the state*"; that, "if the reformists of the Second International tended to interpret Engels's passage in the sense of a linear path, situating the 'withering away' in the

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<sup>334</sup> Lenin, "State and Revolution," III.3.

<sup>335</sup> Key here is the debate which unfolded in the pages of *New Left Review* over Nicos Poulantzas' review of Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society*.

<sup>336</sup> Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 61.

present, as if it were a process already in progress, Lenin brings the moment of discontinuity back to the foreground by objecting: the state must wither away, yes, but *which state?*”<sup>337</sup> As he writes, “to the withering-away thesis it is normally objected that even in a communist society conflicts can occur between individual or collective economic agents. Of course – but they can also not occur, while in the present condition, they cannot but occur.” Zanotti thus adds the following corrective to Lenin. It is not, as Lenin has it, that the proletarian state “cannot but wither away,” but rather that “the proletarian state *can* wither away, while the bourgeois state *cannot* – and this is the very definition of bourgeois and proletarian state.”<sup>338</sup> By focusing on Lenin’s metaphor of the state ‘machine,’ and the proletarian vanguard as the agent tasked with ‘superintending’ this machine, I want to suggest another corrective to Zanotti: that the proletarian state “cannot but wither away” *as long as it remains subject to the vigilance of the vanguard* – as soon as this definitional condition is no longer met, it ceases to be a proletarian state.

Referring to the state as a “machine” does not merely denote the instrumental rationality of the executive apparatus and the bureaucratic systems that flow from it. There are implicit premises that Lenin’s analysis of the ‘state machine’ seem to draw from the long fifteenth chapter of *Capital* that we briefly quoted from above. There, Marx outlines how the sheer scale of the ‘self-motive’ system of machine production has severe knock-on effects for the rest of society. Importantly, he positions the

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<sup>337</sup> Zanotti, Giovanni. “‘Withering Away’: State, Revolution, and Social Objectivity.” In *The Future of Lenin: Power and Revolution in the 21st Century*, edited by Alla Ivanchikova and Robert R. Maclean. Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2022. 238.

<sup>338</sup> Zanotti, “‘Withering Away,’” 248.

political responses to the social ills created by mechanized production under capitalism as ‘automatic’ or ‘spontaneous’ – in the face of this ‘monstrous’ logic, no political subject can stand a hope of regaining the initiative. By analogizing the state to a machine, Lenin is transposing this problematic to the sphere of political action. Any attempt to seize the means of political power, in other words, is going to be overwhelmed by the logic of the state machine, whose agential capacities far outstrip those of any other organized group. It is in relation to this problematic that we can approach the ‘formation’ of the industrial proletariat by machine labor as the political vanguard. Lenin is not making a dialectical argument about a dis-alienated human community replacing the alienated state, but rather is focused on how to transform the state during an era of heightened imperialism into something capable of being controlled. Only the collective power of a “proletarian state” can restrain the impersonal domination of market exchange engendered by commodity fetishism.

As we have seen, Marx portrays the division of labor in the factory as a “decisive” departure from the division of labor during the manufacturing period. This is due to the mechanization of production: where pre-mechanical production already led to a level of specialization that removed the laborer from the direct exchange of commodities, machines led to a further division that was qualitatively distinct. What is monstrous about the factory system’s division of labor, then, is not simply that it ‘objectifies’ the laboring body of the worker as a mere ‘appendage’ of a mechanical system the complex operation of which is entirely removed from the laborer’s purview. It is instead “capital’s tendency, as soon as a prolongation of the hours of labor is once and for all forbidden, is to compensate for this by systematically raising

the intensity of labor, and converting every improvement in machinery into a more perfect means for soaking up labor-power.”<sup>339</sup> A major theme through Chapter Fifteen is the apparent limitlessness of this intensity once capital has adopted machine production. But this does not become a “social principle” until the introduction of machinery. Only with the advent of the factory system does it become feasible to overcome the lack of discipline which so worried capitalists during the manufacturing period. So it is not the fact that industrial workers are insulated from commodity exchange that matters, but the intensification of labor-power that machine production represents. It is this transformation in abstract labor-power itself – the way it redounds to all other spheres of production, whether or not machinery is actually employed therein – that interests Marx.

When legislation to shorten the working day is introduced, and capitalists are compelled to squeeze more surplus labor out of workers in the time of a fixed working day, Marx notes that – at a conceptual level – abstract labor time begins to be measured according to its “intensity” for the first time, as the inverse proportion between the duration of labor time and the ‘degree’ of labor power. Marx seems to imply that, in the theoretical apparatus of political economy, this new measure only becomes systematically thinkable in the aftermath of legislation on limits to the working day.<sup>340</sup> Machinery, in turn, “becomes in the hands of capital the objective means, systematically employed” for increasing this intensity. There are two ways in which this intensification of labor occurs on Marx’s account: “the speed of the

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<sup>339</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 542.

<sup>340</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 534.

machines is increased, and the same worker receives a greater quantity of machines to supervise and operate.”<sup>341</sup> It becomes possible to think of labor as nothing more than a process of supervising the independent movement of machines, and scientific and technical resources are put to work overcoming any perceived natural limit to the intensity of this supervision. This new understanding of labor is captured by Marx in a quote from an 1868 report on automation as a strike-busting technique: ““What every mechanical workman has now to do, and what every boy can do, is not to work himself but to superintend the beautiful labor of the machine.””<sup>342</sup> Thus, “the technical subordination of the workers to the uniform motion of the instruments of labor and the peculiar composition of the working group, consisting as it does of individuals of both sexes and all ages, gives rise to a barrack-like discipline, which is elaborated into a complete system in the factory, and brings *the ... labor of superintendence* to its fullest development.”<sup>343</sup>

This process of the intensification and homogenization of industrial labor under capitalism is, as we have seen, usually linked to the specific formation of the ‘proletarian subject’ as an actual actor capable of imitating social revolutionary change. But my focus on the orthodox Marxist party’s task of shaping the political ‘exemplarity’ of the proletariat opens onto a different interpretation that does not rely on any claims about subjectivity. Lenin’s ‘soviet system’ can be viewed as describing a utopian vision of direct democracy, in which socialist mass administration is rendered possible by the social changes brought about under capitalism and continued

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<sup>341</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 536.

<sup>342</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 563.

<sup>343</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 539.

in the first stages of socialism: the promotion of universal literacy and the disciplining of workers in industrial labor.<sup>344</sup> But, at a more parsimonious level, the key difference between the bourgeois and the proletarian state “machines” lies in the relative “elasticity” between the state and the society that operates it. Marx’s political writings can help us understand with more precision the link between the unnatural elasticity of mechanical change and the relationship between state and society.

When describing the role of the state in Napoleon III’s subversion of the emancipatory hopes of the 1848 revolutions, Marx writes of “the executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organizations, with its wide-ranging and ingenious state machinery ... a state authority whose work is divided and centralized as in a factory.”<sup>345</sup> He observes that, “through the most extraordinary centralization this parasitic body acquires a ubiquity, an omniscience, a capacity for accelerated mobility, and an elasticity which finds a counterpart only in the helpless dependence, the loose shapelessness of the actual body politic.” The upshot of the state machine’s “elasticity” is that the need to not only seize power but to “simplify the administration of the state, reduce the army of officials as far as possible, and, finally, let civil society and public opinion create organs of their own.” The problem in 1848 was that “the French bourgeoisie was compelled by its class position to annihilate, on the one hand, the vital conditions of parliamentary power, and therefore, likewise, of its own, and to render irresistible, on the other hand, the executive power hostile to it.”<sup>346</sup> It is with

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<sup>344</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 472-3.

<sup>345</sup> Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International publishers, 1990. 61.

<sup>346</sup> Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 30-31.

something like this “elasticity” in mind, I think, that Lenin argues for the “preservation” of representative government through the replacement of parliamentary with soviet representation. It was this irresistible corrupting influence of the “state machine” on elected deputies, whose interests once assuming office became aligned with the bureaucratic officials ensconced in the machine rather than any concern for their constituents, that Lenin saw the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as disrupting.

The point is not that the dictatorship of the proletariat introduces a less ‘dominating’ machine that is automatically more autonomously connected to the felt needs of society due to its operatives. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a machine that avows its status as a machine. The industrial discipline of the proletarian vanguard in relation to the machine system of the factory exemplifies the relationship “the people” (construed by Lenin as the “working masses” habitually excluded from the corridors of power) ought to take to the state machine. The capitalist dynamic of simplifying and automating processes of production could be applied to processes of administration such that a similar intensity of ‘supervision’ was now applicable to the state. For Lenin, the one “overnight” change brought about under the dictatorship of the proletariat is in the relation of subordination between state and society: the “bossing” of “state officials” would begin to resemble the simple functions of “foremen and accountants.”<sup>347</sup> What so angered Lenin in Kautsky was his “superstitious belief” in the ‘bossing’ quality of bureaucracy – the fact that he could not imagine enterprise-running “sort-of-parliaments” run by officials who were

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<sup>347</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 426.

reduced to the status of accountants and foremen by being permanently subject to recall, receiving workers' wages, and recruited from among all segments of the population.<sup>348</sup> The reason for the abolition of the capitalist state machine is that – designed as it is by the minority for the purposes of suppressing the majority – its “special,” “complex” operations could not be rendered legible to the majority of people and therefore would continue to function with superior ‘elasticity.’ When we “look more closely into the machinery of capitalist democracy,” we find a whole series of “restrictions, exceptions, exclusions, and obstacles” for the majority of ordinary people that, viewed from the perspective of bourgeois politicians, seem slight.<sup>349</sup> One of Lenin’s main focuses was to protect the soviet system as the foundation of the dictatorship of the proletariat from losing this ‘legibility.’ As he wrote in elsewhere in 1918:

“The fight against the bureaucratic distortion of the Soviet form of organisation is assured by the firmness of the connection between the Soviets and the “people”, meaning by that the working and exploited people, and by the flexibility and elasticity of this connection. Even in the most democratic capitalist republics in the world, the poor never regard the bourgeois parliament as “their” institution. But the Soviets are “theirs” and not alien institutions to the mass of workers and peasants.”<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 481.

<sup>349</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 469.

<sup>350</sup> Lenin, V.I. ‘The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government.’ In *Collected Works*, Volume 27. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972. 235-277.

Thus the immediate objective of the dictatorship of the proletariat is the generalization of systems of “accounting and control.”<sup>351</sup> It is not that the members of a particular class would automatically direct the state machine toward its own withering away and a utopian dissolution of the need for coercion in everyday interaction. Lenin’s vision of the society as “a single office and a single factory” is not Saint-Simonian because it also includes – in fact, is built on – the soviet state as the organized, armed vanguard of the proletariat. It only makes sense in the context of empowering people to look beyond the distortions maintained by the bearers of social objectivity. In other words, it rests on the *vigilance* of the vanguard of armed workers – vanguardism, in this context, denotes *distrust* of officials, not legitimation of their rule as mere administration. Lenin’s enthusiasm for Taylorist scientific management in the immediate aftermath of the revolution is usually interpreted in strictly economic terms, connecting as it does to the classic Marxist problematic of the division of intellectual and manual labor in production. But much less commented upon is the extent to which Lenin applied the principles of scientific management to the representative dynamics of political institutions.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a new account of the ‘vanguard’ idea as it was deployed and redeployed in the tumultuous period between the fall of the Second International and

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<sup>351</sup> Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 473.

the rise of the Third. It has unearthed a distinct account of the proletarian independence required to achieve political liberty in a mass representative democracy, and the perceived transition from parliaments to soviets as the site in which to achieve this. Throughout, I have interwoven contemporary theory to show how pluralist post-foundational democrats still have much to learn from the ‘Marxists’ in their past. If the vision of soviet democracy ultimately became a pretext for an authoritarian party-state, I have tried to show contemporary political theorists should be more careful in how they attribute these outcomes to the discourse of ‘vanguardism’. Simply put, the logic of propagandising a vanguard ‘image’ of proletarian independence exceeds the tactics and strategies of any one party, and remains a compelling problem for contemporary theorists to think through, rather than waving it away as a single totalitarian logic threatening the supposed purity of spontaneous forms of democratic life.

