



Democracy's Triumph, Philosophy's Peril

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Liberal democracy has never had much use for philosophy. Tocqueville opens Volume II of *Democracy in America* by remarking: "I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States" (II, 3). For its part, philosophy tends to be suspicious of liberal democracy and liberal capitalism, even while grudgingly (and only exoterically) admitting that it might be the most harmless regime as far as safety of life and limb is concerned. A perilous enterprise at the best of times, philosophy draws its legitimacy, demands its freedom, and affirms its dignity from the belief in a distinction between popular opinion (frequently, an expression of parochial interest) and true or deep knowledge (resulting from the meditation of independent thinkers who, while remaining loyal citizens, aim at reflection devoid of commitment and bias). In democracies, though, citizenship—that is, partisanship—is paramount.

A civic community, ruling itself, does not need coercion to silence dissent and, as Tocqueville has shown, its instruments for enforcing conformity ("being-of-one-mind") are spiritual rather than physical. It is here especially that liberal democracy is a competitor to philosophy in the latter's very realm.

"In any constitutional state in Europe every sort of religious and political theory may be freely preached and disseminated; for there is no country in Europe so subdued by any single authority as not to protect the man who raises his voice in the cause of truth from the [End Page 103] consequences of his hardihood," Tocqueville tells us. "But in a nation where democratic institutions exist, organized like those of the United States, there is but one authority, one element of strength and success, with nothing beyond it"—to wit, the people (I, 263). "The smallest reproach irritates its sensibility, and the slightest joke that has any foundation in truth renders it [that is, American public opinion] indignant; . . . everything must be made the subject of encomium. . . . The majority lives in the perpetual utterance of self-applause" (I, 265).¹

This state of affairs has now spread to the rest of the world. Anticapitalist or antidemocratic theories are not suppressed, but silenced through indifference, mockery, and marginalization; a debate is never seriously engaged with them. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Werner Sombart dedicated a whole book to the puzzle of why there is no socialism in the United States; Tocqueville, unbeknownst to him, had already answered that question. Rousseau would have been horrified to see that the general will could become informed almost exclusively by bourgeois opinion.

The most disturbing feature of this, for philosophers, is that opinion is thought as well. The undaunted, independent spirit looked down on the raw force and vulgar ignorance that burned books and writers at the stake. But contemporary democratic opinion evinces only merry contempt for the philosophers' "cloud-cuckoo-land," and has got ideas (often quite intelligent ideas) of its own.

Learned elites, with their weird morals and commitments other than usefully civic ones, have always been repugnant to democracy. Yet in the past these elites at least regarded themselves as something more than self-seeking subcultures, and believed they were representing something "higher." In today's globally triumphant liberal democracies, the pretension of devotion to "higher things" smacks of tyrannical tastes. The liberal democracies of the near future may become as aphoristical as ancient Egypt or pre-Columbian America, their liberty empirical and wordless, or expressed in terms of the uncritical "self-applause" foreseen by Tocqueville.

Leo Strauss tells us, in his famous essay "The Three Waves of Modernity":

[J]ust as the second wave of modernity is related to Rousseau, the third wave is related to Nietzsche. Rousseau confronts us with the antinomy of nature on the one hand, and of civil society, reason, morality, history on the other, in such a way that the fundamental phenomenon is the beatific sense of existence—of union and communion with nature—which belongs altogether on the side of nature as distinguished from reason and society. The third wave may be described as being constituted by a new understanding of the sentiment of existence: that sentiment is the experience of terror and anguish rather than of harmony and peace, and it is the sentiment of historic existence as necessarily tragic; the [End Page 104] human problem is indeed insoluble as a social problem, as Rousseau had said, but there is no escape from the human to nature; there is no possibility of genuine happiness, or the highest of which man is capable has nothing to do with happiness.²

Philosophy, whether ancient or modern, had always been characterized intuitively by two criteria: the first was a rejection of, and opposition to, mere opinion; the second was depth. In contradistinction to what Strauss wrote, there is some doubt today as to whether there is a human problem (as such) at all. For in the current anti-philosophical climate, influenced by "liberal ironists" (Richard Rorty) and "consumerist unbelievers" (Ernest Gellner), its existence, the supposition of which is assimilated to a rationalistic and ahistorical stance, no longer seems to be more than one opinion among many, and an old-fashioned one to boot. Instead of terror and anguish, we have complacency and philistine good cheer; instead of beatific communion with nature, the "high" of overwork, the conformism of efficient and agreeable hopelessness.

