

# Organizing Democracy: The Limits of Theory and Practice

LAWRENCE GOODWYN

**D**emocracy is something most people feel they can experience at close range. But, over generations, we have developed very abstract ways of talking and thinking about political experience, and these abstractions now conceal much of the social reality we believe we are talking and thinking about. These abstractions have intense emotional value for everyone throughout the world. They are, primarily, “capitalist” or “Marxist” abstractions, and people feel deeply that one or the other describes modes of behavior that are essential to the achievement of a decent social order. The “free market” and the “free market place of ideas” are as legitimizing for many millions of people as the “free society of the associated producers” and “egalitarian social relations” are for other millions. Most important of all, when we commit political error, as we seem habitually to do, our abstractions console us by reminding us that we are, despite temporary setbacks, still on the road to the good society. Modern political language is an essential part of the structure of modern morale. We therefore hang on grimly to the mental images that confine us, with the result that, though we talk about democracy all the time, we really don’t know very much about it.

Because we know so little about democracy in our own time, we do not know how to go about locating it in the human past. We thus deprive ourselves of historical examples of human striving toward what we seek. Because the

democratic heritage is so remarkably misunderstood, each new generation of incipient democrats finds itself beginning its social journey from, so to speak, square one. Our systematic and sophisticated ways of misreading our own past have led directly to the crisis of modern political immobility. We are trapped, not so much by our past failures, as by our need to justify those failures, and by an underlying need to create modes of analysis that legitimize our justifications.

It is essential to reflect upon the ways we Americans have taught ourselves to think about social and political realities, for example, the Idea of Democracy. The capitalized words reflect the intuition that democracy can be thought about and described most easily when viewed with sweep—that is, not at close range, but from afar. The result of this conceptual distancing is the production of a disembodied political language in which actual people simply disappear from view.

Without going into great detail on the subject—it having been well addressed by others—it is helpful to note that the assumptions we bring to these questions are grounded in our now largely unconscious acceptance of the idea of progress. It is the emotional engine that drives the ideological trains of modern capitalism and Marxism. Indeed, the idea of progress is now so much a part of our outlook that we underestimate how abstract the idea really is, and yet our psychological and ideological investment in it is so great that we stubbornly ignore the mounting evidence against it. We take it for granted that our political system has developed so far beyond previous American experience and understanding that we have nothing to learn from reflecting upon the past.

Given the historical evidence that human beings have accumulated, at great cost, in the twentieth century, it now seems possible to offer a direct counter-premise to the idea of progress: societies based on large-unit production have a verifiable historical tendency to become increasingly more hierarchical over time. Supporting evidence is so pervasive that this may now be taken as a law.

Unfortunately, the psychological evasions embedded in capitalist and Marxist thought have made it difficult for people to imagine what to do about their confinement within prevailing twentieth-century hierarchies. Sophisticated modes of narrowness contribute decisively to this helplessness. Consider the national economy, for example. Because economic decision making in industrial societies takes place within a presumed context of efficiency rather than one of equity, we have, relatively speaking, an efficient economic order that, by democratic standards, works very badly. While our economists debate ways to make it work more efficiently, democratic criteria are not considered germane to the discussion. Whatever the merits of the current debate between Milton Friedman and his liberal critics, the essential point is that both accept authoritarian production relations, substantial permanent unemployment, and gross permanent inequity as unavoidable components of the

American social system. That is to say, what they share is something very modern: a sophisticated capacity to use science to be resigned in the face of unpleasant historical facts.

Marxists see this ideological element in bourgeois economics, but are helpless to explain the direction taken historically by their own economic organizations. This history can be swiftly summarized: all power to the soviets of workers and peasants, became all power to the party, became all power to the central committee. The Gulags necessarily expanded, as the circle of democratic possibility contracted. The law of organizational hierarchy may be seen to be universal, encompassing rival ideologies effortlessly.

**I**t is axiomatic that human beings cannot create a society they cannot imagine. Have we imagined democracy? I would say, in broad terms, "Adequately." Have we imagined how we could achieve it? Here, I would say, "Much less than we think." It is apparent, for example, that we have conceptualized a place "where all men are created equal." We have capitalized and counterposed Liberty and Equality, conjuring up a meritocracy in an effort to bridge the rough places of conjunction. As is often told, Adam Smith and his contemporaries and disciples, concerned with the burdens of unshackling the race from the cultural confines of feudal privilege, extolled the liberating qualities of the unseen hand of the market. When, rather quickly as it turned out, the hand itself not only became visible, but was seen to promote privilege and exploitation that fashioned new forms of constraint unimagined under feudalism, another vision of a mass democracy—the exploited proletariat—came into being. Upon discovering the teeming industrial masses, we analyzed the social relations of production, and thereupon imagined a society governed by the "associated producers."

Offered as intellectual propositions, advanced in reasoned argument, and resting their moral appeal on a particularized interpretation of the idea of democracy, Marxism and liberalism both have relied on abstract descriptions of human societies that have the effect of concealing a central political fact: namely, that the role in the new order of things to be played by the democratic polity—the citizenry—was to be a minimal one. Though we have developed many ways to hide from it, the historical record of both capitalist and socialist regimes over the past two centuries has made this circumstance transparent to anyone who cares to look. Large numbers of people have been permitted and even encouraged to participate in moments of historic democratic breakthrough, but they have subsequently been excluded from shaping their own social relations in the new "democratic" society that emerged.