Oscar Anweiler’s classic study of the Russian soviets puts it best: “The soviets, designed to prevent bureaucratization through constant control by the voters ... turned into bureaucratic authorities without effective control from below. Achieving their aim required the free play of political forces, which the Bolsheviks had foreclosed by their party monopoly.”<sup>352</sup> But commentaries like Anweiler’s ignore the *international* dimension of Lenin’s thinking about the Russian Revolution. They invoke Luxemburg’s critiques of Bolshevik stultification of Russian democracy without mentioning her argument for militant opposition to anti-council SPD leaders — and,

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<sup>352</sup> Anweiler, Oskar. *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921*. 1st American ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1975. 243.

with it, the shifting of revolutionary energy away from Russia to Germany — as the best way to address this. And in this way, Luxemburg can actually be read as somewhat consistent with Lenin, rather than counterposing the virtuous martyr to the evil genius. In ‘weaponizing’ council democracy as an expression of proletarian dictatorship in irreconcilable opposition to parliamentary democracy as an expression of bourgeois dictatorship, Lenin and the founders of the Third International sought to prevent a return to parliamentarism as the channel for building proletarian hegemony.<sup>353</sup>

Critics of ‘vanguardism’ usually point to the difficult questions of coercion and consent that hover over this whole period. But if communists thought violence was necessary to strengthen and protect nascent forms of proletarian self-organisation, social democrats were willing to countenance existing state institutions’ deployment of violence to maintain their monopoly on the legitimate use of force. As we have seen, contemporary supporters of a ‘dual power’ model — one in which, as with Russia from February 1917 to January 1918 and Germany (intermittently) from November 1918 to the summer of 1923, parliamentary and council democracy existed side by side — cite Kautsky as a level-headed proponent of a forgotten third way for a democratic socialism that respects universal human rights while upholding institutions of proletarian hegemony capable of gradually organising post-capitalist economic structures. But, attending to the *conceptual* salience of vanguardism shows how Kautsky’s interest in preserving ‘proletarian unity’ as the basis for these experiments

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<sup>353</sup> In this way, I am not engaging in the endless polemic of trying to ‘assimilate’ Luxemburg to a communist against a new left position. I am simply trying to show that she was participating in the overlooked problem space of how to constitute a symbolic ‘vanguard’ that I am thinking about here.

led him to support an SPD leadership whose empowerment of right-wing paramilitary groups directly contributed to the demise of German experiments in council democracy. In other words, Kautsky's programme of a social democratic German republic mixing council and parliament ultimately provided justification for a set of policies that saw the councils as nothing more than expressions of a temporary breakdown in state authority. More broadly, then, when it comes to strictly thinking through what the concept of the "proletarian vanguard" meant in this period, I hope to have shown that our attention should not be on tired discussions of revolutionary violence.

### Chapter Three

At its Tenth Congress in 1921, in the wake of its violent suppression of the rebellious Kronstadt sailors' soviets, the Russian Communist Party passed a Resolution on Party Unity. If, as we saw in the previous chapter, the Bolsheviks had been uncompromising in their dealings with other socialist parties, this Resolution bears testament to Lenin's voluntarist aspirations coming home to roost within the party. The Kronstadt sailors, once lionized as exemplars of the revolutionary vanguard, were demanding the restoration of the very vision of soviet democracy propagandized by Lenin, and their repression lent serious weight to factions within the party, particularly the Workers' Opposition. Alexandra Kollontai, a key spokesperson of this faction, agitated for the promotion of 'self-activity' against what she saw as the 'bureaucratic' spirit of the party as it became increasingly distant from the 'masses' it claimed to represent. The Resolution on Party Unity, in response to the Workers' Opposition, declared for the first time a ban on all factions within the party. Its goal: "achieving unanimity of will among the vanguard of the proletariat as the fundamental condition for the success of the dictatorship of the proletariat." "In cases of breach of discipline or of a revival or toleration of factionalism," members of the Central Committee would now be subject to demotion from their position or even expulsion from the party, if voted for by a two-thirds majority at a Plenary session of the Central Committee.<sup>354</sup> Historians disagree as to whether this was considered a temporary expedient under the crisis of recovery from the Civil War and the failure of the communist revolutions in Central

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<sup>354</sup> Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. "Preliminary Draft Resolution of the Tenth Congress of the R.C.P. on Party Unity." In *Collected Works*, 32:165–271. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965. 166.

and Eastern Europe, or a consistent feature of the Leninist party.<sup>355</sup> But, whatever the case, the Tenth Congress introduced the factional “purge” as a defining feature of communist parties throughout the twentieth century, and is said to evince the totalitarian nature of the ideological roots of the revolutionary vanguard. “Achieving unanimity of will among the vanguard of the proletariat,” in other words, entailed the monopolization of civil society under the image of the ‘body of the people’; ‘democracy’ thus culminated in the ‘egocracy’ of whichever figure could isolate and expel the ‘deviationists’ and ‘enemies’ within the party.

Though Josef Stalin was its most iconic practitioner, this chapter explores the permutations of the purge in a context dominated by the revolutionary leader who tried to supplant him as figurehead of international communism: Mao Zedong. It interprets the figuration of the ‘vanguard’ in Mao Zedong Thought, tracing the conflicting logics inherited from the Stalinist conception of the party, on the one hand, and Chinese communism’s role as a national liberation movement in a ‘semi-feudal,’ ‘semi-colonial’ country, on the other. But its main focus is on the aftermath of the most important purge in the Maoist period: the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Following Stalin, Mao insisted that, in the long historical period of socialist construction, the danger of capitalist restoration did not diminish but in fact grew more pronounced. For Stalin, this justified extreme measures against a purportedly proto-capitalist peasantry beginning in 1928. Mao, for his part, emphasized the need to “heighten our vigilance

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<sup>355</sup> For a paradigmatic expression of the revision of historiographical assumptions about Leninist authoritarianism in the lead-up to the 1921 Resolution on Party Unity, see Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “The Bolsheviks’ Dilemma: Class, Culture, and Politics in the Early Soviet Years.” *Slavic Review* 47, no. 4 (1988): 599–613, 605-608.

[提高警惕]” against the danger of capitalist restoration by “distinguish[ing] the contradictions between ourselves and the enemy from those contradictions that are among the people, and handl[ing] them correctly.”<sup>356</sup> In the Cultural Revolution, Mao identified the chief source of capitalist restoration against which such vigilance ought to be directed as the privileged stratum in the party itself. It was this situation of a communist leader acting against growing ‘bureaucratism’ within his own party that made the Cultural Revolution so unprecedented (Trotsky, for example, only developed his critique of the Soviet Union’s ‘new ruling class’ after losing power).<sup>357</sup> Of course, as a number of historians and political scientists have vividly illustrated, Mao’s pursuit of ‘class’ struggle against the party was, in large part, a revolution from above: the mobilization of Red Guards against the bureaucracy was itself predicated on the vast bureaucratic effort to classify the population according to highly porous and permeable class categories.<sup>358</sup>

The Cultural Revolution reached its apogee in the late sixties. The spectacle of young Red Guards sweeping away the bureaucratic institutions of party and state

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<sup>356</sup> Mao Zedong, quoted in Li, Yizhe. *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System: The Li Yizhe Debates*. Edited by Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathan Unger. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1985. 34. [Ding, Wang, ed. *Li Yizhe Dazibao*. Hong Kong: Mingbao Yuekan She, 1976. 2).

<sup>357</sup> On this point, see Wu, Yiching. *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014. 31-5.

<sup>358</sup> Wu’s stress on the institutional and ideological determinants of Cultural Revolution mobilization has recently been corroborated by Andrew Walder’s more systematic study of the role of state governance mechanisms in motivating Red Guard activism. Walder, Andrew G. *Agents of Disorder: Inside China’s Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. There is a literature on the governmental techniques by which the CCP produced (and continues to produce) ‘class’ identities too enormous to cite here, but see especially the essays on governmentality in China collected in Shue, Vivienne, and Patricia M. Thornton, eds. *To Govern China: Evolving Practices of Power*. Cambridge University Press, 2017, especially Part IV: ‘Governance of the Individual and Techniques of the Self.’

throughout the world's populous country, at a time of immense anti-imperialist and counter-cultural sentiment across the globe, meant that the radical experiments underway in China would carry global ramifications. Most proximate and visible were the militant Maoist sects lampooned in Godard's 1967 film *La Chinoise*, who, in France and other West European countries, embraced a romanticized Red Guard aesthetic of redemptive violence transcending the alienation of everyday life.<sup>359</sup> But, as Richard Wolin's study of the longer-term effects of the Maoist moment in French intellectual culture has shown, the radical organizations inspired by the "China in our heads" would prove instrumental in coming to terms with May 1968. Wolin relates how the luminaries of the French public sphere were "humbled" by the experience of this revolt none of them had foreseen: thus, "French intellectuals learned to follow as well as to lead," and "the *democratic* intellectual would replace the *vanguard* intellectual of the Jacobin-Bolshevik mold."<sup>360</sup> The Maoist practice of the *enquête* – of, on Mao's slogan, 'going down to the masses' to understand the particularities of "everyday life" – supplanted the old model of the "prophetic intellectual... who claimed to possess privileged insight into the course of history and who prescribed the line of march for the benighted masses."<sup>361</sup> Through this "constructive political learning process," Wolin argues, dogmatic commitment to Mao's revolutionary ideology gave way to a concern for the quotidian sufferings of ordinary people which,

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<sup>359</sup> On the diverse global permutations of Maoism, see Lovell, Julia. *Maoism: A Global History*. London: The Bodley Head, 2019.

<sup>360</sup> Wolin, Richard. *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. xii.

<sup>361</sup> Wolin, *Wind from the East*, 20.

in turn, motivated the French left to rally around the less ambitious goals of human rights advocacy and associational democracy.

While Wolin's is not the only account, his narrative of the Maoist moment as contributing to the post-sixties shucking of "vanguardism" in French intellectual life is a helpful way into the concerns that motivate this chapter. Though I focus on the discourse of Chinese communist ideology itself, my study shares a number of similarities with that of Wolin. Like him, I also trace a 'constructive learning process' set in motion by Mao's mobilization of mass political intensity to purge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Also like Wolin, I identify a human rights-based challenge to a particular way of figuring revolutionary ideology as the culmination of this process. Where I differ from Wolin, however, is that – far from entailing its consignment "to the dustbin of history" – the story I tell here is one of a renewed embrace of a particular conception of the revolutionary vanguard at the 'end' of the Chinese – and global – revolution. I do so by interrogating how the basic vocabulary of the revolutionary culture that sustained the Cultural Revolution's attack on centralized bureaucratic power was taken up and transformed in the Chinese pro-democracy movement that constitutes its coda in the late 1970s. My main focus is on the persistent concept of the communist tradition's 'separation of powers': the proletarian vanguard's vigilant oversight over political office-holders.

To be sure, I am not the first to interrogate the Cultural Revolution itself as a not entirely destructive episode. Among Western scholars, there are still sixty-eighters who maintain "fidelity" to this event, such as Alain Badiou and Alessandro Russo, to say nothing of Chinese "New Left" thinkers like Wang Hui. It is worth dwelling on

some of these approaches to indicate where my interest in this period differs from theirs. For Badiou, the assessment that the Cultural Revolution remains a vital touchstone because it was the “the last significant political sequence that is still internal to the party-state ... and fails as such.”<sup>362</sup> The series of political experiments Mao opened up between 1966 and 1968 culminated in disastrous failure precisely because it could not move beyond the party-state as the place where politics is played out. For Badiou, this “grandiose and courageous saturation of the motif of the party” is an experience which opens onto the truth of the communist idea beyond the party-state form. The Cultural Revolution is thus, for him, the “negative expression” of the fact that the party-state form “is no longer suitable for providing real support for” a politics oriented toward material equality. Badiou thus affirms an underlying ‘communist hypothesis’ connecting the contemporaneous political sequences of the Cultural Revolution to the Paris Commune, attempting to separate the ‘truth’ of these events (its philosophical content) from the communist tradition’s habits of commemoration. Communism, in its party and statist forms, interprets the “incapacity” of the Communards to maintain power after the initial insurrectionary moment is “in the medium term experienced as a failing of the movement itself and not as the price of a structural gap between the state and political invention.”<sup>363</sup> The historical memory of Marxism-Leninism thus inscribes the Commune as a failure in order to cast itself as a success. Where the Communards were defeated, the Leninists managed to redeem their memory by successfully organising an efficient vanguard party to lead the

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<sup>362</sup> Badiou, Badiou, Alain. *The Communist Hypothesis*. Translated by David Macey and Steve Corcoran. London New York: Verso, 2015. 103-104.

<sup>363</sup> Badiou, *Communist Hypothesis*, 194.

proletarian movement and seize control of the state, preparing the way for its withering away. The ‘structural gap’ which Badiou wants to draw our attention to affirms the impossibility that emancipatory political intervention could ever orient itself toward conquest of the state *per se* – the Cultural Revolution is worth reflecting on as the latest site of rupture, a “declaration to break with the left”<sup>364</sup> from within the left’s very logic.<sup>365</sup>

Russo, combining Badiou’s philosophical outlook with expertise in contemporary Chinese history, has thus pushed back against prevailing historiography to argue for a “political” approach to the Cultural Revolution, one that emphasizes this “declaratory essence” of politics. This means refraining from casting the struggles between Red Guard factions as the inevitable reversion to a violent state of nature engendered by Mao’s attack on party-state sovereignty, and instead holding open interpretive space to appreciate the unintentional proliferation of multiple political subjects in excess of Maoist intentions. Politics has to be understood as a rupture of the singular against the depoliticizing universality of the state, which only “exists when people organize themselves to invent new egalitarian prescriptions that are able to force the state to count everybody as one, to admit and even to promote their own

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<sup>364</sup> Badiou, *Communist Hypothesis*, 198.

