

CONTRACT AND BIRTHRIGHT

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Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!" . . . Jacob said "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. . . . Thus Esau despised his birthright [Gen. 25: 29-34].

The story of Esau recounts how a man sold his birthright. In ancient times a birthright usually fell to the eldest son. He succeeded his father and received the major portion of his father's legacy. A birthright was thus an inherited identity and implicitly an inherited obligation to use it, take care of it, pass it on, and improve it. An inherited identity is, by definition, unique: Esau was the inheritor of Isaac, and hence a descendant of Abraham, the founder of Israel. Esau was also the inheritor of the profound experiences of his father, Isaac, whom Abraham had been prepared to sacrifice for his God; and Esau was the inheritor of his father's father, and so on, according to the genealogies so beloved in the Old Testament, back in time to Adam and Eve. Esau's was thus a collective identity, bound up with a people and extending over time.

This unique identity Esau had bartered to fill a need that could be satisfied by any number of different foods. The Old Testament nowhere suggests that Esau was even remotely in danger of starvation. He had bartered what was unique and irreplaceable for a material good for which there were a number of available substitutes.

Although Esau is depicted as a crude man, the Old Testament leaves no doubt that his decision was free and uncoerced, even though there had clearly been an element of cunning on Jacob's part. The power of the biblical narrative depends upon the juxtaposition between the free nature of the choice and the unfree nature of a birthright. One does not choose to be the eldest son of a particular father: That is a matter of one's

special history. Contrary to what Jean-Paul Sartre would claim, the idea of a birthright denies that we are “thrown into the world.”

Birthright has its own distinctive mode of discourse. As its name suggests, birth/right relies strongly on the language of natality. It is a way of “conceiving” the person; and we shall see how the fate of Esau and his brother Jacob is prefigured in the womb of their mother. Birthright language conceives the person as preformed, as an incorporation of elements of family, cult, and community. It asserts that we come into the world preceded by an inheritance. This is why if Esau is to disencumber himself of his inheritance he has to enter into a mode of discourse contrary to that surrounding a birthright.

In contractual discourse the self is performed rather than preformed. It awaits constitution. So it makes itself by a series of bargains. It is a negotiated and negotiable self.

Accordingly, the Biblical narrator says that Esau “swore” and “sold,” that is, Esau entered into a contract of exchange. But the contractual mode presumes precisely what the birthright mode rejects: that the exchanged objects are equal in value. It is not that it is impossible to reduce a birthright and a bowl of pottage to a common measure of value but, rather, that the nature of one is more deeply violated than the other by that operation. In other words, there is an intuitive sense that protests that a birthright is not the kind of thing that should be the object of a contract—in much the same way perhaps, that we feel that Faust committed an act of self-mutilation when he contracted with Mephistopheles to make over his soul in exchange for power.

The idea of a contract not only is familiar to us as a legal instrument by which most business transactions are negotiated, but it is one of the archetypal metaphors of political theory. It is associated with such masters of political thought as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Paine, and Kant. It has represented a distinctive vision of society, and nowhere has it been more influential, in both theory and practice, than in the United States. It is a core notion in two of the most widely discussed political theories of recent years, those of John Rawls and Robert Nozick.

Briefly put, contract theory conceives of political society as the creation of individuals who freely consent to accept the authority and rules of political society on the basis of certain stipulated conditions: such as each shall be free to do as he or she pleases as long as his or her actions do not interfere with the rights of others, or that an individual shall not be deprived of his or her property except by laws that have been passed by duly elected representatives, and so on. Now the contractual element is needed, according to the theory, because, all persons being

free and equal by nature and society being by nature in need of coercive power to protect rights, preserve peace, and defend against external invasion, the freedom of individuals will have to be limited and regulated. Individuals will contract, therefore, to surrender some part of their rights in exchange for the protection of the law and the defense of society from foreign or domestic enemies.