The Dominion of Opinion

In order to explain the transition from the third to the fourth wave of modernity, we shall have to glance at bourgeois society. What now appears to have been most conspicuous about bourgeois society in its original form—if we wish to profit from the benefit of hindsight—was its divided dominion. It was constantly flanked on the right by the alliance of throne and altar, and on the left by revolutionary socialism (and, sometimes, anarchism). Until 1989, capitalism was never on its own. Its legitimacy was always questioned by the romantic adherents of the astrocracy and of the Apostolic Church, by radical and utopian critics, and by those who were opposed to perpetual change.³

When liberal capitalism triumphed at the end of the twentieth century, it was rather different from the unprocessed model—so much so, that we might entertain some puzzlement regarding its true capitalist quality. If true capitalism—at least in Europe—was something problematic, often challenged, passionately criticized by an adversary culture, then today's unproblematic, uncritical capitalism is no capitalism at all, at least as it was known to Alexis de Tocqueville, Gustave Flaubert, and Walter Benjamin.

For if there is no comprehensive criticism of the given, whatever that may be, then the acceptance of this given as an unexamined article of faith merely crowns the dominion of opinion. This makes our epoch aphoristical and antiphilosophical. The opposition of nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*) and, later, of natural right and positive law assured the specific tension in the public conversation that proved conducive to philosophy. If the historical or temporary given is conceived without a critical or utopian alternative, *nomos* and *physis* will merge, [End Page 105] what is conventional will appear as natural, and vice versa; positive law (and with it, the preconditions of the given—in our case, of the liberal capitalist order) will be fused with natural right. Capitalism appears now as natural, as an expression of the true desire of the adult individual liberated from "spiritual" constraint; it is a regime accommodating the striving and passionate being who is first and foremost a body. If a political order is no longer considered an artefact (based on *nomos*), then its critique will not be wrong, but meaningless; there is no Archimedean, external vantage point from which it can be regarded as a comprehensible whole.

Leo Strauss—like his contemporaries Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch—knew that natural right is the sufficient and necessary condition of what older radicals termed "revolutionary potential." Revolutions are founded on the idea (and feeling) according to which the temporary, given order and its *nomos* are not only unjust but lacking in intrinsic necessity, which belongs only to a putative natural order that has to be reestablished.

Hence the double—critical and utopian—function of all radical philosophy, especially Enlightenment philosophy. Philosophical utopias from Plato to Fichte and beyond tended to be communist in nature: Private property was traditionally regarded as the prime example of artificial and historic *nomos*, opposed to what was natural and ancient, prehistoric and prepolitical. Capitalism, having unshackled private property to an extent never known before, was regarded as preeminently historical and transient, as a savage force preying on solitary and erotic human nature. Capitalism embodied newness and change. Capitalism's permanent novelty and its apparent addiction to change signaled its impermanence for both romantic reactionaries and their hostile twins, revolutionary socialists. Inequality was deemed tolerable if noble, and vulgarity tolerable if equal, but vulgar inequality (that is, democratic capitalism) was often felt to be too much to bear.

The very existence of modern philosophy appears to depend on the possibility of its exercising its utopian and critical function, but since 1989 utopia and critique have lost their cultural moorings. The triumphant new pragmatism (an intelligent, careful, and unassuming celebration of the "positive" in Hegel's and Schelling's sense) is not opposed by anything more than a vague sense of malaise and by ideological rejections based on nothing stronger than protestations of elegant taste.

Philosophy's basic statement is, "What you are saying is mere belief and ingrained habit or prejudice, but the well-founded truth is *x*." The fundamental statement of our age is, on the contrary, "What appears to the untutored mind is all there is; and any rejection of this assumption is dangerous"—meaning that whatever is dangerous (threatening to disturb the civil peace) is *ipso facto* false. Any thought bound to have revolutionary consequences if taken seriously enough to serve as a reason [End Page 106] for action is thereby seen as proven wrong. From the utopian cult of what is not (yet) realized, the West has gone over to the cult of whatever will not give us a great deal of trouble, a sentiment rather understandable after the disasters of the twentieth century, which, to be fair, were linked to the massive exercise of the utopian and critical function. A distaste for radicalism unavoidably spreads to philosophy, which cannot possibly help being radical, since its primordial statement makes it so.

Thus, in an antiphilosophical age, philosophy becomes one more specialized pursuit among many, of great technical sophistication but conspicuously disinclined to question, let alone attack, the basic tenets of the culture.