<sup>365</sup> Drawing on Badiou, Patricia Thornton has described how the tension during the Shanghai Commune between the establishment of workers’ council-based governing institutions and the broader party-based structures into which they were subsumed demonstrates “the difficulty of securing both mass representation and mass participation under revolutionary socialism.” Thornton points out, in particular, how concerns about the revolutionary credentials of Shanghai Commune participants meant that democratic election procedures were quickly co-opted by the only body deemed capable of judging what would constitute a danger to the movement: the CCP. In other words, only the party had the authority to identify what was a reactionary threat to the revolution. See Thornton, Patricia M. “The Cultural Revolution as a Crisis of Representation.” *The China Quarterly* 227 (September 2016): 697–717, 713.

individual lives and their subjective intents.” The state is always a structural invariance against this intermittence of politics, and the real issue is “the unavoidable heterogeneity of egalitarian politics with any form of the state.”<sup>366</sup> The state-in-itself, without the addition of politics, is incapable of equality because it has nothing to do with singularities. This approach to political singularity leads Russo to divide the Cultural Revolution into two distinct phases. The first phase is characterized by the “limitless self-authorization of political organizations” against the inertia of the state and the party, and finds its paradigmatic expression in the Shanghai Commune of January 1967. The second phase is a return to the logic of the purge: the transformation of singular organizations into factions claiming universality, in which subjective declarations become bids to represent a nucleus of regeneration for a purified party-state, predicated on the purge of other contestant factions for this claim.

Without denying the importance of affirming the subjective pluralities unleashed by the anti-party and anti-state dynamics of the Cultural Revolution (but with some sympathy to the efforts of Badiou and Russo to do so) I am interested in pushing back on their subsumption of the concept of ‘vanguardism’ under these sovereign logics. What I want to explore in this chapter is the way in which the Cultural Revolution opened onto a different way of figuring the relationship between proletarian vanguardism and popular vigilance that has been the red thread of this dissertation. I do so by, in the first section, providing my own account of how the idea of a proletarian vanguard was adapted to the context of the Chinese revolution,

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<sup>366</sup> Russo, Alessandro. “How to Translate ‘Cultural Revolution.’” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 4 (December 2006): 673–82. 676.

showing how the concept of ‘supervision’ (*jiandu* or *jiancha*) operated in that context. In the second section, I then turn to the Cultural Revolution itself. To provide context for this combination of mass mobilization and party purge, I begin by showing how it fits within the discourse of party history set by the Stalinist precedent. Finally, in the third section, I track the writings of a prominent proponent of the ‘right to supervision’ from the end of the Cultural Revolution into the late-1970s democracy movement. This demand may seem surprising, since the idea of subjecting ruling elites to mass supervision was key to Mao’s strategy during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) of mobilizing society against his enemies within the party, precisely the kind of ‘class struggle’-obsessed politics that reformers were trying to escape from in the post-Mao thaw. As many democratic theorists have shown, such campaigns of vigilant mass oversight are a core dynamic of totalitarian regimes more generally: terror is the name we usually give to the paranoid hunt for ‘enemies of the people,’ orchestrated by the ideology of a vanguard party that alone can finally distinguish society’s friends.<sup>367</sup> But what I suggest in this paper is that, in its appropriation of the Maoist demand for revolutionary supervision, the post-Mao democracy movement developed their own self-conception as vanguard of the socialist revolution. Through bitter experience of having first been mobilized by the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution and then analyzing the reasons for its disastrous failure, these activists suggested a path forward beyond the party’s monopoly of interpreting what would constitute the ‘leading force’ in history. In identifying the democracy movement as a ‘proletarian vanguard,’ they

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<sup>367</sup> My purpose in introducing the Cultural Revolution through Wolin’s intellectual history of French political theory is to connect it back to the post-Marxist moment whose influence on Anglophone democratic theory I analyzed in the introduction to this dissertation.

made virtue of the political experience afforded by their generation's conscription into the Cultural Revolution's artificial class struggle itself, and it is from this perspective that they grounded their critique of the CCP and the promise of post-Mao reform.<sup>368</sup>

### **Mao's 'New Democracy' and the Question of Supervision**

When it emerged victorious from civil war in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did not follow the USSR in monopolizing power on the mainland as a dictatorship of the proletariat embodied in the soviet form. Though formally a Marxist-Leninist party, its strategy of leading peasant struggles against agrarian landlords in China's hinterlands – enshrined as Mao Zedong Thought – implied a very different conception of the social composition of the proletarian vanguard than had prevailed at the formation of the Comintern. Mao's thinking was indelibly shaped by his experiences in the Hunan countryside where he was born and where he returned to investigate the peasant associations springing up there after joining the party. His March 1927 report on these associations foreshadowed what would eventually become the CCP's strategic bulwark when, the following month, the party was forced out of China's urban centers. From its formation in 1921 until 1927, the CCP had followed a United Front strategy largely dictated to it by the Comintern: since China was a 'semi-feudal' country lacking a strong industrial proletariat, its communists were to focus on pursuing national self-determination as junior partner to the Guomindang (GMD), the

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<sup>368</sup> A remarkable PhD dissertation by Lauri Paltemaa, which carefully links the broader intellectual production of the Democracy Wall movement to the sociological conditions engendered by the Cultural Revolution's mobilization of Red Guards, has greatly influenced this paper. See Paltemaa, *In the Vanguard of History: The Beijing Democracy Wall Movement 1978-1981 and Social Mobilization of Former Red Guard Dissent* (2005).

nationalist revolutionary party that had formally overthrown the Qing empire in 1911 and that – also with Comintern backing – had been struggling to restore centralized authority ever since. This was the familiar revolutionary plotment that we saw in the previous chapter: the party would prepare the way for ‘proletarian hegemony in the bourgeois revolution’ by organizing the nascent working class into the exemplary vanguards of the struggle for democracy, seizing the initiative from the bourgeoisie and stamping the new regime with a ‘proletarian’ character. In the context of republican China, this meant asserting the legacy of the revolutionary ideology associated with founding GMD leader Sun Yat-Sen (1866-1925). For Sun’s slogan of the ‘Three Principles’ championed not only nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*) and democracy (*minquan*), but also a focus on improving ‘the people’s livelihood’ (*minsheng*) that is often translated as socialism. It was on this third principle, primarily defined as a program of land reform, that the communists would claim Sun’s mantle as their own.<sup>369</sup>

Mao introduced his observations from a month spent in the backwater villages surrounding his hometown of Changsha with a prophetic warning: “several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back.”<sup>370</sup> In the face of this force, there were “three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them? To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticizing? Or to stand in their way and oppose

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<sup>369</sup> Sun’s own ideas on land reform were inspired by the American Progressive Era reformer Henry George. See Wells, Audrey. *The Political Thought of Sun Yat-Sen: Development and Impact*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave, 2001.

<sup>370</sup> Here and throughout this paragraph I quote from Mao, Zedong. “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan.” In *Selected Works*, 1:23–63. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.

them?” Despite the imagery of blind unstoppable spontaneous forces, Mao’s purpose in invoking this rising peasant movement was to assert the superiority of associations led by poor peasants as sites for the realization of Sun’s three principles. Thus the most famous line from this report – “revolution is not a dinner party” – was not Mao’s only response to the prevailing view that these peasants were “riff-raff” (*pizi*) terrorizing their landlords; throughout the report, he placed far more stress on the idea that “the peasants keep clear accounts, and very seldom has the punishment exceeded the crime.” In this way, he declared that the “great mass of poor peasants ... are the backbone of the peasant associations, the vanguard [*xianfeng*] in the overthrow of the feudal forces and the heroes who have performed the great revolutionary task which for long years was left undone.” Unlike Lenin – for whom the ‘alliance’ between poor peasant and proletariat was built upon the organization of the latter bringing political discipline to the former – Mao interpreted peasant associations as self-disciplining institutions that would lead the current, ‘feudal’ stage of the revolution themselves. Far from “riff-raff,” the associations’ “own slogan” of “rectification and discipline” showed, for Mao, that the party need only adapt this spirit to its own propaganda work in the countryside and thereby assist the peasants in unfolding their potential as revolutionary vanguard.

This vision of peasant revolution rose to the level of party policy with Mao’s gradual ascendancy to paramount CCP leadership through the thirties and forties, but it was given an unexpected boost the very month after the report was delivered, when the GMD’s right-wing faction massacred working class organizations in Shanghai. The CCP’s departure from the cities after the Shanghai massacre that year “persuaded

Mao that the ultimate goal of national revolution should not be pursued by lurking in the countryside and waiting for the ‘revolutionary moment’ but rather by expanding the rural bases to encircle the cities from the countryside.”<sup>371</sup> The model was no longer proletarian organization but peasant mobilization. From the CCP’s “revolutionary base areas” – first in the southeastern province of Jiangxi and later in at Yan’an in China’s arid north-west – this strategy would be codified as ‘Mao Zedong Thought,’ the guiding framework embodied in the party’s great helmsman.

The CCP mythologizes the “Yan’an soviet” as the crucible of revolutionary struggle, where the ideas and practices that guided it to victory first against Japanese occupiers and then against the GMD were formulated. It was here in this ‘republic of caves’ that the profusion of Maoism as an ideological system and personality cult would be carried out. Alongside attracting peasants to support the CCP through material incentives of land redistribution and the collectivization of agricultural implements across the north-west, Mao implemented the ideal of disciplined organization he had perceived in his early observation of the peasant associations. These efforts culminated in the 1942 Yan’an Rectification Campaign, “the prototype for every subsequent movement of thought reform launched under Mao: the mass meetings designed to humiliate and isolate targets; the repeated writings of confessions; the discussion groups where silence was not an option; the honing of self-criticism” were all “dress rehearsals” for future major mass campaigns culminating in

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<sup>371</sup> Womack, Brantly. “From Urban Radical to Rural Revolutionary: Mao From the 1920s to 1937.” In *A Critical Introduction to Mao*, edited by Timothy Cheek, 1st ed., 61–86. Cambridge University Press, 2010. 79.

the Cultural Revolution.<sup>372</sup> Much ink has been spilt on the intensity of the thought reform that took place in this tight-knight quasi-spiritual community.<sup>373</sup> But for now, what interests us here are the changes that had taken place in Mao's conception of vanguardism in this period of his refashioning into the intellectual fountainhead of Chinese communism. For it was here that the distinct Maoist language of "proletarianism" began to take shape.

The key distinction worth making here is that, where in 1927 Mao unequivocally cast the poor peasants and their associations as the vanguard of a national revolution with the potential to develop into social revolution, by 1942 the concept of the proletariat (*wuchan jieji*) had become central in Maoist discourse. The Chinese Trotskyist Wang Fanxi (himself a victim of the Rectification Campaign) would later note that it was at Yan'an that Mao finally began to actually read Marxist theory. Chief among these works were Kautsky's *Class Struggle*, familiar from the previous chapter, and the *Short Course on the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, which had become a kind of 'master narrative' for the international communist movement following its publication by Stalin in 1938. The latter text was particularly important in Mao's interpretation of the historical significance of intraparty struggle, which we will return to below. For now, what interests us here is how the basic Kautskyian theme of giving political shape to the class struggle through an organization of 'proletarian discipline' was adapted from the

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<sup>372</sup> Juliet Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*. 45.

<sup>373</sup> GET REF.

Reichstag battles of Wilhelmine Germany to the rustic ‘base areas’ of a guerilla insurgency against domestic foes and foreign invaders.

Commentators on the Rectification Movement tend to interpret it as the culmination of an intra-elite power struggle in which Mao terrorized his way into dominance over the so-called ‘28 Bolsheviks,’ the Moscow-educated faction of the CCP led by Wang Ming. But we can also take seriously the theoretical issues at stake without denying the campaign’s undeniably important political motivations. What differentiated Mao from the likes of Wang was his concept of ‘new democracy’ as an alternative goal for the structure of China’s revolutionary state. Mao described this future state in a 1940 speech:

"The content of China's new national culture at the present stage is neither the cultural despotism of the bourgeoisie nor the socialism of the proletariat, but the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal New Democracy of the masses, under the leadership of proletarian-socialist culture and ideology."<sup>374</sup>

Against Wang Ming and the 28 Bolsheviks, Mao fundamentally revised the concept of the revolutionary state as the dictatorship of the proletariat. What he advocated for and ultimately attempted to institute was, instead, what he called “the leadership of proletarian-socialist culture and ideology.” The concept of proletarian culture thus became entirely untethered from any sociological referent – the Yan’an base area,

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<sup>374</sup> Mao, Zedong. “On New Democracy.” In *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 2:339–85. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965. 378.

after all, lacked industrial laborers – and became instead something that the party under Mao would conjure into existence through the disciplinary effects of the mass campaign.

Mao delivered his most important pronouncements on how to subject intellectuals to proletarian discipline at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942. There, he declared that “we can mold the Party and the world only in the image of the proletarian vanguard.” This meant stressing the world-historical difference between the China of the GMD and the China of the CCP. Against “the garrets of Shanghai” with which intellectuals who had joined the party identified – a “semi-feudal, semi-colonial” society “under the rule of the big landlords and the big bourgeoisie” – Yan’an was “a revolutionary new-democratic society under the leadership of the proletariat.”<sup>375</sup> Mao borrowed the designation of China as semi-feudal and semi-colonial from Sun Yat-sen but, where Sun did not specify where to draw the line between the feudal and the colonial, Mao’s romanticized understanding of peasant society provided him with a key to spatially dividing China’s territory into world-historical zones. Cities like Shanghai – established as treaty ports after the First Opium War in the 1840s – were the realm of the fully ‘colonial,’ tending toward the development of ‘old democracy’ under a bourgeois hegemony embedded in global imperialism. Rural areas, meanwhile, were, on the Maoist analysis, fully ‘feudal’ in the sense that they had not yet been penetrated by the colonial system at all.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Mao, Zedong. “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art.” In *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 3:69–99. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.