Consider the capitalist case. Though the classical economists and their Lockean advance men sought to hasten the passing of feudal forms by prevail-

ing in reasoned argument, in point of fact, the functionaries of the new capitalist order took power by mobilizing populations to social protest and armed combat. They decided the matter with guns. But in America, precisely who “they” were became obscured by layers of mystifying historical literature that blurred the identities of the specific historical actors engaged in bringing “freedom and democracy” to the revolutionary colonies. The result, two-hundred years after the fact, is that we are quite unclear about who made our revolution, and in behalf of what ideas, and who and what ideas were defeated in that struggle. It will require a certain measure of demystification to fix the visible connections; it is a most essential task, one that bears directly on our present circumstances.

It is first necessary to observe that Americans have been taught to understand their own founding moment as an abstract event. An abstract entity, called “the people,” made the revolution in conjunction with a second entity, called the “Founding Fathers.” We are not dealing with fine points of scholarly research; we are dealing with cultural memory—with what we “know” of the American Revolution because it was taught to us in grammar school.

The Founding Fathers, then—as memory. They include the good democratic radicals—Thomas Paine, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, as well as the good democratic conservatives—Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. Collectively, “the people” and the “Founding Fathers” orchestrated the events of the revolution: the Declaration, the Constitution, *The Federalist* papers, and an epic moment of victory at Yorktown, sometime after a winter of discontent. These jumbled images constitute the adult memory, though there are additional schoolday stories now largely forgotten—stories for the young about Nathan Hale, Paul Revere, Benedict Arnold, and Valley Forge. Considered as a whole this swirl of people and events becomes a dim, romantic blur that somehow adheres hazily to the idea of democracy.

In pursuing our assessment of democracy in the modern world, it will be necessary shortly to return to this founding moment and to this most central of American social myths, but, for the present, it is sufficient to observe that, as a cultural “truth,” we have been instructed to remember that the American revolutionaries achieved a relative unanimity among themselves, and forthwith formed “the American democracy.” (The “Tories,” of course, excluded themselves from the favored circle.) As to who made the revolution, the verdict is that everyone did. What needs to be stressed is that through this mode of political description, and through this means of creating an American memory of the nation’s primal moment, the tactical and theoretical dilemmas of how to achieve democracy never really became a central focus of debate in the mainstream of American culture. It is, after all, unnecessary to explore for answers to problems that have already been solved. How to achieve democracy is therefore not a

question modern Americans ask themselves; rather, we seek to improve the democracy we already have.

We shall return to the mystique of the bourgeois democratic revolution, but for the moment, let us briefly examine the "other" democratic revolution, the socialist one. The relevant point here, I believe, is that Marx filled the tactical lacuna of how to make a democratic society much less fully than most of his modern admirers and detractors suppose. Indeed, Marx's lack of theoretical preoccupation with the specific human process of democratic social transformation may be taken as a product of his belief in the historic inevitability of it all. The revolution of the "associated producers" would come as a "burst" that sundered the old order. As the evocative, but tactically opaque, phrase went: "The expropriators are expropriated!"

As it turned out, the bastions of capitalism, guarded by increasingly well-trained police forces and armies, did not crumble. Marx's disciples learned in Paris in the 1870s and elsewhere over the next two generations the practical limits of ideological exhortation. It was left to Lenin to provide the practical answer that has come to dominate the socialist world down to our time: a tightly organized vanguard party of dedicated professionals, trained to seize the revolution at any moment. Human actors are at least in view, though unfortunately, in rather small and highly select numbers. Be that as it may, like their capitalist predecessors, Marxists came to power and declared the result to be founded on the "real" will of the people. All subsequent construction could now proceed from a theoretically valid social base, one already in place.

The presumption that fundamental democratic preconditions have been fulfilled is thus a feature of both Marxist-Leninism and bourgeois liberalism. Therefore, there is no need to ponder how to create democratic societies, it is sufficient to generate refinements within the framework of these inherited democratic achievements.

This is where we are. We have engaged in democratic speculation, but we have essentially bypassed, as objects of theoretical and tactical discussion, the problem of how to actually construct a democratic order. We have tended to ignore the concreteness of this problem for two reasons: because of our assumption, traceable to the Idea of Progress, that we have already traveled much of the distance, and by our development of languages of political description that leave out most of the human race.

To those who do not find capitalist social relations intrinsically diminishing to the human species, adequate improvement, we are told, can be anticipated through the established mechanisms of the received political culture. Thus, we can debate whether the Democratic or Republican party is the proper mechanism of social reform, satisfying ourselves that the resulting contest is "politics." In the meantime, corporate domination of both major parties and of the polit-

ical process itself can be construed as pluralism. The corporate shape of foreign policy can be justified as a defense of freedom. Corporate domination of the range of permissible political discussion can be understood to be “balanced” by public opinion—although it is never explained how public opinion gains autonomy from the surrounding corporate culture itself. On those many occasions when proper “balance” is not forthcoming, the modern psychology of mass behavior can be invoked, and the preoccupations of the “me generation” can be lamented. The corporate invasion of the universities and of the disciplines of social and scientific inquiry can be explained as benign philanthropy, or passed over as a subject too complex for popular discussion. Corporate shaping of the frames of reference within which print and electronic journalists operate is understood to be minimized by the constitutional guarantees of the first amendment; meanwhile, sensitive reporters repress the thought that the free press they work for is not corporate-dominated, but is itself corporate.