For more than three centuries the contract way of understanding political life has been criticized for being unhistorical, but the criticism has usually taken the form of arguing that contractualism gives a false account of how societies have actually come into existence. To which the contract theorist has quite properly replied that he or she has been engaged not in historical description but in prescribing the principles of a rights-oriented society. Yet that reply does expose an assumption: namely, that it is possible to talk intelligibly about the most fundamental principles of a political society as though neither the society nor the individuals in it had a history. It stands, therefore, in sharp contrast to the conception of a birthright, which, although not strictly historical in its approach to collective identity, might be said to have a quality of historicity.

I want to suggest that the conception of a birthright provides a more powerful way of understanding our present political condition than does contract theory, and that contract theory is less a solution to the political problem of our times than an exacerbation of it. I began with the story of Esau because it bears on the birthright that each of us has. Like Esau's, our birthright is an inheritance. Like Esau's, it is inherited from our fathers. Like Esau's, it is a birthright that concerns a unique collective identity. Like Esau's, our birthright is not being extracted from us by force; it is being negotiated or contracted away. Finally, like Esau, we have made it possible to contract away our birthright by forgetting its true nature and thereby preparing the way for it being reduced to a negotiable commodity, with the result that its disappearance is not experienced as loss but as relief.

The birthright that we have made over to our Jacobs is our politicalness. By *politicalness* I mean our capacity for developing into beings who know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life. To be political is not identical with being "in" government or being associated with a political party. These are structured roles and typically they are highly bureaucratized. For these reasons they are opposed to the authentically political.

A political inheritance or birthright is not something we "acquire" like a sum of money or our father's house; nor is it something we grow

into naturally without effort or forethought, like reaching the age of 18 and automatically being entitled to vote. It is something to which we are entitled, as Esau had been; but we have to make it consciously our own, mix it with our mental and physical labor, undertake risks on its behalf, and even make sacrifices. What the "it" is was suggested more than 2500 years ago, when Heraclitus implored his fellow citizens to "cling to the common": that is, search out the concerns that represent what our collectivity identity is about, and seek to use them, take care of them, improve and pass them on.

Politicalness comes to us as a birthright, as an inheritance, and hence it has a historical quality without being merely historical. A birthright is defined by the historical moments when collective identity is collectively established or reconstituted. For Americans, these moments include the seventeenth-century beginnings in New England; the revolutionary founding and the redefinition of it symbolized by the ratification of the Constitution; the Civil War, with its vision of a nationalized society and its inconclusive attempt to radicalize republicanism; and two world wars that have affixed collective identity to the dream of world hegemony and have reconstituted the moments represented by the New Deal and civil rights movement so as to make them functional elements.

Historical things "are"; they have spatial and temporal attributes that can be described. But as elements of a birthright, they have to be interpreted. Interpretation is not historical description but a theoretical activity concerned with reflection upon the meaning of past experience and of possible experiences. Because birthrights need interpretation, they are contestable; and because contestable, there is not absolute finality to the interpretation. Birthrights are transmitted, and because of that their meaning will have to be reconsidered amid different circumstances. We inherit from our fathers, but we are not our fathers. Thus, the Constitution is part of our inheritance. Its formation and contents can be described historically, but the interpretations of its origins and its contents have been highly contestable subjects and remain so. No interpretation enjoys undisputed hegemony.

One reason for the contestability of historical things, whether located in the more remote past or the more immediate present, is their ambiguousness. Human actors intervene to enact a law or promote a policy, but they are never able to circumscribe its consequences, many of which prove to be unwanted. Or the intervention itself embodies contradictory motives, such as when a law reflects the aims of those who hope to prevent the law from achieving the ends of its proponents and so attach a "rider" to it. Most, if not all, defining historical moments are full of ambiguities. Our Constitution, for example, proclaims liberties

and inhibits democracy. Every war since the Mexican War has its ambiguities, although this is not to say that some wars are not less ambiguous than others: World War II, for example, was less ambiguous than World War I—and World War III may be totally unambiguous!