<sup>376</sup> Kataoke, Tetsuya. *Resistance and Revolution in China: The Communists and the Second United Front*. Berkely, Calif.: University of California Press, 2022 [1974]. 5.

Similarly to Lenin's interpretation of the soviets as superior arenas for working class democracy, Mao saw the grassroots organs of self-governance arising in this feudal realm as possessing the potential to fall under 'proletarian' hegemony, due to the absence of 'bourgeois' influence.

Apter and Saich's account of Maoist theory and practice during the Yan'an base period (1937-1945) remains helpful for illustrating the apparatuses that went into constructing the image of this society. They represent the base area as a "hothouse" or "nucleus" for the intellectual production of revolutionary discourse. "This center set up fields of force radiating outward" through which these ideas traveled across networks of educational, military, and party centers.<sup>377</sup> Apter and Saich invoke the analogy of "cell reproduction and nucleation" to describe this process<sup>378</sup> – it is "less a system than a kind of energy", a spread of political passion the efficacy of which depended on its ability to "flow" outward from base camp to surrounding areas.<sup>379</sup> Finally, this process was, in turn, organized around the drive to "distinguish insiders from outsiders," leading to a situation in which "moral boundaries superimposed on physical ones sacralize the terrain, turning it into a mobilizing space."<sup>380</sup> Apter and Saich thus portray the Yan'an base as a space for bringing revolutionary ideology to life, mobilizing political energies by structuring the distinction between friend and enemy – the 'totalizing' politicization of society.

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<sup>377</sup> Apter, David E., and Tony Saich. *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994. 187.

<sup>378</sup> Apter and Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, 12.

<sup>379</sup> Apter and Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, 143.

<sup>380</sup> Apter and Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, 9.

The Maoist discourse of the “proletariat” was thus, from the very beginning of the canonization of Mao Zedong Thought, a quintessentially Schmittian operation in deciding the state of exception. But what gave New Democracy its veneer of democratic legitimacy was the studied avoidance of describing the leadership of this proletariat in terms of dictatorship. Beginning in 1937, consistent with the Comintern United Front strategy, the CCP had sought to attract mass support from the broader movement to resist the full-scale Japanese invasion launched the previous year. Historians both celebratory and critical of the CCP have noted how the image of the Yan’an soviet as a nucleus of heroic resistance fighters made the disciplinary prowess of the party an attractive model for a nationalist coalition.<sup>381</sup> After the defeat of Japan, when overt hostilities between the CCP and the GMD resumed in 1945, the party was able to leverage this good will to emerge victorious from the Civil War in 1949. As one commentator notes, this campaign for hegemony in the nationalist movement meant that the distinction between ‘national’ and ‘social’ revolution became almost imperceptible after the second united front – “slowly but perceptibly Mao’s concept of the state emerged as one not greatly at odds with Sun’s concept” of a multi-class state pursuing the ‘three people’s principles.’<sup>382</sup>

In May 1948, the CCP began preparing to institutionalize the united front, issuing an invitation to “all democratic parties, various people’s organizations, and various social elites to quickly convene a political consultative meeting to discuss and

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<sup>381</sup> Van Slyke, Lyman P. “The United Front in China.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 3 (July 1970): 119–35. 130. Van Slyke stresses the attractiveness of the party’s “attitude” and “work style” for non-party allies during this period.

<sup>382</sup> Bedeski, Robert E. “The Concept of the State: Sun Yat-Sen and Mao Tse-Tung.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 70 (1977): 338–54. 350.

realize the convening of the people's congresses and the establishment of a democratic coalition government." In September 1949, the 38 non-CCP organizations who had effectively sworn allegiance to the party convened at the first meeting of what remains to this day the main 'united front' body in the People's Republic of China: the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC).<sup>383</sup> Scholars of comparative politics have well documented how the CPPCC's 'united front work' serves as an important legitimating device in the PRC's "consultative authoritarian" regime structure.<sup>384</sup> In his address to the preparatory meeting of the CPPCC, Mao stressed to the 134 assembled delegates that cessation of full-scale civil conflict would not mean the end of anti-imperialist struggle. "Just because we have won victory," Mao declared, "we must never relax our vigilance against the frenzied plots for revenge by the imperialists and their running dogs."<sup>385</sup> The leading role of the party as the representative of New Democracy's 'proletarian leadership' meant that, consistent with the model of totalitarian democracy, its ideological campaigns would continue to be required in order to decide upon the imperialist enemies against whom to direct this vigilance.

Under New Democracy the legitimacy of the CCP's status as 'leading party' required the continued renewal of its exemplary disciplinary capacity, and it is here

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<sup>383</sup> Sagild, Rebekka Åsnes, and Anna Lisa Ahlers. "Honorary Intermediaries?: The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences in Theory and Practice." *China Perspectives* 2019, no. 2 (June 8, 2019): 916. 8.

<sup>384</sup> He, Baogang, and Stig Thøgersen. "Giving the People a Voice? Experiments with Consultative Authoritarian Institutions in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 66 (September 2010): 675–92; Wang, Ray, and Gerry Groot. "Who Represents? Xi Jinping's Grand United Front Work, Legitimation, Participation and Consultative Democracy." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 112 (July 4, 2018): 569–83.

<sup>385</sup> Mao, Zedong. "Address to the Preparatory Meeting of the New Political Consultative Conference." In *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 4:405–11. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1961. 406.

that the Maoist notion of the ‘bureaucratic work style’ (*guanliao zuofeng*) becomes crucial. The institution of the mass line worked out at Yan’an was predicated upon the inculcation of a ‘proletarian work style’ counterposed to this opposite term. The Maoist mass-line was a technology for producing an intimacy with the masses meant to counteract political operatives’ distance and abstraction from the concerns of ordinary people that the concept of ‘bureaucratism’ was meant to capture. After ascending to the dizzying heights of operating the machinery of state, of course, the protection of the proletarian work style became much more difficult. Thus the CCP launched its most spectacular early mass campaign – the “Three Anti” campaign of 1951 – to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining its proletarian work style. As Michael Sheng has shown, the ill-defined nature of the “corruption, waste, and bureaucratism” among state officials and party cadres this campaign was meant to target meant that the definition of these ills ultimately fell to arbitrary quotas set by Mao. “Mao’s alarmist vision of the extent of corruption became a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Sheng writes, “— as time went on, he criticized anyone whose report did not paint a dark picture that matched his vision and he urged leaders of various units to compete with each other in uncovering corruption and mobilizing the masses.”<sup>386</sup> The Three-Antis were expanded to Five-Antis, targeting many of those categorized as

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<sup>386</sup>Sheng, Michael M. “Mao Zedong and the Three-Anti Campaign (November 1951 to April 1952): A Revisionist Interpretation.” *Twentieth-Century China* 32, no. 1 (2006): 56–80. 66. Sheng’s is a revisionist interpretation because, using documents newly available at the time, he tries to show the dictatorial authority Mao had in setting the policies of the campaign even in the early fifties, where previous scholarship had interpreted CCP Politburo policy decisions as outcomes of intraparty deliberation.

members of the ‘intellectual’ and ‘national bourgeois’ classes formally included in the united front.

By the time the campaigns concluded in early 1952, and under the continued pressure of ‘thought-reform’ campaigns on intellectuals, the CCP revised its strategy for dealing with the intellectual plank of the New Democracy coalition, leading to the Hundred Flowers Campaign of (1956-7). Mao laid out the ideological justification for this campaign in perhaps his most famous post-1949 speech, ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People.’<sup>387</sup> He divided “antagonistic” contradictions between the people and its enemies, on the one hand, from “non-antagonistic” contradictions among the different categories of the people, on the other. Non-antagonistic contradictions were to be “handled” according to democratic processes under legal procedures, while antagonistic contradictions belonged to the realm of the dictatorial powers laid out in the concept of ‘people’s democratic dictatorship.’ “In advocating freedom with leadership and democracy under centralized guidance,” Mao declared, “we in no way mean that coercive measures should be taken to settle ideological questions or questions involving the distinction between right and wrong among the people.” But Mao also admitted that it was impossible to always avoid the errors of either mistaking non-antagonistic contradictions for antagonistic ones, or of allowing non-antagonistic contradictions to sharpen to the point of becoming antagonistic. As he put it, “in ordinary circumstances, contradictions among the people are not antagonistic. But if they are not handled properly, or if we relax our vigilance

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<sup>387</sup> Throughout this paragraph and the next, I quote from Mao, Zedong, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People.” In *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 5:384–422. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977.

and lower our guard, antagonism may arise.” Citing the recent violent suppression of the Hungarian revolution, and interpreting it as a struggle for parliamentary democracy, Mao at once criticized the aims of sympathizers in China as well as their methods. Hungary proved what could happen when critics aligned with “reactionaries inside a socialist country, in league with the imperialists,” to push a non-antagonistic contradiction among the people into an antagonistic one. The “two-party system” they advocated for, moreover, was “nothing but a device for maintaining the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” – Mao thus employs the familiar Leninist critique that “in a society where class struggle exists, if there is freedom for the exploiting classes to exploit the working people, there is no freedom for the working people not to be exploited.” Democracy only applied within the confines of “socialist discipline.”

Commentary on the Hundred Flowers campaign tends to focus on the CCP’s abortive (or perhaps manipulative) attempt to salvage some degree of free expression as China’s civil society was increasingly monopolized by the party’s disciplinary power. But what I want to focus on here was another, less-scrutinized aspect of the campaign. The campaign of 1956-7 unfolded under the aegis of two eight-character slogans: the more famous “let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend,” but also “long-term coexistence and mutual supervision” (*changqi gongcun, huxiang jiandu*). It was precisely with the role of multiple political parties in Mao’s people’s democratic dictatorship that this second ‘guiding principle’ (*fangzhen*) was concerned. In Mao’s speech on contradiction, he stresses that this principle of subjecting the CCP to the “supervision” of “bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties” was codified the previous year at the CPPCC – despite the implementation of the first

soviet-style five year plan, which symbolized China's formal implementation of a command economy, the party would still "need to hear opinions different from its own." Two months after Mao's speech, in April 1957, Zhou Enlai addressed a provincial party congress on the principle of mutual supervision, emphasizing it as "the best solution" to the danger of "growing bureaucratism and separation from the masses" in the party. If hitherto the focus was on the CCP's supervision of other parties, now it was time for CCP cadres to reciprocally invite and accept it. "Our democracy is a democracy with leadership – this aspect has been explained enough already. Now it is the expansion of democracy that must be emphasized."<sup>388</sup>

Of course, the CCP demonstrated its lack of commitment to this principle with the prompt suppression of dissent as the Hundred Flowers campaign rolled into the purges of the Anti-Rightist campaign later that year. But it is nonetheless important to dwell on mutual supervision since it is the unfamiliar conceptual framework that, as we shall see, will come to play an important role in the later Democracy Wall movement. I want to suggest that, in invoking the supervision of bureaucratism, Maoist discourse – whether "intentionally" or not – continued its hegemonic maneuver of claiming the legacy of Sun Yat-sen's democratic revolution. In Sun's studies of Western political traditions, above all Montesquieu's constitutional thought and the United States constitution, he had deemed the tripartite division of executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government insufficient. Drawing inspiration from

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<sup>388</sup> Zhou, Enlai. "Changqi Gongcun, Huxiang Jiandu." In *Zhou Enlai Tongyi Zhan Wenxuan*. Zhongwen Makesi Zhuyi Wenke: Zhou Enlai, n.d. <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/zhouenlai/252.htm>. Accessed June 4<sup>th</sup> 2023.

the separation of powers in imperial China, he had proposed adding two more branches: the “examination” branch (*kaoshiquan*) and the “supervisory” branch (*jiancha quan*). Imperial China’s 1,300 years of historical experience with the Confucian examination system had furnished it with a model of “meritocratic” governance that Sun believed could make up for the deficiencies of the electoral principle underpinning Western representative government. The instability in administrative posts induced by competitive turnover, and the classic problem of elections favoring demagogic manipulators of the crowd over talented administrators, could be offset by the appointment of government officials according to examinations based on the Confucian principle of meritocracy (updated, of course, to reflect modern social needs).<sup>389</sup> Interestingly, the persistence of meritocratic selection embodied in the appointment procedures of the CCP has become a legitimating bulwark of attempts to present the contemporary ‘China model’ as a viable alternative to Western liberal democracy.<sup>390</sup>

But Sun was also deeply invested in adding a “supervisory” branch to the balance of powers, based on the old institution of the imperial censor responsible for auditing and evaluating the performance of other officials. “The reason for designing an independent supervisory power is that in Western political practice, where the legislature also has the power to impeach the executive,” Sun wrote, “parliamentary dictatorships that hijack the executive are thus easily brought about.”<sup>391</sup> The

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<sup>389</sup> Ji, Manhong, and Wengang Bai. “Sun Yat-Sen’s Thought of the Five-Power Constitution and Its Practice.” *Shixue Yuekan* 5 (2002): 54–59.