For all those who are not persuaded by the apologetics of pluralism, there is the opposing conception of political activity as an abstractly defined kind of class struggle. Approved participants—industrial workers, certainly, and landless agricultural workers, conceivably—can be recruited to this historic task, but unsanctioned participants—the bourgeoisie, reformist workers, and entrepreneurial farmers—are to be guarded against. One is asked to understand that an elite vanguard party, subject to intermittent purges, will do the guarding. Stalinism can be grasped as a transitory aberration. Secret police and their political prisons, admittedly not so transitory, can be most easily handled by unblinking analyses of some of the activities of the CIA. The destruction of art and literature and the crushing of civil liberties can be understood as an excess of historically mandated progressive administration.

I would suggest that the 200-year history of the industrial era points rather starkly to the conclusion that though we can imagine democratic social relationships, we are baffled by the task of finding concrete ways to proceed from where we are to where we wish to be. Mainstream bourgeois and Marxist theories endure essentially as religious faiths, to tide us over our bafflement. The contradictions embedded in each would surface for all to see if the mass of people—in the flesh rather than abstractly—were vital to either. Rhetorical habits, long ingrained, obscure the antidemocratic features of both traditions.

**L**et us turn, then, to this question of what can be done. And let us recognize at the outset that it was specifically Lenin’s question, addressed in a work entitled, appropriately enough, *What Is to Be Done?* We have been living with his answer ever since. Indeed, Lenin’s vanguard formula, both for those who approve of it and those who are appalled by it, has taken up a great deal of space in

our imagination. So much so, in fact, that, in one decisive sense, twentieth-century people have been forced to participate in what can be taken as a Leninist approach to politics and society. In this one sense, capitalist and socialist architects have managed to create a worldwide Leninist paradigm, and now argue with each other within its framework. The one seminal feature of this shared approach is impatience with mass human performance. It is the absolute precondition for the intellectual justification of rule by experts.

The starting point for democratic theory turns on the relationship of ends and means: it is unreasonable to expect a revolutionary regime in power to behave in ways that are more democratic than the theories of politics, and the social relations, generated within the insurgent movement that brought that regime to power. Authoritarian elements that emerge within the ruling institutions of a regime are the empowered forms of similar ingredients present in the earlier insurgent movement that created that regime. I know of no exceptions in human history to this causal relationship.

The implications of this premise are large. In excluding the population from decision making, the Leninist approach reveals itself as inherently authoritarian in its very formulation. For reasons having to do with the historical association of capitalism with liberalism, the elite formations of capitalism have had to function under nominally democratic ground rules. Accordingly, the corporate hierarchy is impelled by self-interest to depoliticize the electorate, to block it off from effective access to decision making, to purchase the party system, to exploit while weakening the parliamentary process, and, eventually, to sponsor the creation and sanctioning of cultural norms that legitimate the achieved procedures as "democratic." All of these things have long since transpired in America.

The only democratic counterforce to vanguard politics or to corporate politics is a politically democratic presence in society—that is, some kind of empowered, and democratic, polity. Such an organized democratic presence is quite literally the most fundamental threat conceivable to the continuing dominance of corporate or vanguard elites. The historical evidence is conclusive that both will, when confronted with even the apparent beginnings of an autonomous democratic presence, move promptly to destroy it, divert it, buy it, or try in any way to gain effective control over it.

For democratic social relations to materialize—that is, to materialize among human beings rather than as a theoretical abstraction—these relations must develop first within a group of associated people. This incipient "movement" must grow into a mass movement—to the point that it eventually achieves state power. Internal democratic social relations must be maintained in the process, must literally exist as a cultural form that spreads as the movement expands. This, then, is the relevant circumference of modern politics.

It may be noted at the outset that the creation of mass democratic move-

ments as the essential prerequisite to the creation of mass democratic societies was not a Marxist preoccupation, nor a Leninist one, nor within the interests of the classical economists. The matter was not central to the politics of the American Revolution, though people like Daniel Shays in Massachusetts, and the Regulators in North Carolina, acted as if they thought it were. Similarly, no theory of mass democratic movement-building undergirded the French Revolution, the failed bourgeois revolutions of 1848 in Europe, or the construction of the major working-class institutions that subsequently materialized in western Europe and the United States. There were individual persons, and even groups of persons, participating in a number of these historical moments who nursed certain highly relevant democratic intentions, but the movements themselves proceeded from other conceptual principles of organization and function. Some of them contained elements of a popular base, sometimes substantial elements, but they simply were not conceptualized as, and did not function as, mass democratic structures.

The heritage of democratic movement-building is quite meager.

**T**he initial task of persuasion, then, is to gain agreement that the sole relevant form of democratic politics is to create and maintain mass democratic structures that can bring an authentic democratic presence to bear on the hierarchical political inheritance.

So tentative is our grasp of mass democratic movement-building that we have little experiential knowledge to bring to bear on a whole host of practical questions. What is a democratic movement, how is one built, how is it preserved against its myriad opponents, and, above all, how does it maintain its egalitarian momentum as it struggles to bring into being an authentic democratic culture?

If one thing is clear after two centuries of industrial politics, it is that mass democratic movements happen only when specific instruments of recruitment are fashioned. The stages of development, both in numbers of recruits and the level of political consciousness the recruits attain, unfold slowly, which is why the building of democratic movements requires patience above all.