The Disappearance of Alternatives

It is perhaps uninteresting to ask whether this is still philosophy (for this would lead to a fruitless quarrel over dictionary definitions); after all, such an old occupation or disposition of the human mind is rather likely to undergo great changes. The victories of hypothetical-deductive and experimental (natural) science have obliterated philosophy's role as the ultimate arbiter of validity and veracity; nowadays even the critical philosophy of science (a great success in the 1970s) has fallen into disrepute. What remains of philosophy, ironically faithful to its institutional tradition, is relegated to the wilder shores of unbridled imagination; instead of being "metaphysics," the "queen of the sciences," it is gradually becoming a literary genre like fiction or the essay. Spinoza's *Ethics*, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and Hegel's *Phenomenology* are being read because they are beautiful (and they are, to be sure). Their understanding can be aided by a scholarship that is eminently respectable, but is quite undistinguishable from the subtle literary history despised by Hegel as mere "philology," and hence irrelevant.

It would appear that philosophy flourished in a world of "alternatives," a world where regimes were competing for the title "natural" (equated with "good"), understood as based on and deduced from a true knowledge of reality, especially human reality. Many philosophers did not hesitate to designate as "natural" regimes that had been unavailable to contemporary experience (these we call utopias). The contentious and "alternative" character of pre-1989 liberal capitalism offered a propitious milieu for such musings. But the tacit ban on any serious consideration of noncapitalist or antiliberal alternatives today has transformed this milieu into one in which attempts to "transcend" private property and the market have lost their respectability and therefore their political cachet. A new "radical chic" is unlikely to come into being.

Yet a social and cultural history of philosophy would show that philosophers were almost always struggling with censorship; modern philosophy was created outside the universities by gentlemen of independent [End Page 107] means and free-floating radical intellectuals, employed more often than not on Grub Street. Modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant was mostly published in something rather reminiscent of *samizdat* (this parallel has been noted by historian Robert Darnton as well⁴). "Philosophy" in eighteenth-century France and early nineteenth-century Germany meant a cultural reality people today would call "the radical fringe." It was marginal, subversive, even clandestine, frequently associated with masonic lodges and the *illuminati*. The university was still dominated by the clergy. Most emblematic masterpieces of modern philosophy were banned and burned. To be radical and to be a philosopher were often one and the same thing. Radical philosophers became briefly established in the 1960s and 1970s when the European radical left, too, had become established. Louis Althusser was a professor at the rue d'Ulm (the seat of the Ecole Normale Supérieure) because he was a leading member of the French Communist Party—but Jean-Paul Sartre was an independent author who lived on his royalties; until Michel Foucault, philosophical radicals were members of café society. In West Germany (until the 1970s) there was only a single academic, Wolfgang Abendroth, who said openly that he was a Marxist. "Tenured radicals" appeared only when they became harmless and lost their "organic" connections with "The Movement."

In the Eastern bloc official "Marxism" was anything but radical; whoever took the doctrine seriously was fired immediately.

Philosophy could be a reasonable enterprise as long as the distinction between mere opinion (*doxa*) and true knowledge (*episteme*) was thought to be meaningful and relevant. Liberal capitalism now fills the horizon but, since its legitimacy is not in doubt any longer, no one bothers to justify it as the outcome of a progressive development, as the superior result of the historical process. In the new dispensation, opinion will coincide with true knowledge; liberty is a condition rather than an idea. *Agon*, that is, concurrence, contest, competition, is now at the heart of the free individual, but success has no direct relationship to the human good (except perhaps for a technical aptitude for fast adaptation and accommodation to rapidly changing circumstances).

There is no substantive criterion to decide which way of life is superior; philosophy "as a way of life," as it was traditionally conceived, becomes incomprehensible.

Depth and Discovery

Another traditional characteristic of serious philosophy, *depth*, is in crisis. *Depth* is a notion that describes the capacity of a theory to show, simply, that things are not what they seem. Good theory, according to this notion, is discovery. Discovery is a novel presentation of something previously unknown or misunderstood. A good—that is, deep or [End Page 108] profound—theory therefore must be difficult, even mysterious. Great philosophical theories were known by their admirers to be sometimes well-nigh impossible to grasp. Good students of philosophy were supposed to be able to put up with difficulty; to penetrate a thicket of apparently counterintuitive, at times absurd-sounding arguments; to chase hidden meanings—hidden because of censorship imposed by the powers-that-be or because of the inherent difficulty of talking about the highest things. The assumption of depth, too, is dependent on the hypothesis of a world of alternatives. If the only reality is the market and the consumerist mass culture, then deep analysis demonstrating the presence of layers of human nature irreducible to these is either nonsense or . . . poetry.