<sup>390</sup> Bell, Daniel. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015.

<sup>391</sup> Quoted in Ji and Bai, “Sun Yat-Sen’s Thought of the Five-Power Constitution,” 55.

supervisory branch would thus ensure that impeachment of the executive would be conducted according to relatively impartial judgment. Of course, as many Chinese scholars have noted, this resulted in a stronger executive – when coupled with the examination system, some have even argued that Sun’s ideal of the five-power system looked much more similar to Soviet democratic centralism than any Western system of checks and balances.<sup>392</sup> Indeed, the addition of extra branches to Montesquieu’s schema could be thought of as bringing a Confucian emphasis on harmonious balance rather than an amelioration of the “jealousy for liberty” that the latter had observed in the English constitution. Nonetheless, Sun’s principle of supervision did reserve a distinct place for dynamics of contention derived from the Confucian past. For Pierre Rosanvallon, imperial China’s “supervisory, functional surveillance also served as a basis for the organization of counter-powers,” – censors would use the occasion of the administrative audits undertaken every three years to not only evaluate the performance of officials, but also to organize more wide-ranging denunciations of the actions of the powerful. This is an example, for Rosanvallon, of the way that counter-democratic divisions of power can become institutionalized – however partially – in societies that do not conform to the regime of the liberal democratic imaginary.<sup>393</sup> But what interests us here are the transformation in the idea of supervision under Maoism. Of course, the partisan dynamics of non-communist United Front parties supervising the CCP was a far cry from the ideal of the impartial institutional mechanism

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<sup>392</sup> Sun, Hongyun. “A Summary of Mainland China’s Studies on Sun Yat-Sen’s Five Power Constitution.” *Shixue Yuekan* 11 (2007): 100–106. 102.

<sup>393</sup> Rosanvallon, Pierre. *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 52-3.

envisioned by Sun. Interpreting the discourse of ‘mutual supervision’ through this longer tradition, however, can help us understand what was at stake in the CCP’s ongoing struggle to legitimate itself as the representative of ‘New Democracy.’

### **The Transformation of the Line Struggle in the Cultural Revolution**

As we have already seen, efforts to subject the CCP to any regulatory checks outside of its own political monopoly – particularly after it embarked on the ambitious program of constructing a soviet-style state-planned economy – were undermined by the party’s own faith in the rectifying potential of its ‘mass line’ intimacy with the masses. To see why claims to exercise popular “supervisory” power had changed by the end of the Cultural Revolution, it is worth dwelling on the historical logic that Mao inherited from the Stalinist model of the vanguard party. When Mao assumed the post of Chairman at the Enlarged Seventh Plenary Session of the Sixth Central Committee of the CCP in 1945, a ‘Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party’ was also adopted. This document provided an authoritative interpretation on the various conflicts within the party, plotting the revolution’s course up to that point as a series of struggles over the “correct line” in political, military, organizational, and ideological questions, and was directly inspired by Mao’s study of Stalin’s 1938 *Short Course*, the official ‘textbook’ on CPSU history mentioned earlier. Like Stalin, Mao sought to narrate the history of the party’s praxis as an ongoing struggle against opportunists, deviationists, and adventurists on left and right, in which history had demonstrated the correctness of his own line in each struggle. The Resolution stresses the Yan’an rectification and thought-reform campaign in 1942 as the key moment

when the “correct” line was restored after the various erroneous left and right lines of preceding years. Consistent with the discourse of Stalinism, it was the correctness of the line as represented by the leadership of the party central committee that ensured the party’s status as vanguard of the proletariat. I quote here at length to illustrate the logic behind this:

“If the proletariat do not draw a firm and sharp line between Marxist-Leninist ideology and the original ideology of those Party members who came from the petty-bourgeoisie and do not educate them and struggle with them in a serious but appropriate and patient way, it will be impossible to overcome their petty-bourgeois ideology, and what is more, these members will inevitably *strive to remold the vanguard of the proletariat in their own image and usurp the Party leadership*, thus damaging the cause of the Party and the people.”<sup>394</sup>

Petty-bourgeois and proletarian ideology are distinguished based on the “stand-point” of the two classes – where the proletarian position in relation to production fosters a capacity for reflecting on the political problems in their totality, the petty-bourgeoisie – above all the intellectuals from the ‘semi-colonial’ world mentioned above, who are most likely to influence ideological currents in the party – “does not proceed from an objective and comprehensive picture of the balance of class forces, but takes subjective wishes, impressions and empty talk for reality, takes a single aspect for all

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<sup>394</sup> Mao, Zedong. “Appendix: Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party.” In *Our Study and The Current Situation*, 20–90. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1962. 76. Emphasis added.

aspects, the part for the whole and the tree for the forest.”<sup>395</sup> This leaves petty-bourgeois thought susceptible to “vacillation” between left and right errors, as it either overestimates or underestimates the revolutionary potential of a concrete situation. The key goal of the party leadership, then, is to prevent the “petty bourgeois who has not yet been proletarianized” from “develop[ing] into a state of antagonism.”<sup>396</sup> This requires “rais[ing] the ability of the whole party to distinguish between proletarian and petty-bourgeois ideology,” by “giv[ing] full play to inner-Party democracy” and “develop[ing] criticism and self-criticism,” culminating in a situation of “ideological unity” in which “Marxist-Leninist ideology, which Comrade Mao Zedong represents, grips more and more of the cadres, the Party members and the masses of the people more and more profoundly.”<sup>397</sup>

In presenting himself as “representing” (*daibiao*) Marxist-Leninist ideology, and therefore of preventing the proletarian vanguard from being “remolded” according to deviationist images, Mao was following the strategy of Stalin’s *Short Course*. Given its publication at the height of the personality cult, when Stalin and a pantheon of patriotic heroes took center stage in party mass propaganda, the historians who compiled that text were taken aback by the General Secretary’s editorial insistence on removing himself from the narrative and centering the status of theoretical mastery as the source of party prestige. Stalin presented the *Short Course* as a “panacea” for “an educational strategy that had apparently left party cadres poorly trained and

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<sup>395</sup> Mao, “Resolution on Certain Questions,” 76.

<sup>396</sup> Mao, “Resolution on Certain Questions,” 75.

<sup>397</sup> Mao, “Resolution on Certain Questions,” 80-83.

insufficiently vigilant.”<sup>398</sup> The substantive theoretical section on ‘historical and dialectical materialism’ was added as a conclusion to the discussion on the role played by Lenin’s 1909 *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, which Stalin described as an urgent defense of Marxism from “hypocritical criticism” whose attempted “improvements” to theory were “calculated to deceive rank-and-file members of the Party.”<sup>399</sup> Stalin stresses that, in the disappointing aftermath of the 1905 revolution, Lenin “safeguarded” the fundamental commitment to historical materialism as an ideology, ensuring that the Bolsheviks could emerge as a “party of a new type, the party of Leninism” when the split from ‘reformist’ currents was codified in 1912.

Resting on the authority of Marx and Lenin, Stalin characterizes historical materialism as theory capable of “gripping the masses” due to its conformity to the economic conditions of the age. The key distinction is between “old ideas ... which hamper the development, the progress of society,” and “new and advanced ideas and theories which serve the interest of the advanced forces of society.”<sup>400</sup> Stalin characterizes Lenin’s safeguarding theoretical work as ensuring that party theory adequately captures the contradictions between the forces of production and the relations of production. Simply put, the social character of the means of production under capitalism produces a demand for social ownership of the means of production. Stalin writes:

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<sup>398</sup> Brandenberger, David, and M. V. Zelenov, eds. “Editors Introduction.” In *Stalin’s Master Narrative: A Critical Edition of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*. Annals of Communism. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 22.

<sup>399</sup> Brandenberger, David, and M. V. Zelenov, eds. *Stalin’s Master Narrative: A Critical Edition of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*. Annals of Communism. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 246.

<sup>400</sup> *History of the CPSU (B): Short Course*, 259.

“After the new productive forces have matured, the existing relations of production and their upholders – the ruling classes – become that ‘insuperable’ obstacle which can only be removed by the conscious action of the new classes ... out of the new economic demands of society there arise new social ideas; the new ideas organize and mobilize the masses; the masses become welded into a new political army, create a new revolutionary power, and make use of it to abolish by force the old system of relations of production, and firmly to establish the new system.”<sup>401</sup>

It is only “the party of the proletariat” that is guided “by [these] laws of development of society, and by practical deductions from these laws,” and – as Lenin’s experience combatting the vacillating petty-bourgeois intellectuals within his own party showed – this ‘dialectical’ awareness of social transition as a process requiring conscious intervention under correct conditions had to be vigilantly defended from the reformist temptation to shy away from the ‘qualitative’ revolutionary leap.<sup>402</sup> “The Party is the leading detachment of the working class, its advanced fortress, its general staff,” Stalin adds to the conclusion on the lessons to be drawn from this historical narrative; “The easiest way to capture a fortress is from within. To attain victory, the Party ... must first be purged of capitulators, deserters, scabs and traitors.”<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> *History of the CPSU (B): Short Course*, 272.

<sup>402</sup> *History of the CPSU (B): Short Course*, 257-8.

<sup>403</sup> *History of the CPSU (B): Short Course*, 661.

Following this understanding of the communist party's vanguard role, Mao sought to emulate and even surpass Stalin's example as the representative of the correct ideological line. If the Resolution on Party History had also extolled the Central Committee Plenary Meetings as deliberative fora for intraparty debate about policy directions, Mao went so far as to suppress these references to the core Leninist principle of democratic centralism. Thus, if anti-bureaucratism has been described as "perhaps the most important single plank in the Maoist political platform,"<sup>404</sup> Mao's periodic mobilization of mass campaigns to revive the party's intimacy with the masses always took place in the context of a line struggle the direction of which he sought to impose – the Cultural Revolution, as the final and most spectacular of these, was no different. Framed as the ninth line struggle in CCP history, the Cultural Revolution was primarily directed against the 'capitalist line' of the economic reform faction associated with vice chairman Liu Shaoqi. This line struggle was merciless in its identification of 'capitalist roaders,' culminating not only in the expulsion and death of Liu and other reformist leaders but also in the much broader and deeper mobilization of social conflict that would scar the entire population. As Wang Fanxi observed at its launch in 1966, "the Cultural Revolution resembles Stalin's anti-rightist struggle in that although it has 'anti-capitalist' connotations, it does not serve the workers' interests. Instead, it serves the interests of the bureaucrats ... One is a conspiracy of the few; the other is a conspiracy of the many."<sup>405</sup> Reams have been

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<sup>404</sup> Walder, Andrew G. *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed*. Cambridge, Mass. London: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017. 8.

<sup>405</sup> Wang, Fanxi, and Gregor Benton (trans). *Mao Zedong Thought*. Historical Materialism Book Series 210. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2020. 298.

written on the horrors of this period, and scholarly consensus tends to have vindicated Wang Fanxi's Trotskyist interpretation of it as an outpouring of pent-up frustration among China's youth at the strictures placed upon it by the CCP's bureaucratic regime.<sup>406</sup>

As indicated in the introduction, my goal here is not to dwell on the more spectacular and radical aspects of the Cultural Revolution that so captured the imaginations of its international observers. Instead, I want to explore how it opened onto a rethinking of the party's power to determine line struggles altogether, and in doing so reopened the question of 'supervision' in the discourse of new democracy to forces outside the purges of the Central Committee. Thus, as also indicated in the introduction, it is the overlooked later period of the Cultural Revolution that interests us here – the tenth and final line struggle, given a name which sounds particularly jarring in English: the 'Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius' (*pi Lin pi Kong yundong*). This campaign was the climax of the tenth, and final, 'line struggle' in CCP history. If, as Yiching Wu puts it, the "spectacularly vulgarized ... terms 'class' and 'class struggle' were stretched to near lunacy" during the Cultural Revolution's radical phase,<sup>407</sup> it could be said that the tenth line struggle took this conceptual stretching even further. Launched at the Tenth National Party Congress in August 1973, Mao's left faction constructed an ideological explanation for the purge of his erstwhile second-in-command Lin Biao. While the complex party politics behind Lin's ouster are beyond the scope of this chapter, Lin's role in constructing Mao's personality cult

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<sup>407</sup> Wu, Yiching. *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014. 235.

(he was the chief promoter of the infamous ‘Little Red Book’) led the left faction’s propaganda team to invent a new concept to describe his incorrect line: ‘feudal-fascist dictatorship.’ This necessitated a simultaneous criticism of Lin alongside Confucius, since the feudal order he had supposedly tried to reconstitute was defined by a ‘Confucian’ deference to “rites.”