Here we have come upon a cornerstone of democratic theory. Human beings organized into a democratic movement, and striving cooperatively to challenge one or more unjust features of the received hierarchical order, discover in the ensuing struggle a number of exploitative qualities about that hierarchy that they did not previously grasp. This discovery is a collective experience of the movement's participants, a shared heightening of political consciousness that, in setting them off from their nonmovement fellow citizens in the larger society, alters (by emotionally improving) their interior social relations within



the movement. This is to say merely that they perceive more clearly their collective—and now overtly political—relationship to the existing social order that confines them.

What is being described is a public coalescing of a certain kind of positive human energy, a development that encourages individual hope and facilitates collective striving. This shared perception of social possibility among many people, one that is a product of a shared experience within a voluntary and cooperative effort, may be characterized as the way we are when we are at our best, when we have hope, when we have attained a modicum of self-respect, and have a vision of even greater self-respect. It is a sense of possibility that occurs when people have been encouraged by their own initial experience in collective effort, and by the corroborating and enhancing knowledge that one is not alone, that many others are sharing in the same transforming sense of political possibility. At such moments in human history, things can happen. We are dealing here with mass democratic empowerment. Specifically, we are dealing concretely with some of the ingredients of cultural transformation, and with some of the prerequisites to the achievement of a democratic social environment.

There are other stages in this sequential evolution of a democratic movement culture, as well as gradations of sentimentalism and/or *Realpolitik* within each stage, but the development itself requires more precise definition of its components. The process of constructing a democracy can perhaps most easily be conveyed by recourse to a metaphor. An appropriate one is hard to formulate. In one sense, the process can be likened to a tall ladder, a very tall ladder, that has to be constructed by those attempting to climb it. The rungs of the ladder can be understood symbolically as sequential levels of popular awareness of "what is to be done." The ladder is not prefabricated; the rungs are not in place at the start of construction. If this is to be a democratic building project, the rungs have to be grasped by the carpenters; their functions must be understood, and they must then be set in place by the people who intend to use them. "Scientific" abstractions aside, "consciousness" is something that develops in human beings one step at a time. The ladder must be ascended, then, one step at a time. Patiently. One cannot construct what one cannot imagine.

Movements can fail because their organizers ask too much of them too soon, as happens when highly conscious theorists, standing on, say, rung 25 in their awareness of the authoritarian culture of the modern world, ask the movement's people, located around the vicinity of rung 10, to proceed forthwith to rung 26. "Vanguard" theorists have a habit of doing this. Indeed, the error is built into the vanguard theory itself. Bold leaps forward—and especially "great leaps forward"—are almost always fatal; if the movement's spokesmen themselves do not misstep and fall to the ground, most of the rank-and-file certainly

will. To reach this conclusion is not to be condescending toward the general populace, but rather to engage in a democratic acceptance of the integrity of abused people in being where they are. This is democratic patience.

Movements can also fail because their spokesmen decide—in order, for example, to settle a strike or to prevail at the next election—to ask the rank-and-file to descend below levels already attained. The American political system routinely functions this way. These retreats from levels only reached arduously are almost always destructive to mass morale, and morale is an absolutely essential component of the social energy that fuels democratic (i.e., voluntary) movements.

These sundry requirements are patently unfair, it would seem. Movements must develop neither too rapidly, nor too slowly, their elected spokesmen must neither lead too zealously nor ever stop to rest, and rung placement and rung climbing must be steady and relentless, lest the oncoming mass of would-be carpenters ceases to grow in political consciousness beyond the prevailing level of social awareness they brought with them originally. To say the least, this litany of performance asks a great deal of mere mortals—of theorists, strategists, tacticians and humanity generally. Clearly too much! Far simpler to conceptualize a vanguard party, or an invisible hand guiding a rational market.

Precisely. The difficulty of the task helps explain why it has yet to happen in human history. Upon closer examination, the metaphor of the ladder, while providing a measure of clarity about the sequential dynamics of democratic social construction, is too mechanistic to convey the experimental quality of building mass movements and of political consciousness as an aspect of human intelligence. In the most practical terms, what we are dealing with here is human perception of social possibility, as distinct from simple perceptions of justice. Unjust social conditions have existed throughout history and masses of people have been quite adequately aware of their own victimization—indeed, to an extent that only the most alert elites have even suspected. But “awareness” is a passive condition, one necessary as a precursor to democratic activity, but not one inherently active in itself. In consequence, victimized people have suffered silently throughout history—grudgingly, resignedly, perhaps deferentially, perhaps cynically, but, in whatever style, in a state of political acceptance rather than one of active insurgency. Established regimes invest a great deal of energy in encouraging this passivity, by instructing the lower orders in deference, by intimidating them with police and prisons, and, most effectively of all, by developing cultural norms that make mass democratic experience difficult for the citizenry to imagine.