Our birthright is composed of these ambiguous historical moments, and so its political meaning is rarely obvious. If we are to deal with the ambiguities of our birthright, we need an interpretive mode of understanding that is able to reconnect past and present experience, and we need to think in different terms about what it means to be political. We cannot, for example, experience the past directly. We can, however, share in the symbols that embody the experience of the past. This calls for a citizen who can become an interpreting being, one who can interpret the present experience of the collectivity, reconnect it to past symbols, and carry it forward.

This conception of the citizen differs from that made familiar by contemporary liberal and conservative thinkers and their neovariants. The latter conception tends to be two-dimensional. The individual is usually pictured as responding to the world as if in a situation of choice, in which he or she will decide according to whether a choice will advance or reduce, protect or threaten the interests of the chooser. The temporal dimensions of choice are typically reduced to two: the present and the future. In this context recall President Reagan's famous query to the voters, "Ask yourself, are you better off now than four years ago?" Thus, the citizen was asked to think about the past as a thin slice of time, four years, to reduce its political meaning to economic terms, and then to assess it in personal rather than communal or collective terms. It was not a request for an interpretation of the meaning of four years of the Reagan regime, but a calculation of personal gains. It was a question that tacitly rejected as nonsensical the possibility that "I" could be better off but that "we" were not. It was Esau-talk.

The reason that the president could successfully address this appeal to the voters is that social contract thinking has become so engrained as to seem to be a natural part of the social world. There are two crucial assumptions made by social contract theory that present a particularly sharp contrast to the notion of a birthright. One is that the contracting individuals are equal because they have no prior history, the other that the contract represents a "beginning" in which society starts afresh like the beginning of a new footrace.

Each of these assumptions is deeply antihistorical. Individuals could be considered equal (that is, uniform in some important respects) only if they had no autobiographies with different backgrounds and experiences, if they had no personal histories. Obvious as this may seem, the

contract theorist had to deny it, at least for the moment prior to the act of consent, otherwise no one would agree even to equal terms if they knew that others would be carrying forward previous advantages and hence could perpetuate or even increase their advantages. So the contract theorist has to posit a memoryless person, without a birthright, and so equal to all the others.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the memoryless person was said to exist in a state of nature in which no social, political, or economic distinctions existed. In our own day the notion has been perpetuated most ingeniously by John Rawls in his conception of a "veil of ignorance." Rawls asks us to imagine an apolitical condition in which individuals who know nothing specific about their personal identities choose certain conditions that they would accept precisely because they do not know who they are or what advantages or disadvantages they enjoy. They are forced by the logic of this situation to choose conditions that will be fairest for all. The same lack of historicity surrounds the society that results from the Rawlsian contract. It begins with no past, no legacy of deeds or misdeeds, nothing to remember. The contract depends upon collective amnesia.

In suggesting that I do not mean to devalue the idea of equality but to claim that its present chimerical status, in which it seems impossible to achieve yet impossible to abandon, is due in no small measure to the spell cast by contract thinking. We tend to assume that equality represents a condition that we are trying to recapture, that once we were equal, as in the moment before the contract, and so the task is to eliminate barriers, such as segregation or sex discrimination. When this is done equality is restored, because equality has come to be identified with equal opportunity. But equal opportunity merely restarts the cycle of competition in the race, and races are designed to produce a single winner. Then it becomes obvious that social competition cannot be compared to a footrace between trained athletes; that the race for education, jobs, income, and status is rarely between equals, but between those with greater advantages and those with greater disadvantages. The end result is that the quest for equality becomes an exercise in guilt, which is typified in Rawls's solution. Rawls argues that inequalities can be advantageous if they spur economic activity that improves everyone's situation, which, by definition, would include that of "the least advantaged." But this is an argument for improving the lot of those who are unequal. It does not follow that in doing so inequality is reduced, much less eliminated.

In reality the issue may be a different one: What kind of a collectivity is it that approaches its central value of justice by making the lot of the

disadvantaged the test? The answer is that necessarily such a society will have to commit itself mainly to developing the economy, because only in that way will the lot of the disadvantaged be improved. As a consequence, the elites will be formed in response to that need and the structure of society will be shaped toward economic ends. The answer presupposes a polity that is, in reality, a political economy rather than a democracy. I shall return to this point.