But the Cultural Revolution group did not deploy the conceptual lens of Lin and Confucius as simply another demarcation of political friends from enemies. The campaign also, crucially, featured a series of efforts to think through the theoretical dead-ends raised by the events of previous years. These efforts are brought out in a recent study by Alessandro Russo, who interprets the Cultural Revolution as an “impasse” in which the conceptual framework of the hegemonic political culture in Maoist China reached its limits. The “new subjective multiplicities” which came into being in this “massive laboratory,” Russo argues, could not be made sense of in the existing terms of revolutionary culture; the events of the early part of the decade, such as the 1967 Shanghai Commune, “remained inexplicable,” and “the political problem of the decade’s final phase was [therefore] how to overcome the difficulty of that assessment.”<sup>408</sup> As Russo puts it, Mao’s strategic goal in initiating the campaign “was to open up a critical mass rethinking of the Cultural Revolution,” and “a first step toward achieving this was to thoroughly review the fundamental categories of politics.”<sup>409</sup> Rather than simply rejecting all forms of ‘traditional’ thought (along the lines of Chen Boda’s famous 1966 call to ‘smash the four olds’), then, this campaign

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<sup>408</sup> Russo, Alessandro. *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 239.

<sup>409</sup> Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, 240.

looked to the history of ancient political thought in order to better understand what proletarian dictatorship might mean in the present.

Beginning in 1974, the Cultural Revolution Group attempted to do this by launching a second ‘sub’-campaign in the tenth line struggle: the Campaign to Criticize Confucianism and Evaluate Legalism [批儒评法]. This campaign interpreted the rise of Legalist philosophy under Qin Shi Huang (259-210 B.C.E.) as the emergence of a theoretical system capable of justifying the political ascendancy of a newly empowered economic class – the feudal landlords – over their apparent class enemies – the superseded slave-owning class. The rapid centralization of power under the Qin dynasty, China’s first unified empire, was thus seen as a potential model for establishing class dictatorship. Confucianism, on the other hand, was an ideology that had arisen from the material interests of the slave-owning class. Its evil thus lay in its *reactionary* nature: while Legalism and the Qin state represented the actual class interests of the landlords, the subsequent revival of Confucian hegemony under the Han and beyond meant that the political thought of imperial China was out of step with the times for over two thousand years. Recognizing the limits of a Marxist historiography that saw political ideologies and institutions as determined by economic relations, the Campaign to Criticize Confucianism and Evaluate Legalism envisioned the entire field of Chinese history as a single great struggle to throw off reaction.

Given the political context of this campaign, its historiographical and philological credentials are highly questionable. But even such contemporary historians as

MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, usually highly skeptical of ideologically-inflected texts, suggest that although most of these studies were “allegorical commentaries of the present,” “some were doubtless meant to be, and could be read as, examples of historical scholarship, albeit of a very politicized kind.”<sup>410</sup> In the words of Rebecca Karl, this was a time when “the linear historical time posited by the Marxist march of historicist stages was at risk of being disproved by the particularity and historical weight of the Chinese past.”<sup>411</sup> Of course, as Mao’s famous dictum about ‘using the past to serve the present’ suggests, the creative adaptation of historical models to the challenges of modern revolution was nothing new.<sup>412</sup> What was new, however, was the sense that the very parameters of the revolutionary culture had been shaken to their core, and that it would take a rethinking of historiography itself to comprehend the ‘new-born things’ (*xinsheng shiwu*) of the era.

This engagement with the history of traditional Chinese political philosophy in the name of getting out from under its apparent burdensome weight was, in some ways, a continuation of the work begun by non-Marxist revolutionaries around the time of the 1919 May Fourth Movement. Indeed, as Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik has argued, in dividing all Chinese history into an eternal class struggle between Legalists and Confucians, the campaign embraced a ‘traditional’ historiography over the modern

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<sup>410</sup> MacFarquhar, Roderick, and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao’s Last Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008. 372. For a systematic discussion of the vast historical scholarship produced during the campaign, see Wu, Tien-wei. *Lin Biao and the Gang of Four: Contra-Confucianism in Historical and Intellectual Perspective*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983.

<sup>411</sup> Karl, Rebecca E. *China’s Revolutions in the Modern World: A Brief Interpretive History*. London ; New York: Verso, 2020. 309.

<sup>412</sup> See Unger, Jonathan, ed. *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*. Contemporary China Papers. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1993.

historiography of Marxism. For her, this campaign was marked by a new sensitivity to the dangers of “restoration”: the realization that historical determinism provided no guarantees, and that any political gains had to be vigilantly protected. The brief rise to prominence of the scholar Yang Rongguo was key here: under Yang’s “historiography of allusions” (*yingshe shixue*), articulated in earlier writings but advanced by Mao at this time, history was “a reservoir of anecdotes from the past which instruct adequate moral behavior in the present.” The ability to tap this reservoir of moral instruction “is based on the idea that ... ethical standards are not subject to change,” i.e., that “the moral basis of human existence is interchangeable.”<sup>413</sup> By selectively appropriating certain anecdotes from the compendious record of historical action, one could reconstruct an alternative transhistorical ethical standard. But Mao’s goal in consistently advocating a Legalist standpoint, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik argues, was not simply to choose a set of new models in particular. Rather, it was to “chang[e] the interpretation of the anecdotes” altogether: whatever was demonized in the traditional reading of history would now be upheld as a paragon for virtuous behavior.<sup>414</sup> Only this logic of radical inversion could undo the weight of the Confucian superstructure that had caused the revolution to become stalled in the cul-de-sac of Lin Biao’s feudal-fascist dictatorship.

One of the most prominent advocates of such an inversion was the ‘Luosiding’ group, a writers’ collective associated with the Shanghai CCP theory school. As Zhou

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<sup>413</sup> Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Susanne. “The Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (批林批孔) and the Problem of ‘Restoration’ in Chinese Marxist Historiography.” In Murthy, Viren, and Axel Schneider. *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. 158.

<sup>414</sup> Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “The Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius,” 172.

Zhan'an has written, Luosiding radicalized the Cultural Revolution call for 'equality' by arguing for "a change in the *quality* of intelligence [智]," such that practice would become an essential component of philosophical reflection itself.<sup>415</sup> Of course, as we know from the eleventh thesis in Marx's critique of Feuerbach, this overcoming of the division of labor between thought and action has always been a central tenet of Marxism; what was unique in the Campaign to Criticize Confucianism and Evaluate Legalism was that the search for a new practical philosophy opened onto the adoption of a new mode of historiography. "The law of history is not the starting point of our actions, nor the object of materialism to obey," writes Zhou on the outlook adopted by Luosiding, but "the effect of our thinking in a dynamic situation."<sup>416</sup> This was an open admission of the breakdown of the party's claim to a deterministic interpretation of history that had been enshrined in Mao Zedong Thought as an adaptation of Stalin's dialectical materialism. The new problem space of 'feudal-fascist dictatorship thus undermined the vanguard role of the party as orchestrating the forces of historical development. If this problematization of "the relationship between the past as history and its narrativization in the socialist present" was, in Rebecca Karl's words, not only the "heart" of the Cultural Revolution, but also a leitmotif across China's difficult passage into the 'modern world,' it opened onto a much more profound sense of crisis during this final campaign.

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<sup>415</sup> Zhou Zhan'an. "Ru Fa douzheng yu 'chuantong' chonggou: yi 20 shiji 70 niandai Ping Fa Pi Ru yundong suo tigongde lishi goutu wei zhongxin." *Kaifang Shidai* 3 (2016): 83-97, 88.

<sup>416</sup> Zhou, "Ru Fa douzheng yu 'chuantong' chonggou," 90.

Despite calls in the main CCP theoretical journal, *Red Flag*, for the ‘democratization’ of classical philology through such institutional channels as Proletarian Theory Teams and Factory Universities, this campaign failed to produce the kinds of mobilizational effects that were seen in the ninth line struggle against capitalist restorationism.<sup>417</sup> If, in Russo’s words, “the workers’ theoretical contingents ... considered themselves the vanguard for reducing the gap between manual and intellectual labor on all social levels,”<sup>418</sup> this “vanguard” – beyond threatening to re-ignite the factional chaos that had seemingly necessitated Lin Biao’s militaristic restoration of order in the first place – did not challenge the bureaucratic hierarchies that the Cultural Revolution had supposedly been launched to combat. The renewed emphasis on ‘big character posters’ under the Campaign to Criticize Confucianism and Evaluate Legalism as a public forum for ideological criticism did, however, give rise to an unprecedented critique of the ‘feudal-fascist dictatorship’: Li Yizhe’s ‘On Socialist Democracy and the Legal System.’ In the next section of this chapter, I show how, in their calls for a socialist democracy of revolutionary supervision, Li Yizhe (and, subsequently, Wang Xizhe’s personal writings) would point to a way out of these impasses in both bureaucratization and historical interpretation.

Before engaging with these texts, however, I want to briefly sketch how the late Cultural Revolution’s experimentation with historical inversion was foreclosed. After Mao’s death in September 1976, rehabilitated reform faction figures applied the

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<sup>417</sup> See, for example, *Hong Qi* 1974, No. 2, p.109.

<sup>418</sup> Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, 257.

‘feudal-fascist dictatorship’ framework to the very left faction leaders who had done so much to proselytize it: now dubbed the Gang of Four, they were arrested a month later, and, in their 1981 show trial – a legitimating moment for Deng’s leadership – sentenced for crimes of usurping state power and party leadership.<sup>419</sup> But if the Gang of Four trial marked a decisive break with the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, it also revealed the CCP’s willingness to perpetuate its curated control over historical narrative. The friend-enemy logic of the line struggle, while not explicitly invoked, was just as active in this trial as it had been in Stalin’s notorious Moscow Trials of 1937-8. Although CCP campaigns have repudiated the mass-mobilizational techniques of high Maoism, the failure to relinquish control of historical interpretation still inflects efforts to ‘discipline’ party cadres. For such a contemporary theorist of China’s New Left as Wang Shaoguang, the argument to seriously consider the “representational democracy” practiced by the CCP as an alternative to parliamentary representative democracy could, potentially, be compelling were it not undercut by this historical outlook. Wang posits Mao’s theory of the “mass line” as superior to interest group pluralism in that it prioritizes political elites both adopting attitudes of epistemic humility when interacting with constituents and prioritizing efforts to engage with less-resourced interest groups. In this way, he argues, CCP representational democracy is, in theory, less prone to oligarchic capture than multiparty parliamentary democracy. But Wang readily admits that the “Achilles’ heel of the mass line” is its “over-reliance on the level of enlightenment of cadres”; his

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<sup>419</sup> On the trials, see Cook, Alexander C. *The Cultural Revolution on Trial: Mao and the Gang of Four*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

only solution is to posit stronger mechanisms of cadre discipline and more robust participatory forums for underprivileged groups, both of which are – crucially – themselves party-led processes.<sup>420</sup> Thus, despite trying to distinguish the CCP’s “vanguardism” from its “elitism,” this brings Wang Shaoguang much closer to neo-authoritarian and neo-Confucian intellectuals, who justify their elitism with reference to meritocratic cultural and institutional frameworks that do not attempt to be democratic.

### **The Democracy Movement and the Right to Supervision**

This conception of political initiative as the monopoly of the party – the CCP’s continued adherence to the Stalinist conception of vanguard agency, in which the determination of the historical line is centrally decided – was forcefully critiqued Wang Xizhe, and it is to his conception of vanguard agency that we now finally turn in this section of the paper. By 1980, Wang had turned the tenth line struggle’s ‘anti-feudal-fascist-dictatorship’ narrative against Mao, presenting him as an ‘agrarian emperor’ presiding over an administrative dictatorship based on a ‘modern rule of rites.’ At the same time, he presented the democracy movement as the best-organized among those who – having taken Mao’s Cultural Revolution directives to distrust authority seriously – now possessed the experience required to render them the “vanguard” in the international movement for socialist democracy. This section of the chapter traces the evolution of this conception of vanguard agency from the Li Yizhe

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<sup>420</sup> Wang, Shaoguang. “Daibiaoxing Minzhu yu Daiyixing Minzhu.” *Kaifang Shidai* 2 (2014): 152–74.

manifesto of 1974 to Wang's trenchant critique of Mao in 1980. It shows that, without refuting the CCP's role as a vanguard party, Wang challenged its monopoly on historical knowledge by arguing that 'correct' and 'incorrect' political lines could only be the outcome of a process supervised by a democratically elected representative assembly. Crucially, he makes this case as part of the post-Mao democracy movement's investment in human rights discourse. But far from merely echoing the anti-communist talking points of the US State Department – a view suggested by both the Democracy Wall's Western admirers and its CCP critics – activists like Wang developed a sophisticated internal critique of Marxist-Leninist politics that drew constructive lessons from their own participation in the disasters of the Cultural Revolution period, even as they became much more critical of Mao's place in history than the CCP ever was.

The Li Yizhe manifesto is presented as a contribution to the campaign to Criticize Lin and Confucius, and thus positions itself as following the line struggle against the 'feudal-fascist dictatorship' for which Lin Biao had become the figurehead. But the manifesto writers turned the logic of the campaign against its very instigators, locating the strongest continued influence of Lin's feudalism and Confucianism in the left faction controlling the party. The manifesto is framed as a set of demands to the upcoming Fourth National People's Congress, and asks the following question: "How is the country's basic legal system that is to be promulgated – the new constitution – to express the will of the proletariat and the broad masses in China who have experienced the Great Cultural Revolution?"<sup>421</sup> The central question Li Yizhe asks

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<sup>421</sup> Li, *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System*, 74.

about the upcoming Congress is “How should the masses’ right of revolutionary supervision over the Party’s and country’s various levels of leadership be determined?”<sup>422</sup> It is at the end of the Manifesto that Li Yizhe most directly oppose the leftist party leadership, making a distinction that will remain important throughout Wang’s contributions to rethinking socialist democracy. They argue that the slogan of ‘going against the tide’ (*fan chaoliu*), despite being one of the “great contributions” of the left-dominated 1973 Tenth National Party Congress, could easily be appropriated by reactionaries if it was not rooted in concrete analysis. Li Yizhe cite the absurdity of the cases of going against the tide promoted in the national media, including the valorization of model students who rejected discipline from their teachers.