How, then, is it possible to overcome this multiplicity of inherited social forms? To begin the process, the first requirement is the achievement of a certain measure of individual self-respect: the simple ability to say “no” to one or more

forms of the received culture and to propose an alternative. Individuals who achieve this capability not only are the ones who initiate political movements, they transparently are the only people who can. Throughout history, their shared problem has been one of recruitment. Their task demands that they find a way to instill mass hope where weariness lives, to generate self-respect where deference reigns, to stimulate conscious action where resignation prevails. The problems of recruitment, practical as well as theoretical, are enormous; it is sufficient for our purposes to note that the entire subject has received much less attention than we assume it has and, as a result, we know far less about it than we think we do. A number of rather simplistic assumptions conceal our ignorance, or our faith. People are presumed to rise in insurgency "when times are hard," and badly isolated vanguard functionaries are consoled by the knowledge that their moment will come "when the people rise." What speculative literature we have on the subject is riddled with quasi-religious tautologies of this kind. Unfortunately, for most human beings over the centuries, times have routinely been "hard," but this circumstance has been insufficient, in itself, to generate mass efforts for social change.

Perhaps the most enduring misapprehension among activist-intellectuals is that people cannot be expected to act "intelligently" until after they have achieved a proper level of "ideological consciousness." Under this prescription, political "organizing" is preceived to be essentially a matter of tutorial education. "The masses," or at least literate sectors, can be induced to read approved works. For the more energetic, the "propaganda of the deed" offers activists a means of teaching through spectacular public acts of display or terrorism. Such endeavors are presumed to help engender in the observing populace the level of consciousness that then, and only then, permits "real mass organizing" to begin.

As an aspect of political science, "recruitment" thus comes down to us in our time as a topic that is imbued with the essential qualities of pregnancy: the citizenry either is, or is not, capable of being fertilized, and genuine political life begins only after an embryo has consciously, very consciously, "seen" the light of day. Since most people have not "seen" it, movements are hopeless, or, at best, almost hopeless. Our penchant for viewing human society in this way accounts in part for the widespread political resignation that is such a notable feature of contemporary life in America.

Mass democratic recruitment manifestly is no simple task, but it is not beyond human achievement. Rather, such historical evidence as we have indicates that movements begin when unresigned and self-respecting activists find a way to connect with people *as they are in society*, that is to say, in a state that sophisticated modern observers are inclined to regard as one of "inadequate consciousness."

Since humanity is routinely in a state of political longing, and thus in a state

of incipient insurgency, human beings are forever starting local movements of one kind or another. But since they necessarily function under the sundry constraints I have outlined, they clearly need some sort of early institutional success. If movements do not achieve it, as most do not, they die. In historical terms, most incipient movements collapse in such early obscurity that subsequent generations of observers are unaware that they ever existed.

**T**here are three important moments of democratic movement-building in American history that provide concrete guidance about the process itself. They are the Massachusetts "Regulation" during the American Revolution, the Populist rural mobilization of the 1880s and 1890s, and the sit-down strikes of the 1930s that led to the partial organization of the industrial working class. We shall examine the earliest of these shortly. The other two can be briefly examined as a unit, for they shared a common characteristic—a searing collective experience that heightened the consciousness of the participants. For the Populists, mass recruitment was made possible by the development of a plan of cooperative marketing and purchasing. Unpoliticized farmers were recruited to the basic Populist institution—the National Farmers Alliance—because these recruits wished to participate in the Alliance cooperative. The subsequent *experience* of these farmers, as they labored to make their co-ops functional in the face of implacable banker, railroad, and merchant opposition, had a transforming political impact upon them. They learned to perceive the coercive elements of commercial exchange embedded in the structure of the emerging corporate system. This insight in itself did not insure political insurgency—the Alliance was not structurally geared for insurgent politics—but the experience did bring the farmers to a level of consciousness that facilitated the creation of a new democratic political institution, the People's Party. The "Agrarian Revolt" in America was a sequential process that began when ordinary people, their traditional political beliefs intact, were recruited to a collective effort. Subsequent successes in their cooperatives helped engender a collective self-confidence that overcame inherited patterns of deference and resignation. Many things were possible after that stage was reached.

Meanwhile, efforts to organize the urban work force foundered for over a half century following industrialization in America. Workers repeatedly organized themselves to form unions, but continually lost the pivotal recognition strikes that would have insured a continuing institutional shelter for their collective efforts. The problem was a tactical one, namely the ability of corporate managers, supported by court injunctions, the National Guard, and the Pinkertons to immobilize the picket line and hire strikebreakers. Not much could subsequently be done to heighten political consciousness among the workers when

they did not have an institutional forum of their own. The story of the organization of the sit-down strike at the huge General Motors facility at Flint, Michigan in 1936—a story that is too complex to relate here—is, like the Populist experience, one that is grounded in the achievement of sequential levels of both organizational development and a corresponding development of rank-and-file consciousness. Here, too, the dynamics of democratic political development describe a sequential process of movement-building.

With this perspective as a guide, let us take a closer look at the third (and earliest) of these three movements, the Massachusetts “Regulation.” It came at the nation’s primal moment, when the American political ethos was originally being shaped during the revolutionary struggle. One caveat: viewing “history” or “politics” through the window of democratic social construction changes all that one sees; it alters our understanding of democratic striving in human history. Among others, the “Founding Fathers” will not look the same.

Adopting the democratic perspective, let us look at the formative moment in the early republic when “Shays’s Rebellion” erupted.