I want now to set over against the social contract conceptions of membership and collectivity the notion of inheritance as suggested by the Esau story. One reason Esau may have bargained away his history or inheritance was that, in addition to the material benefits—his father's flocks and land—a birthright brought with it some accumulated burdens. He would inherit his father's "name"; that is, a family history that would likely have included its share of debts and obligations, responsibilities, quarrels, feuds, and so on. To live in the world for any length of time is to know shame, guilt, dishonor, and compromise.

It is not irrelevant to the notion of inheritance as a burden that the Old Testament described Esau as a hunter, which signified someone who prefers to travel unencumbered and who is disinclined to settle down. His brother Jacob, in contrast, was characterized as "a quiet man, dwelling in tents" (Gen. 25:27). The Old Testament clearly aimed to depict opposing types. It notes that before their birth "the children struggled together within" their mother's womb (25: 22). Their mother, Rebekah, was told,

Two nations in your womb,
and two peoples, born of you
shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than
the other,
the elder shall serve the younger [25: 23].

Even when they were being born, Jacob was said to have grabbed hold of Esau's heel (25: 26). In their encounters it was Jacob who always won by virtue of some stratagem. Thus, as Isaac lay dying Jacob and Rebekah conspire to deceive him into believing that Jacob is Esau. As a result the dying father gives his precious "blessing" to the wrong son.

Our natural response is to say, "Foolish father!" But the truth is that all fathers are foolish and all birthrights are a mixture of good and evil, justice and injustice. When Esau learns that Jacob has also tricked him of his blessing, he demands that Isaac give him another. Isaac complies but, under the rules, he cannot retract the first and superior blessing given to Jacob. So he gives Esau another but inferior blessing with the

predictable result that Esau is resentful and threatens to kill Jacob, who then flees. Thus, the birthright sows seeds of conflict and the effort to mitigate the effects creates further conflicts.

An inheritance, then, is a mixed blessing from foolish fathers. And, lest we forget the scheming Rebekah, from foolish mothers as well. The same is true of our birthright. The Founding Fathers left us a mixed blessing, a constitution that showed how power might be organized without leading to arbitrary authority, but also a document that was silent about women and accepted the institution of slavery. What is true of the Constitution is also true of the legacy of later centuries of American history. There is unparalleled economic opportunity and social mobility, but there are numerous blots and stains: the treatment of the Indians, the aggression against Mexico, the cruel war between the states, the imperialist expansion of American power abroad, and, not least, the use of the atomic bomb.

When set over against this ambiguous legacy, the function of social contract thinking becomes clear: to relieve individuals and society of the burden of the past by erasing the ambiguities. This function assumes practical importance because contractualism is not solely an academic philosophy. It is part of American political mythology, of the collective beliefs that define our identity and help to shape our political attitudes and opinions.

Parenthetically, although myth is a feature of so-called "advanced societies"—which might for the present purposes be defined as societies in which science and rationality become identified and their promotion becomes an object of public policies—there is a difference between the status of myth in such societies and its status in premodern and primitive societies. In an advanced society the study of history tends to be demythologizing. As a consequence, myth and historical consciousness coexist uneasily. In premodern societies, especially primitive ones, the historical consciousness can be critical without being instinctively debunking.¹

This point has a practical bearing. President Reagan is rightly described as a president who appeals to "traditional values" and to the "nation's past." However, if those appeals are governed by the dehistoricizing tendencies of contract theory, as I believe they are, his appeals are not to history even when they appear to make reference to it. Rather, history returns as myth, because the critical relation between myth and history has dropped out.

Returning now to the main theme, anthropologists tell us that myth is kept alive by rituals. Accordingly, we should expect our political rituals to perpetuate the myth of contractualism.