To render functional the policy of ‘going against the tide,’ Li Yizhe argue for a class democracy based on *adversarial* criticism and counter-criticism rather than a struggle over the means to define and suppress an absolute class enemy. Crucially, this means the protection of means of publicity independent from the CCP: they point out that the “fearlessness” praised by left leaders at the Tenth Congress is impossible under the “strict ritual formalities” required by established channels of communication.<sup>423</sup> To make possible authentic criticism and counter-criticism of the kind they hope their big character poster will generate on the streets of Guangzhou, they demand that “the people's rights to implement revolutionary supervision over all levels of the Party's leadership” replace what they see as the central “rite” of the ‘feudal-fascist dictatorship’: that a leader “has only to declare himself to be the

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<sup>422</sup> Li, *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System*, 80.

<sup>423</sup> Li, *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System*, 73-4.

personification of Chairman Mao's revolutionary line, and then he will become sacred forever.”<sup>424</sup> Only this will solve the persistent replacement of actual criticism with the criterion of judgment according to the criterion of Mao’s “genius”, and the consequent substitution of real politics with the enactment of “Confucian filial relationships.” Li Yizhe thus turned the charge of Confucianism against Mao himself.

This critique shared much with the exiled Trotskyist Wang Fanxi’s appraisal of Mao. His views on both the nature of Mao Zedong Thought and the social and historical conditions that enabled Mao’s ascendancy as China’s paramount leader are worth dwelling on here, since they closely resemble the arguments made by the radical democrats in the Democracy Wall movement. But engaging with Wang’s writings on Maoism, rather than merely providing systematic rigor to the protean pronouncements of these radicals, will also help bring into view what was distinct in their calls for representative democracy in Chinese Communism. At the outset of the Campaign to Criticize Lin and Confucius, Wang had argued that “in fact, Mao is far more obviously ‘a follower of Mencius and Confucius’ than Lin Biao.”<sup>425</sup> This was part of a long-running critique of Mao developed by Wang in the 1950s, when he had made sense of Mao’s power in terms of “backwardness’s revenge on revolution” – if both Stalin and Mao had relied on a bureaucratic regime underpinned by a personality cult to maintain the revolutionary party’s political power in a context where actual proletarian class consciousness had not yet matured, Mao’s enthusiasm for Stalinism derived from “his roots in orthodox Confucianism.”<sup>426</sup> Despite Mao’s recognition of the incompatibility

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<sup>424</sup> Li, *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System*, 60, 76.

<sup>425</sup> Wang, *Mao Zedong Thought*, 301.

<sup>426</sup> Wang, *Mao Zedong Thought*, 63.

between democratic-reformist attempts to ‘modernize’ Confucian ideas (like that of Sun) and Marxist revolution, Wang argues that a broad “undercurrent” of the Confucian principle of “righteousness” (*li*) lived on in Mao Zedong Thought. Above all, the hierarchical system of mutual feudal obligations between all levels of society – the compassionate father and the filial son; the humane ruler and the loyal minister – laid out in Confucius’ *Rites* that Wang sees as enduring “in the lower depths” of Maoism. Despite flouting this normative system, he established his authority – like the peasant emperors before him – according to the tried and tested method of elevating himself to “the revered scholarly elite” after coming to power.<sup>427</sup> For Wang Fanxi, the popular discontent unleashed by the Cultural Revolution could only be assuaged by dismantling the bureaucratic personality cult and establishing in its place “a broad-based system of socialist democracy, under popular control and supervision in the towns and villages, a system of workers, peasants, and soldiers’ soviets like in the USSR in Lenin’s time.”<sup>428</sup> This solution – broadly consistent with the general Trotskyist approach to any “degenerated workers’ state” – was similar to what the Li Yizhe activists were promoting in their big character poster, and indeed its Trotskyist overtones were denounced by Guangdong provincial party officials in the inevitable imprisonment which followed their radical challenge. A few years later, however, one Li Yizhe activist developed and extended the call for popular supervision of the party in the context of a renewed interest in human rights discourse after Mao’s death.

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<sup>427</sup> Wang, *Mao Zedong Thought*, 78-9.

<sup>428</sup> Wang, *Mao Zedong Thought*, 304.

When the CCP reform faction led by Deng Xiaoping came to power at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in 1978, they did so against the backdrop of the first large-scale protest movement entirely independent of party influence since the foundation of the PRC: the Democracy Wall movement. Democracy Wall activists exploited new opportunity structures that the reform faction's rise had opened up within the CCP. As the reform faction repudiated Mao's fixation on class struggle – declaring economic development through the 'Four Modernizations' its new policy priority – activists demanded a 'fifth' modernization: democracy.<sup>429</sup> Big-character posters critiquing the Chinese political system and outlining visions for its reform were plastered across a bus terminal wall in Beijing's Xidan district, only a few miles west of the central political and administrative buildings around Tiananmen square. Throughout that year, crowds would assemble daily to read these posters, and the Xidan Democracy Wall was imitated in cities around the country, also giving rise to a network of mimeographed journals that extended the political foment beyond these physical spaces.

What gave the Democracy Wall such symbolic power was its self-presentation as heir to the victims of the April 5<sup>th</sup> 1976 Tiananmen incident. That year, during the Qing Ming Festival (in which offerings are traditionally burnt for deceased ancestors), over a million people had visited Tiananmen square to commemorate the recent passing of premier Zhou Enlai. If Zhou's reputation as an honorable public servant – bolstered by his having avoided the purges of the Cultural Revolution – had drawn

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<sup>429</sup> The slogan of democracy as the "Fifth Modernization" was coined in a big character poster by Wei Jingsheng, one of the leading Democracy Wall activists.

such large crowds, the ‘Cultural Revolution group’ still in charge of the party viewed this adulation as a threat, and ordered the removal of all displays of mourning. Protests against mourning displays in Tiananmen drew a crowd of over 100,000, many of whom stormed surrounding government buildings. Thousands were arrested on charges of counter-revolution, with Deng himself was charged as leader of this conspiracy and placed under house arrest. One of the key moves in the reform faction’s return to power at the 1978 Plenary session, then, was its “reversal of verdicts” on the April 5<sup>th</sup> incident – not only was Deng’s name cleared, but the public mourners were also honored as revolutionaries. As part of a broader amnesty meant to definitively mark the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Li Yizhe collective was released from prison.

It was this status as co-participants in the party’s process of reform that the Democracy Wall invoked, linking Deng’s new leadership team to the appearance of insurgent crowds in the heart of China’s political geography. They referred to the period as the ‘Peking Spring,’ a clear reference to the Prague Spring and other democratic social movements in communist countries. Although Democracy Wall writers expressed diverse opinions, what united almost all of them was a demand that the CCP respect human rights. It is tempting to view such a demand as consistent with what Samuel Moyn calls the “last utopia”: the global human rights discourse that arose in the late 1970s as a passive vision of emancipatory politics suited to a nascent neoliberal order that denied the possibility of constructive political projects led by

mass initiative.<sup>430</sup> This would be consistent with the observation made by Richard Wolin with which this chapter began, of French intellectuals' romantic infatuation with Maoist mass politics giving way to a chastened horizon of human rights advocacy. If, as Moyn points out, by the late seventies the Russian dissident movement had placed its hopes in international human rights agreements to initiate change in their country, the Democracy Wall did not share this appraisal. As *April Fifth Forum*, a leading Democracy Wall journal, put it in its critique of the Baltimore Sun's coverage, "we are not political dissidents! We are ... struggling at this stage for the establishment of socialist democracy and socialist legality ... [and labeling us dissidents] is simply sowing discord between the youth participating in the socialist democracy movements and the Party central committee!"<sup>431</sup> Having experienced the Cultural Revolution's party-orchestrated attacks on bureaucratic privilege, they now turned to rights language to institutionalize popular oversight, rather than to protect individuals from suffering. I thus want to focus on the way one particular right – the right to *supervision* – was figured in this moment, and how it was both consistent with Maoist discourse but also pointed to a way out of its defects that this triumphalist narrative papers over.

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<sup>430</sup> Moyn, Samuel. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2012. The embrace of a post-democratic politics of international human rights advocacy by Soviet dissidents after the crushing of the 1968 Prague Spring had dashed their hopes for humanized communism is a key episode in Moyn's narrative. What I have tried to show in this chapter is that the events of the Chinese sixties left 'dissidents' in the PRC in a very different situation regarding the prospects for socialist democracy than those in the Soviet bloc.

<sup>431</sup> "GET TITLE" In Ching, Tzu-li. *A Collection of Underground Publications Circulated on Chinese Mainland*. Vol. 10. 15 vols. Taipei: Institute for the Study of Chinese Communist Problems, 1982.

The writings of Wang Xizhe, a member of the Li Yizhe collective, appeared frequently in the Democracy Wall journals, and they provide a fruitful source for approaching this concept of the right to supervision. His speech ‘On Party Leadership and People’s Supervision’ was delivered at a Theory Forum of the Communist Youth League in Guangdong, and published in *April Fifth Forum*.<sup>432</sup> Wang presents the “unification of the legislative, executive, and judiciary” as undermining the renewed importance of rule of law in the era of reform. If “stable and well-constituted” laws are required to ensure the inviolability of the economic contract – “the most vital measure tying the relations of production together” in the new economy – then the authority of the “Politburo document” can no longer trump the authority of the constitution. Wang frames the constitutional separation of powers as an alternative way of reaching verdicts on line struggles that did not rely on struggles between party leaders in the Politburo Central Committee.

The system is simple: the Central Committee poses a political line to the People’s Representative Assembly of the National People’s Congress (NPC), which has veto power over such line proposals. The State Council – the executive body staffed by Politburo nominated members (in practice usually mostly overlapping with the membership of the Politburo itself) falls under the supervisory power of a Procurator’s office staffed by members nominated from the NPC. If the State Council does not adhere to the NPC verdicts on lines, the Procurator can trigger the dissolution of the State Council and the Politburo Central Committee and initiate an inner-party

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<sup>432</sup> Wang, Xizhe. “Dang de Lingdao yu Renmin de Jiandu.” *Si Wu Luntan* 15 (1979) **GET PAGES**. In Ching, Tzu-li, *A Collection of Underground Publications Circulated on Chinese Mainland*. Vol. 10.

purge based on procedural lines. When representatives of a new political line emerge from this procedure, its proposed line will then be presented to the NPC, which in turn will reach another verdict. We can approach Wang's constitutional proposal from the perspective of Sun Yat-sen's "examination" and "supervision" powers. The party functions as an examination system, but the coherence and suitability of the theoretical edifice underpinning 'examination' is tested by independent supervision.

Of course, by placing the supervisory power in the hands of the representative assembly, Wang's proposal opens onto the dangers of parliamentary despotism. But Wang's proposals are interesting because they grow out of the Cultural Revolution's experiments with opening the conduct of government up to popular criticism – the widespread "exposures" of government failures with the encouragement of people to exercise "the four great rights." Wang develops and expands this defense of revolutionary supervision in his subsequent independent writings. In his 1980 essay 'Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution,' Wang tied this demand to an interpretation of the history of the CCP that followed a similar logic of inversion to the Campaign to Criticize Confucianism and Evaluate Legalism. But although this narrative retains that campaign's focus on the 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial' mindset of the masses as the obstacle to future revolutionary development, it turns it against Mao himself and, in doing so, denies the epistemic authority of the Great Helmsman to identify line struggles. It instead attempts to tell this history from the perspective of precisely those "broad masses in China who have experienced the Great Cultural Revolution."

Wang's inverted history positions the democracy movement as potential allies for reformers within the party against party leaders and members who have

succumbed to bureaucratic self-interest. This alliance, Wang thought, would reconstitute the CCP as an authentic vanguard establishing something consistent with the democratic institutions of the dictatorship of the proletariat celebrated by Marx and Engels in their appraisals of the Paris Commune and taken up by Lenin in *State and Revolution*. Like Wang Fanxi, Wang Xizhe denied Mao any claim to represent a proletarian vanguard – within the essay itself, and even more pointedly in a post-script written a week later, Wang thus addresses himself to those who supported democratic reform but who still perceived Mao as a scientific socialist. Wang argues that, despite being a communist in form, Mao was a peasant leader “in content” – “the greatest peasant leader ever,” perhaps, but also “an emperor of China ... due to [this] class nature.”<sup>433</sup> The true revolutionary vanguard, then, are the democratic reformers within the party who constantly had to struggle against this powerful “remnant” of China’s feudal past. Mao could repeatedly undo the gains of the party’s democratic reform faction because of this support base among the peasantry. As he puts it,

“[The peasant’s] consciousness of communism was of a Heavenly Kingdom of Peace where, when the ‘Great Way’ was travelled, there was a spirit of ‘Cooperation’ under heaven. Mao Zedong was able to bring them this kind of heavenly country. So we can understand how they could repay Mao Zedong with fanatic worship!”<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Wang, Xizhe. “Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution.” In Li, Yizhe, *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System*, 177-261, 236.