We might begin by training our democratic lens upon that symbol of revolutionary ardor, Samuel Adams. To a royal governor such as Thomas Hutchinson, Sam Adams had seemed on the eve of the revolution to be an insufferable “incendiary,” bent upon manipulating “the lower part of the people” into a political “mob.” Things had reached such a state that the common people were no longer even being respectful of their betters on the streets of Boston. “It is,” sighed the outraged and depressed Hutchinson, “more than I can bear.” When revolutions are successful, officious agitators like Samuel Adams naturally gain considerably in stature; after the war, he became one of those to be courted by the new democratic Commonwealth of Massachusetts. And courted he was—by the new merchant aristocracy that took effective control of state affairs. Rather quickly, for a firebrand, Adams became deeply concerned about what he called “the dignity of government.”

Let us inspect the new environment in which Samuel Adams moved. The merchant peers were able to flourish, despite the self-serving and highly exploitative monetary and taxation system they created—systems that promptly plunged large sectors of the state’s farming population into crippling debt. The seaboard merchants, who had taken pains to become holders of virtually all the massively depreciated wartime bonds extant, wanted this near worthless “continental paper” redeemed at par. They initiated a combined financial system of high taxes and tight money that wrecked the agricultural economy, opened up promising opportunities for land speculation, and gained them windfall profits. The tax burden, payable only in specie, was steeply regressive. It fell very heavily upon farmers, only lightly upon holders of stocks and bonds. Foreclosed farmsteads, brokered for taxes at sheriffs’ auctions, were soon available to specula-

tors at one-third to one-tenth value. The principal instruments of enforcement of the new financial system were cooperating judges who foreclosed farms and ordered farmers to jail for what today would be considered trifling debts. Indeed, with money so scarce it had almost disappeared from circulation in the agricultural districts, court actions for debt reached astonishing proportions. In some rural counties, as many as 800 farmers were haled before magistrates—a total that represented heads of households of a majority of the agricultural population! Throughout the period of enforcement, merchants held tightly to their wartime bonds in anticipation of handsome profits.

Needless to say, the full dimensions of the emerging economic power relationships provided a somewhat different perspective on the new democracy than most of the farmers had anticipated when they marched in the revolutionary armies. Some debtors drew the economic connections and indignantly pointed out that the oppressions of the newly arrived merchant commonwealth far exceeded those of the departed royal colony.

So began, with impressive democratic patience, considering the circumstances, the series of escalating agrarian political actions aimed at merchants and their judicial allies that became known as the “Regulation.”

Mass democratic organization began in the countryside. As dockets burgeoned with debt litigation and foreclosures, crowds of cooperating farmers, bearing agreed-upon agendas for political action, began descending on court sessions; their massed presence caught the judges’ attention and slowed the legal machinery considerably. Meanwhile, agrarian mass meetings of organized Regulators not only condemned the tax and currency procedures, but proposed a wholesale democratic restructuring of both. When the legislature continued to balk, the chorus of dissent grew louder, the organizational and communication network expanded, and the movement grew. In the process, it seems that Massachusetts farmers became remarkably well informed. They fashioned their own internal network of communications, and they were able to see through, and ignore, much unsolicited advice that emanated from the commercial press of Massachusetts. Let us take note of this: masses of people had constructed their own autonomous sources of information and were acting politically on the basis of their own conclusions. Self-evidently, central ingredients of a democratic society had appeared in the new nation.

Let us now endeavor to place Samuel Adams within this expanding dynamic of a developing democratic culture. His response to the upsurge of popular energy among Massachusetts people revealed the transformation of his prerevolutionary outlook caused by his associations with the world of Boston commerce. To Adams, the farmers of the Regulation appeared “to view themselves as [of] equal if not better standing than the legislature.” But when this assessment failed to instruct the agrarian upstarts, Adams reached a conclusion

that involved a fine democratic distinction: "In monarchy the crime of treason may admit of being pardoned, or lightly punished, but the man who dares rebel against the laws of the republic ought to suffer death." Samuel Adams was a revolutionary, but it is clear that he had only a truncated understanding of a democratic society and how to achieve one.

The Regulation had brought the very economic ground rules of the new society under democratic review. In question was the range of permissible modes of fortune seeking—that is, at issue were the prerogatives of commercial elites in harnessing governmental tax and monetary authorities to private, exploitative, and transparently undemocratic purposes. Too much popular democracy patently limited merchant-inspired attempts to sanction these new departures. Given the stakes involved, it is understandable that the Massachusetts legislature, despite enormous popular pressure, should have rejected Regulator proposals for monetary and tax reform.

By the end of 1786, the organized farmers faced stark choices. As they saw the options, democratic relief having been foreclosed, they could disband, or they could mobilize a rising. Since the issues for them—the preservation of their homes and livelihoods—were fundamental, it is not surprising that they chose the latter course. They reorganized the movement into regiments, and moved to take state power. But their attack on the Springfield armory to acquire necessary weapons failed, and the Regulation was thereupon crushed.

Impressive numbers of Massachusetts farmers in due course were sent to debtors' prison. The new financial relationships having been both installed and consolidated, there quickly ensued in Massachusetts what in later terminology would be called a "substantial capital readjustment." A number of merchants and merchant bankers got richer at the expense of a much larger number of farmers who got poorer.

The dynamics of English mercantilism had ceased to inform the economy of the state; the dynamics of American capitalism had begun. A certain kind of world view about politics and social relations had found an institutional focus. It was a demonstrably new and antiroyalist framework. But it was not a democratic one.