One of our firmest rituals is the inauguration of a president. In his second inauguration address the president gave expression to the myth and so preserved it:

Four years ago I spoke to you of a new beginning, and we have accomplished that. But in another sense, our new beginning is a continuation of that created two centuries ago, when, for the first time in history, government, the people said, was not our master. It is our servant; its only power is that which we, the people, allow it to have.

The president's formulation repeats the mythic formula of contract that there is not only a political beginning but, in principle, there can be any number of new beginnings. The basic myth that ties the beginnings together is that "the people" are the dominant actor in the mythic drama: Like an Old Testament god, the people spoke and said, "Let government be servant and its powers limited." Note, however, that the myth is also being used to delegitimize as well as legitimate. The president also spoke disparagingly of recent efforts to employ governmental power to correct perceived social ills and wrongs:

That system [presumably the original Constitution] has never failed us. But for a time we failed the system. We asked things of government that government was not equipped to give. We yielded authority to the national government that properly belonged to states or to local governments or to the people themselves.

Thus, a new beginning can, like a form of ritual, absolve us of past wrongs and put us in a saving relationship to "the system," which, like some patient father-god, will welcome back the prodigals. By restoring the original contract we are washed clean and made innocent once more. Moreover, we are all, potentially, made equal again: Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Jews, northern WASPS, and Southern gentle-folk can each and all accept the sacrament:

Let us resolve that we, the people, will build an American opportunity society in which all of us—white and black, rich and poor, young and old—will go forward together, arm in arm.

The sacrament of innocence is absolution from the foolishness of our fathers and mothers. It soothes us with the knowledge that we were not there when blacks were treated as a species of property; when Indians were massacred and deprived of their ancestral lands; when suffragettes were attacked and humiliated; when the early strikes of workers were broken by the combined force of government and business corporations;

when the liberal government of F.D.R. refused to admit refugees from Hitler's Germany; or when the Bomb was dropped, not once, but twice. As the president remarked in the inaugural address, "We, the present-day Americans, are not given to looking backward. In this blessed land, there is always a better tomorrow."

Bitburg was a symbolic occasion when contract/amnesia was celebrated at the expense of birthright/memory as an American president and a German chancellor confused themselves and the world about the distinction between forgiveness and forgetfulness, victims and victimizers.

Against this "Sweet Oblivious Antidote," in Shakespeare's phrase, we might set the words of Richard Hooker, an English theologian of four centuries ago:

Wherefore as any man's deed past is good as long as he himself continueth; so the act of a public society of men done five hundred years sithence standeth as theirs who presently are of the same societies, because corporations are immortal; we were then alive in our predecessors, they in their successors do live still.²

Clearly by Hooker's understanding, and that of the birthright idea, we can never renounce our past without rendering the idea of a political community incoherent. The reason we cannot has to do with the power that is aggregated by a political community. A political community exercises power in the world and against it. When we accept our birthright, we accept what has been done in our name.

Interestingly, the president also made allusion to the idea of a birthright:

We will not rest until every American enjoys the fullness of freedom, dignity, and opportunity as our birthright. It is our birthright as citizens of this great republic.

At the center of the president's conception of birthright is the fundamental notion of contract theory, the idea of freedom:

By 1980 we knew it was time to renew our faith, to strive with all our strength toward the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with an orderly society.

We believed then and now there are no limits to growth and human progress when men and women are free to follow their dreams . . . The heart of our efforts is one idea vindicated by 25 straight months of economic growth: freedom and incentives unleash the drive and entrepreneurial genius that are the core of human progress.

Freedom is thus conceived in essentially economic and material terms: It is not Esau's birthright that is at stake for the president but

Esau's contract with Jacob for disposal of his birthright. For the president nowhere in his speech suggested that our birthright includes our right to participate, our right to be free from political surveillance, our concern to protect urban habitats and natural environments—in short what was omitted was our birthright as political beings. Perhaps the most striking example of the reduction of our birthright to a bowl of pottage occurred in the use the president made of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation for freeing the slaves:

The time has come for a new American Emancipation, a great national drive to tear down economic barriers and liberate the spirit in the most depressed areas of the country.