<sup>434</sup> Wang, “Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution,” 196.

The Li Yizhe poster “represented the rupture between the generation produced by the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong's imperial use of revolution, as well as this generation's introspection concerning that ‘revolution.’”<sup>435</sup>

The climax of this narrative is the April 5<sup>th</sup> Tiananmen incident. In a commemorating speech from 1979, Wang points out that the difference between April Fifth and May Fourth (the 1919 protests led by young Pekingese students that inaugurated the New Culture Movement) was that “the movement’s vanguard and main force were mostly young workers.” He describes this as “a huge signpost indicating that an entire generation of industrial workers has grown up with socialist consciousness and culture.” Due to this display of political maturity – their manifestation of a proletarian vanguard that had independently rediscovered that democracy was the answer to socialism’s bureaucratization – Wang suggests in his speech that “the people ... unveiled a secret in the Tiananmen incident: the administrative leadership of the Party is not the only form Party leadership can take.”<sup>436</sup>

Finally, then – and to return to Wang’s speech on revolutionary supervision – the alliance between the democracy movement and the party’s reformists would allow “the Communist Party as the vanguard of the proletariat” to “once again realize its role as leader of the people of the whole nation.” For Wang, this entails “[the party’s] correct policy of representing the interests of the majority of the people and the vanguard exemplary role of her members, in particular, that the outstanding work of

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<sup>435</sup> Wang, “Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution,” 227.

<sup>436</sup> Wang, “Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution,” 154.

[its] cadres in the State Council [the PRC's chief executive authority] and in various social and public positions at all levels of government has achieved the trust and support of the people, thereby realizing this leadership.”<sup>437</sup> The rationale behind the separation of powers we saw Wang suggest above is thus very different from that of liberal democratic pluralism. The intrinsic good of democracy is not generating an aggregate interest from the free expression of plural interests and identities – *Federalist* No.10's “republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.” The party still preserves, on Wang's account, the kind of control that James Madison would have considered a tyranny of the majority. This is because Wang retains faith in the propagandistic and organizational role of a vanguard party as necessary to safeguard “the interests of the majority” against the “interests of value” that the capitalist mode of production constantly threatens to strengthen.<sup>438</sup> The role of a legislative assembly in this hybrid system, then, is to provide an independent and electoral institution for the “inspection and supervision” of the executive authority wielded by CCP cadres framed in a very specific way. That is, it puts the communist party's working out of lines of struggle into a constitutional framework – however rudimentary – replacing the ‘totalitarian’ dynamics of revolutionary supervision associated with the Central Committee purge with a kind of ‘mixed regime’ of popular oversight.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>437</sup> Wang, “Dang de Lingdao yu Renmin de Jiandu,” 29.

<sup>438</sup> See Wang, Xizhe. “Mizhu de Fangxiang.” *Si Wu Luntan* 17 (1980). 12ff. In Ching, Tzu-li. *A Collection of Underground Publications Circulated on Chinese Mainland*. Vol. 11.

At the end of 1980, after Deng Xiaoping had declared big-character posters illegal, the CCP labeled Wang and the democracy movement “counter-revolutionary,” and he was sentenced to fourteen years in prison.<sup>439</sup> The CCP under Deng would only double down on its monopolization of historical interpretation, and China’s new era of reform and opening-up would proceed according to the party’s analysis of history, and thus with the party supervising its own conduct.<sup>440</sup> In 1981, at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, a new Resolution on Party History was ratified, appraising the “mistakes” of the Cultural Revolution and confirming the replacement of class struggle with socialist economic development as the principal method of the party’s political work. But this new historical period would still be marked by a the “imperative to maintain a high level of vigilance ... against all those who are hostile to socialism and try to sabotage it.”<sup>441</sup> Throughout the 1980s, this vigilance took the form of various campaigns against ‘petty-bourgeois liberalism’ and for ‘the construction of spiritual civilization.’ As China’s economy liberalized, the party would manage growing inequality by promoting the responsible middle-class urban consumers as the new exemplary class, consistent with the widely-held sense that its legitimacy rests on the pursuit of higher living standards through rapid economic development.<sup>442</sup> Xi Jinping’s ascendancy as paramount CCP leader on the back of an

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<sup>439</sup> Chan, Rosen & Unger, p.27.

<sup>440</sup> Escaping China after the party’s post-1989 crackdown on dissenters, Wang, meanwhile, would eventually become associated with American evangelical politics, and is known today for his vociferous support of Donald Trump.

<sup>441</sup> “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China,” available at the Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/resolution-certain-questions-history-our-party-founding-peoples-republic-china>. Accessed June 5<sup>th</sup> 2023.

<sup>442</sup> On the CCP’s attempts to construct a ‘high quality’ population of urban consumers during the reform era, and its adaptation of Mao-era governmental techniques to achieve this end, see, for

anti-corruption campaign targeting his key opponents, and his enshrinement of this effort with a third historical resolution ratified in 2021, suggests that the purging logic of the line struggle lives on.<sup>443</sup>

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to show how this key method of settling political questions in the Stalinist vanguard party was opened up during the course of the Cultural Revolution. I have situated this in a long-running investment in popular supervision of the party that included space for forces outside its remit alongside the more familiar formulations of the ‘mass line’ and its rectification campaigns based on the responsiveness of the party to its investigations into the masses’ needs. Wang Xizhe’s claims during the Democracy Wall movement were, to be sure, the ephemeral and, some may say, doomed expressions of one of any number of failed attempts to ‘humanize’ communist regimes. But what I have tried to capture in this chapter is the extent to which they were shaped by more enduring ideas about some basic requirements of democratic representation that stretch across the communist tradition I have mapped in this dissertation. The key inflection point, on this telling, was the way that the late Cultural Revolution – during the Campaign to Criticize Confucius – stretched the symbolic framework of the class struggle to its limit, in a way that created space for new claims to exercise the vigilance of the proletarian vanguard to arise.

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example, Jacka, Tamara. “Cultivating Citizens: *Suzhi* (Quality) Discourse in the PRC.” *Positions: Asia Critique* 17, no. 3 (August 1, 2009): 523–35; Dutton, Michael. “Cultural Revolution as Method.” *The China Quarterly* 227 (September 2016): 718–33.

<sup>443</sup> On the persistence of the post-Mao invocation of ‘mass supervision,’ see Andreas, Joel, and Yige Dong. “‘Mass Supervision’ and the Bureaucratization of Governance in China.” In *To Govern China*, edited by Vivienne Shue and Patricia M. Thornton, 123–52. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this dissertation, I have returned to key moments in the tradition of communist thought and practice to bring out what I consider to be a neglected principle of vigilance associated with the core representative idea in that tradition: the proletarian vanguard. Across each moment, I have shown how socialist claims to “vanguardism” have either undermined or bolstered this vigilance. I have framed this dissertation around ‘anti-totalitarian’ attitudes inflecting contemporary democratic theory and its appraisal of the communist tradition. For anti-totalitarians, the proletarian vigilance of the communist tradition was bound up with the revolutionary imaginary’s distortion of the principle of popular sovereignty that dissolved the bonds of civil society upon which representative government relies by mobilizing the friends of the people against its purported enemies. Responding to an emerging conceptual vocabulary in contemporary democratic theory that a robust representative government requires the supplementation of periodic electoral authorization by the sustained vigilance of complementary political organizations, I have conducted a comparative investigation of the ‘communist tradition’ with this alternative conception of vigilance in mind.

Of course, the proletarian vigilance I have emphasized throughout this communist archive is still a long way from the decentralized watchdog organizations praised by Pierre Rosanvallon as the embryonic departure points for a contemporary ‘second democratic revolution’ based on the principle of popular oversight. For many radical democratic theorists, the theoretical stakes of what I have presented in this dissertation may seem more or less assimilable to the older Trotskyist anti-

totalitarianism that upheld the potential of robust mass organizations led by the industrial working class as bolsters against the distortion of socialism's democratic principles by the bureaucratic opportunists who hijacked the communist project. What makes the archive I have reconstructed throughout this dissertation distinct from the kind of Trotskyist perspective that post-Marxist democratic theory has done so much to move beyond? In other words, is the framework of 'vigilance' not already covered by Trotsky's construal of democratic politics as the struggle of an authentic proletarian organization embedded in an international revolutionary movement to resist bureaucratic opportunism and the conversion of the dictatorship of the proletariat into a degenerated workers' state?

As I hope to have shown, the theoretical payoff of retreading the exhausted old ground of spent revolutionary movements is not to repeat the Trotskyist gesture of reviving communism's democratic authenticity, i.e., of affirming a renewed politics of communist internationalism for today. By framing this investigation into vanguardism as a comparative exercise, my main purpose has been to challenge the political theorists' habitual projection of long-vanished Cold War geopolitical boundaries onto the conceptual boundaries of the liberal democratic space in which we think. The key objective of the dissertation has thus instead been to challenge the reception of the communist tradition in contemporary democratic theory according to the schemas put forward by the likes of Isaiah Berlin at the height of the Cold War, as a wholly negative example of the heteronomous tutelage required for collective autonomy pushed to its logical conclusion of totalitarian domination. In many ways, it has thus tried to show that communists have persistently grappled with the same puzzles that

have occupied liberal democrats, and with a comparably interesting degree of intellectual sophistication that merits scholarly engagement. But given the dissertation's focus on this objective, more work remains to be done to more precisely illustrate the unique contributions communist figures have made to reflecting on these perennial problems.

One of the key goals for future research in this vein would be to more robustly situate the communist discourse of vanguardism in the broader history of discourses about democratic vigilance. Although each chapter of this dissertation alludes to various aspects of this history, a more sustained and detailed account of what we might call the 'pre-industrial' discourse of vigilance would help shed light on what is unique and interesting about its 'proletarian' iteration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that I trace in this study. Schematically, this would most likely take as its point of departure the eighteenth century democratic revolutions and their 'discovery' of representative government as a way of organizing the machinery of state so as not to rely on the invigilation of a virtuous citizenry at all. The communist concern with the corruption of elites under capitalist society, then, could be cast as an 'update' to much older republican discourses of *virtù* for a context in which rationalized schemas of representative institutions had deemed it obsolete. Future work would thus carefully consider how the turn to proletarian vigilance arose from this new conception of the state as a 'machine' that could be perfected in such a way that its functionaries might unproblematically enact policies advancing society's collective interest.

Such a broader historicization of the discourse of vigilance would also help to provide a more nuanced account of how the communist notions of proletarian

oversight this dissertation has brought into view relate to the conceptual problematics of revolution and constituent power usually associated with this tradition. In foregrounding the question of proletarian vigilance, and in construing a democracy of vigilance as an alternative to a democracy of legitimation and authorization, this dissertation has unavoidably – to borrow Lenin’s phrase – “bent the stick” too far away from communism’s obviously more expansive conceptions of democratic autonomy, participation, and agency. Future research would nuance the dichotomy this dissertation draws between vigilance and authentication and, rather than replacing the latter with the former, would instead analyze how the two relate. Such work is particularly crucial when it comes to the metaphors of ‘vanguardism’: predicated as it seems to be on the ‘advanced detachment’ moving out ahead of a main force, any account of this concept ought to consider in detail the logic of historical transition implied by the term. Proletarian vigilance, in other words, does not (as this dissertation may have risked suggesting at various points) suggest a protection of the established *res publica*— a logic of resistance against corruption and return to virtuous origins – but rather implies a creative destruction of some kind in the name of transitioning to a republic free from the kinds of domination that characterize capitalist society. This is the crucial distinction that *proletarian* vanguardism names: the proletariat is supposed to not merely *operate* the state machine more skillfully, but instead possesses a greater talent for *wrecking* the machine which dominates both itself and the other exploited classes it leads.

Relatedly, future research remains to be done on the relationship between the more symbolic account of the proletariat this dissertation has put forward and the

obvious material and sociological questions of class identity it has left out. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to rely above all on a 'political' conception of the proletariat, interrogating what the qualities of communism's privileged subject might be when its primary characteristics are not defined according to its position in relation to the means of production, but rather in terms of how industrial laborers' participation in political activity has been said to differ from the ruling classes broadly construed. However, particularly in the second chapter, I have also relied heavily on arguments about the phenomenological significance of factory labor as a kind of 'pre-political foundation' for the politics of elite oversight I have tried to reconstruct. More careful work thus remains to be done across the entire span of the dissertation's chapters about the imbrication of the material and the symbolic in discourses of proletarian vanguardism. This would open onto the difficult questions of class identity that this dissertation has studiously avoided for lack of space, in particular the vexed place of 'sub-proletarian' class formations like the peasantry and lumpenproletariat, and better connect its archive to the vast Marxist literature on these questions (particularly in the field of anti-colonial agrarian revolutionary thought beyond Mao).

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