Indeed, it is sobering and even diminishing to learn of the public humiliation that was demanded of Daniel Shays and his associate, Eli Parsons, as the price of the official pardon that would permit them to return from Canadian exile. They were admonished to affirm, and to have recorded in their petition, that: "They will never cease to remember and regret their not having trusted for relief of the wisdom and integrity of the ruling power." Shays eventually got his pardon, but neither he, nor the rest of the farmers, got "relief." Indeed, Shays eventually joined many of his fellow agriculturalists in debtors' prison.

For his part, Samuel Adams, having established his usefulness and credi-

bility within the aggressive new commercial hierarchy of Massachusetts, went on to become governor of the Commonwealth. There, he presided over the newly established social relationships of the citizenry, and did nothing further to tarnish his prewar credentials. He thereby assured for himself a secure place in history alongside his somewhat less adaptable comrade, Thomas Paine, within the pantheon of radical democrats among the Founding Fathers.

A century after the Regulation, similar circumstances (bondholder domination of the monetary system) would produce a similar commercial objective (projected windfall profits on depreciated Civil War paper) that, in turn, would generate a similar financial policy (an artificially contracted currency) and similar social results: the immiseration of the agricultural population and a financial bonanza for bondholders. The same dynamics that inspired the Regulation in the eighteenth century thus underlay the Populist uprising of the nineteenth century. Merchant bankers, in power before, during, and after the Regulation, remained in power before, during, and after Populism. It is instructive to observe that an inherently exploitative system of exchange in America (as polished into final form with the creation of the Federal Reserve System in 1913) has persisted uninterruptedly throughout the twentieth century. However, the modern victims, the American people, who are forced to purchase homes, automobiles, and other goods under undemocratic and highly usurious credit procedures, have been socialized into such an ethos of mass deference that they no longer contest the matter, as their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors did. This is so despite the fact that millions of working Americans, who could enjoy the dignity of owning their own homes under ground rules of a democratic system of money and credit, are forced under the prevailing system to spend their lifetimes as transient renters. The relevant long-term development is that the American people understandably no longer even comprehend the financial formulas that ensnare them, since such matters are no longer on the agenda of national political discussion. Along the pathways of industrial progress, a popular democratic sense of self—never victorious but also never expunged—has been slowly eroding under persistent attack within American culture. It is certainly not an irreversible trend, but it does not help matters to pretend it does not exist.

The interplay of history and political culture is clear here—for “culture” is the name we give to conduct predicated upon sanctioned memory. If the farmers of Massachusetts were in fact proceeding politically from democratic assumptions, which they were, and if they had in fact organized themselves into an energetic democratic movement of Massachusetts people, which they had, our way of viewing them, and Samuel Adams, and the national history as a whole, suddenly appears profoundly skewed. Despite some impressive exceptions, the academic rendition of American history cannot in general be said to constitute a democratic literature. It is an aggregate literature that catalogues and interprets



two centuries of rule by a financial and commercial elite and characterizes the result as "popular government." As one of the many, many political consequences of this historical literature, the full dimension of the constitutional crisis in the new nation, and the profound implications of the democratic issues that generated the crisis, echo unheard down to our own time. At the decisive formative moment for the new society, a number of democratic values suffered an enormous defeat.

The immediate consequence was structural. So shaken were the colonial commercial classes, not only by the Regulation but by the questions of democratic prerogative and commercial privilege that the Regulation called into debate, that the events of 1786-87 had an absolutely galvanizing political effect. It extended beyond Boston merchants and their counterparts in New York and Pennsylvania to George Washington, James Madison, and the Southern gentry generally.

Anticipating Lenin by 120 years, they decided, in the name of their own understanding of political values, that the democratic polity could not be trusted. They forthwith set aside regional differences and moved to replace the Articles of Confederation with a new code that provided for more effective insulation against an excess of popular aspiration. Amid specific warnings that popular "regulations" had to be prevented, they enshrined their efforts in the new federal Constitution. It was offered for ratification even as debt imprisonments and foreclosures of the Regulators were proceeding. It was in such a political context that the specific structure of commercial politics in America was set into place—where it has, no doubt needless to add, since remained. In finding a way to inhibit popular democracy, the eighteenth-century revolution completed itself. The persons who gathered at Philadelphia and drafted the Constitution thus joined, as Founding Fathers, their countrymen who had signed the Declaration of Independence a decade earlier. In the generated consciousness of hundreds of millions of Americans then unborn, they would all be remembered, in blurred harmony, as "revolutionaries" and "democrats."\*

\*Charles Beard, Merrill Jensen, and Jackson T. Main are among the most prominent of three generations of American historians who have attempted to come to grips with the implications of the thwarted popular democratic thrust of the revolutionary period. Beard went so far as to portray the Constitutional Convention of 1787 as a counter-revolution.

These studies, and those of rival interpretive schools, have unfortunately covered too narrow a time span to illuminate the social forces engaged in the struggle or the size of the stakes involved. The era of contention in which the ground-rules for American governance were shaped extended over a quarter of a century, ending in 1789. The debate was not over property rights *per se*, but turned, rather, on the ability of popular majorities to constrain merchant-banker efforts to fashion, in the latter's own self-interest, undemocratic structures of monetary and taxation policy. The multiple popular "regulations," which first burst into prominence in the Southern Colonies in the mid-1760s, ended with the Massachusetts upheaval of 1786-87. The latter can best be under-

**T**hough democratic movements, when closely viewed, force established hierarchies to reveal themselves, they offer even more useful instruction about democratic politics as a continuing historical process. In this latter sense, the Massachusetts agrarian democrats speak more directly to the twentieth century than they did to the elites of the 1780s who defeated them. We merely have to ask the right questions.