The president's image of "the opportunity society" symbolizes a profound transformation in collectivity identity that has been accelerated during the years since World War II. We have virtually ceased to think of ourselves as a political people. Our politicalness is interjected only as a convenient contrast with the Soviet Union. Then suddenly we are a "democracy." Democracy is not invoked when the discussion is about enforcing desegregation statutes, intruding religion into the schools, or preventing discrimination excepting reverse discrimination.

The silence about politicalness and the cynicism about democracy are related. Politicalness is at odds with the conditions required by the form of polity that has come into being, but that form lacks legitimation and so the democratic principle of "we the people" is shamelessly exploited to provide it. The new polity can be christened "the political economy." The name stands for an order in which the limits of politics are set by the needs of a corporate-dominated economy and of a state organization that works in intimate collaboration with corporate leadership.

In the theory of the political economy society is absorbed into "the economy" and, instead of economic relationships being viewed as embedded in a complex of social and political relationships, they are treated as though they constituted a distinct system that is at once autonomous, or nearly so, as well as constitutive or defining of all other types of relationships. The primacy of economic relationships does not operate solely as an explanatory device but as a first principle of a comprehensive scheme of social hermeneutics. Economic relationships constitute an interpretive category of universal applicability. It is used to understand personal life and public life, to make judgments about them, and to define the nature of their problems. It supplies the categories of analysis and decision by which public policies are formulated, and it is applied to cultural domains such as education, the arts, and scientific research. It is, we might say, a conception striving for totalization.

To the political economy a genuinely democratic politics appears as destabilizing. This is because those who govern fear that democratic institutions, such as elections, free press, popular culture, and public education can become the means to mobilize the poor, the less well educated, working classes, and aggrieved ethnic groups and to use them to bring demands for a revision of social priorities and a redistribution of values. This would kindle inflationary pressures and divert social resources to nonproductive uses, such as health care, low cost housing, and toxic waste disposal. Accordingly, the ruling elites have to discourage the mobilization of poorer groups by asserting that a rational investment policy requires different priorities. So, for example, the Pentagon's spokesman refuses to trim the defense budget and openly asserts the priority of defense over so-called "social spending."

The depoliticalization of the poor and the working classes was most clearly demonstrated in the anti-inflation strategy adopted by the state. The rate of inflation was successfully lowered at the expense of employment, which is to say, at the expense primarily, although not solely, of the working classes and minorities. The significance of this choice goes beyond the important matters of jobs and standards of living to the vital question of whether an unemployed person has not been deprived in some crucial sense of membership. For if the economy is the crucial sector of a political economy, it means that employment is, so to speak, the mark of citizenship in the important sense of being involved in productive activity that is widely believed to be the most important activity in society and, ultimately, the foundation of American power and security. Economic production, we might say, is to the political economy as political citizenship was to Aristotle: namely, the mark of whether one was "in" or "outside" the polity.

It is clear that in today's high-tech society there is a substantial number of persons, mostly minorities, who are superfluous: They are unemployed and have practically no foreseeable prospect of becoming employed, except perhaps temporarily, and many are trapped in a cycle of unemployment that comprehends two and sometimes three generations. In a rapidly changing economy that replaces the skills of human operatives by machines in accordance with the relentless pace of technological innovation, superfluous members are being created constantly. If by chance some are returned to the work force in a period of economic upturn, this does little to reduce their anxieties about the future. Everyone knows that business cycles return. The consequence is to produce noncitizens who will be most reluctant to take political risks of the kind required by politicalness.

Similarly, when in the name of “the economy” public spending on social program is cut, this means more than the loss of substantial economic benefits. It reduces the power of individuals. Health care, education, aid for dependent children, job training—each of these holds out hope to an individual that he or she can increase his or her power to cope with the world. When social programs are reduced, then restored somewhat, only to be reduced again, tremendous power is lodged in the hands of the state, or of those who operate it. The economy becomes a means of denying power to some and denaturalizing them, as it were, rendering them wary of political involvements.