This is precisely how radical philosophy is read (or "received") now in North America. It may be called "French theory" or, more conventionally, "continental philosophy" (the presumption is that radical philosophy is characteristic of one or more given national traditions or cultures and thus cannot hope to aspire to universal validity and respectability; it does not travel very well). Or it may be classified as "cultural studies" or even, in some bookshops, "critical studies," again suggesting that philosophy has limited aspirations to universal validity or respectability but may be colorful and enjoyable, like Beaujolais nouveau, which one does not drink all year.

Critics of "continental philosophy" like Alan Sokal (and a host of others) pretend to be unaware that philosophy, like romantic poetry, seeks to pursue difficulty for its own sake, to express the inexpressible, to say the ineffable, to use concepts metaphorically. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were not the first thinkers who put twisted scientific concepts to poetic-cum-metaphysical use; their predecessors included Jacob Boehme and, later, the post-Kantians: Johann Georg Hamann, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Karl Solger, Franz von Baader, Schelling, and Hegel. The so-called romantic philosophy of nature is, if you wish, crazy. But it was committed to paper in the spirit of sacred madness, in the hope of finding an intuitive shortcut to essence. No doubt it is a perilous methodology, but it has nothing to do with an ignorant naïveté concerning "hard" science.

Contemporary critics would consider this simple madness or irresponsible verbiage (often adding the terms of abuse "postmodern," "deconstructivist," "radical," and the like, sometimes fully deserved, sometimes not), a rhetorical mania that has nothing sacred, a *Begriffs-dichtung* ("conceptual poetry") that is little more than sheer nonsense. More tolerant spirits might mention "the body" or "the Imaginary," so as to separate radical philosophy from philosophy proper, which juggles concepts, not daydreams.

But philosophy's ambition is different from this. Its depth, now viewed as wild, even stark, raving mad, is bound to lead it far beyond [End Page 109] what can be deduced from any consensus. It claims an authority that is not institutional. Its holy *mania*, aiming at the invisible, will always tend toward something that is not immediately accessible or available. *manis*, its view that people's unexamined agreement is no guarantee of truth, that desire is no guarantee of the good, that the prevailing forms of human coexistence are not necessarily according to nature, makes it rebellious. It is this rebellion against the surface that makes philosophy both sediciously and profound. If the possibility of an introspective short-cut to nature (or "existence") is denied, if the radical "no" of utopia and critique is denied, then philosophy is of course quite impossible.

Our age denies these possibilities, showing how fragile philosophy was all along, how dependent it was on a perspective outside the given, and how easily it might perish if the plausibility of the grand refusal is not granted. It is, perhaps, not for happy nations.⁵

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Footnotes

1. In the most revolutionary book to appear between 1945 and 1989, Guy Debord discovered the spiritual-intellectual nature of the present order: "The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous possibility [in Hegel's sense], out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances." Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 15.

2. Leo Strauss, *Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, Hilail Gildin, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 94–95.

3. See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993); Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Daniel Bell *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). See also a popular tract on the missing utopian and critical function of philosophy and social theory: Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). On the necessary role of philosophy to disturb tranquility, see Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, Peter Snowdon, trans. (London: Verso, 1998), 1–24 and *passim*.

4. See Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal 1989–1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991); cf. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), and Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

5. On radically poetic philosophy, see the following works by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). On the role of madness in theory cf. three of Félix Guattari's books: *Chaosology* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1995), *Chaosmosis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), and *Soft Subversions* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1996).

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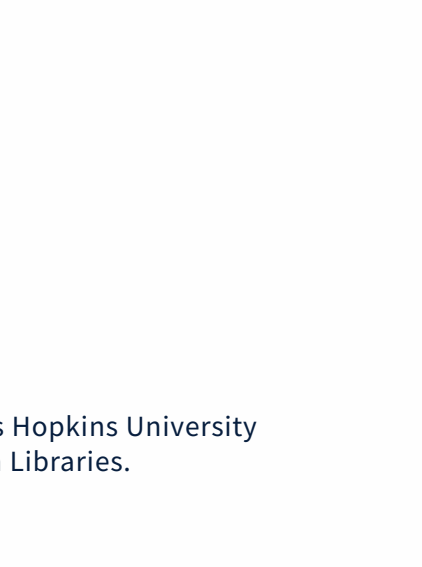
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