How did New England farmers achieve the organizational feat of “the regulation”—a task that intimidates us in our own time? And where, in terms of democratic movement-building, did they fail? And what can be learned from other such experiences—from the efforts for land reform by black advocates during Reconstruction in the post-Civil War South, from the Populist moment in the 1890s, from the Debsian socialists, from the evolution of the CIO in the 1930s and 1940s, from the variegated politics of the 1960s? I am not here trying to evoke some mystical progressive past. I am suggesting that we don’t understand these historical moments in democratic terms because we ask the wrong questions of them and, given our modern penchant for sophisticated abstractions, we often tend to understand them so quickly that we scarcely ask any questions at all. Could it be possible—the Idea of Progress to the contrary notwithstanding—that we know less about these central matters of democratic politics than some of our earnestly striving and self-respecting predecessors? Indeed, is it possible that if we historically consult past defeated democrats, we might learn enough to feel less naked before the corporate monolith?

To extend these historical analogies to the present, can we profitably criticize the fledgling efforts toward contemporary movement-building in America? To name some: the spreading local-level cooperative movements now numbering over a million participants; the proliferating neighborhood “citizen action” movement, which now reaches into every state in the nation and has generated some statewide and even regional organizational structures; the various antinuclear mobilizations; and the fragile reality of the Citizens Party in national politics. An analysis of the interior life of these multiple and uncoordinated efforts would seem to offer an applicable test of the democratic criteria I have outlined—modes of recruitment, attempts at long-term consciousness raising, the presence or absence of interior democratic social relations, and ideological patience. Collectively, these efforts represent the democratic *Realpolitik* developed in the 1970s that materialized outside the sustained consciousness of both the national media and the academic community. They reveal that intensive, if fragile, experimentation in movement-building is proceeding in America.

---

stood as the volatile climax of a long struggle, not the essence of that struggle. Nor can it properly be seen as some sort of regional aberration. From beginning to end the issue was fundamental: the extent of permissible popular governance.

But here, too, we will have to learn to ask the right questions. That we are not yet close is evidenced by the level of commentary that accompanied the maiden voyage of the Citizens Party. The new third party was dismissed by some observers during the campaign for alternatively being "invisible," or "too radical," and condescended to by others for presenting a "minimalist" program inadequate to the contemporary crisis.

**W**hat is to be done? A necessary starting point would seem to be to re-think what democratic politics actually embraces. To do this, we shall have to develop democratic terminology beyond that promulgated by Adam Smith, Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, and John Maynard Keynes if we are to impart understandable social meaning to clear democratic criteria. This done, we shall have to experiment in democratic movement-building and generate some practical experience in answering the difficult questions about recruitment that heretofore have defeated us.

The questions of democratic recruitment are more numerous than we have been encouraged to imagine: how narrow can an appeal be before it is decisively narrow, before it works against the possibility of reaching a broad democratic spectrum? And how broad before it is so sweeping that it soars irrecoverably beyond prevailing cultural assumptions? In contemporary America, the first question can be asked of the antinuclear movement; the second, to those wishing ritually to advocate the social ownership of the means of production. In either case, to ask the question is not to imply a negative answer; it is merely to insist that the question, offered in the explicit context of movement-building, is essential if we are to raise beyond currently primitive levels the contemporary discourse about democratic politics.

These are the difficult questions at the heart of the democratic quest. I would suggest that usable answers depend upon the adoption, at the very least, of one specific theoretical premise: our maxims of democratic procedure must be grounded upon an acceptance of human consciousness where it is, a willingness to address people in society as it appears around us. Though conservatives and radicals can readily agree that this level of consciousness has historically been "inadequate," the remedies that have emerged from the mainstreams of these traditions have the effect of precluding democratic development. The conservative solution, rule by a more or less enlightened commercial elite, is undemocratic in its very premises, as is the Leninist formulation of an ideological elite. Another tradition, which may be loosely described as social democratic, has relied heavily on the transforming potential of impoverished working classes. After all the holocaust of the twentieth century, it should by now be clear

that whatever transforming potential is assigned to the working class, we cannot conceptualize "the social question" in terms of dehumanized "others" who can be treated as historically endowed abstractions and counted upon to act politically in certain preconceived and heroic ways. The tragedies daily assaulting working people in America and around the world continue to constitute, as they have for generations, a political and social priority of the first magnitude; but most abstractions about "the working class," including the patronizing ones that are currently fashionable in many professional circles, can be characterized as ranging from complacent and callous condescension to expressions of passionate religious belief. Granting all exceptions, what most of these diverse and generalized descriptions have in common is a shared distance from working people.

After two centuries of desperate thinking about our common plight as a "lonely crowd" in an industrial world, it should now be clear to all that the abstractions of modern politics have simply been overwhelmed by the events of history itself. The mass of humanity cannot imagine generously or coherently within them.

We begin with this understanding. How far we proceed depends upon our ability to develop democratic terminology and modes of discourse of sufficient clarity and sufficient civility to permit ourselves to hear one another.

What we know—the intellectual content of modern sophistication—is a cover for modern resignation in the face of overwhelming centralized power. Most people on the planet, less sophisticated than the commercial and intellectual mandarins of this technologically drunken age, are also less resigned. We are blessed that they are.