Underlying these programs, which combine pacification with demoralization and depoliticization of the lower classes, is a fear of Esau. We should recall the “blessing” that Isaac finally gave to the frustrated and enraged Esau, who had been doubly cheated:

By your sword you shall live,
and you shall serve your brother;
but when you break loose
you shall break his yoke from
your neck [Gen. 27:40].

The advent of the political economy does not signal the disappearance of the state, despite the frequent and well-subsidized rhetoric extolling the free market and attacking government regulation. Under the regime of political economy the state is actually strengthened. The military has for over 3000 years been a key element in political power and a crucial one in the apparatus of the modern state. The astronomical rise in defense budgets and the revival of an interventionist foreign policy signify an increase in the power of the state. The same can be said of the increasing control over information being exercised by the state.

The basic reason the present administration is concerned to mystify the presence of the state and to denigrate its value is obvious: They want to discredit the state as an instrument of popular needs without substantially weakening it. It should never be forgotten that the state is not necessarily weakened by reducing social welfare programs; it is often strengthened under the guise of introducing more efficient management practices.

For those who care about creating a democratic political life, a strong state must be rejected because the idea of a “democratic” state is a contradiction in terms. By its very nature, the state must proceed mainly by bureaucratic means; it must concentrate power at the center; it must promote elitism or government by the few; it must elevate the esoteric knowledge of experts over the experience of ordinary citizens; and it

must prefer order and stability to experiment and spontaneity. The result of state-centeredness is a politics in which at one extreme are the experts struggling to be scientific and rational while at the other is a politics of mass irrationality, of manipulated images, controlled information, single-issue fanaticism, and pervasive fear.

A democratic vision means a genuine alternative. It means the development of a politics that cannot be coopted, which is precisely what has happened to the original democratic dream of basing democracy upon voting, elections, and popular political parties. These forms, as we know from the experience of this century, can be taken over by corporate money and manipulated by the mass media. Democracy needs a noncooptable politics, that is, a politics that renders useless the forms of power developed by the modern state and business corporation. This means different actors, different scales of power, and different criteria of success.

First, democracy means participation; but participation is not primarily about "taking part," as in elections or office holding. It means originating or initiating cooperative action with others. This form of action is taking place throughout the society in response to felt needs, from health care to schools, from utility rates to housing for the poor, from nuclear energy to nuclear weapons, from toxic waste disposal to homesteading in urban areas. One of the most important aspects to these developments is that political experience is being made accessible, experience that compels individuals to deal with the complexity of interests and the conflicting claims that have hitherto been reserved to politicians and bureaucrats. In this way the political has become incorporated into the everyday lives of countless people.

Second, democracy means diffusion of power rather than centering it. Power can only be diffused if problems are defined in smaller terms. Not all problems can be, and it is not necessary to abolish the state. Yet the more that is taken on by smaller groupings, the less justification there is for central regulation and control. But power also has to be generated differently. Hitherto it has been primarily conceived in terms of federal dollars derived from taxation. Although it would be important to increase local control over fiscal resources, money is not the only form of power. Each person is potential power: He or she has skill, energy, intelligence, and a capacity for shared effort. This is not to deny the importance of material resources; it is to suggest that democracy can evoke forms of power not available to bureaucratic and centralized organizations.

A democratic political life would, I believe, set terms that would make it difficult for the corporate bureaucratic system to coopt its

activities. It would generate a politics that could not be handled by the categories that are essential to state-centered, bureaucratic, and mass-electorate politics. It would nurture a political life that would be decentered rather than centralized, pluralistic rather than hierarchical, participatory rather than managerial, egalitarian rather than efficient. It offers, I believe, the best hope for deconstructing the political economy and retrieving our birthright.

NOTES

1. See Sheldon Wolin, "Postmodern Politics and the Absence of Myth," *Social Research* 52 (Summer 1985), 217-239.
2. *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book I, x, 8.

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