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What Is to Be Done?

...be on the watch.
there are ways out.
there is a light somewhere.
it may not be much light but
it beats the
darkness.
be on the watch.
the gods will offer you
chances.
know them, take them...
the more often you
learn to do it,
the more light there will
be...
you are marvelous.
the gods wait to delight
in
you.

—“The Laughing Heart,”
Charles Bukowski (1993)¹

In *The Politics*, Aristotle describes how oligarchies fall and give way to democracies: “by concentrating power into ever fewer hands, because of a shameful desire for profit, [the oligarchs] made the multitude stronger,

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with the result that it revolted and democracies arose” (Aristotle, 1998b, p. 1286b). As we stagger through the flotsam of the financial crisis and the preposterous proposal of “austerity” as a solution, it is not hard to see ourselves in the first part of Aristotle’s account. But in this book, I want to focus on the second part, the part where he suggests that oligarchies tend to “make the multitude stronger,” that they awaken and activate a popular power that rises up and expresses its desire for democracy.

Aristotle also reminds us that, in a sense, political questions are always very old ones. He advises that we should “take it, indeed, that pretty well everything...has been discovered many times...in the long course of history....Therefore, one should make adequate use of what has been discovered, but also try to investigate whatever has been overlooked” (Aristotle, 1998b, p. 1329b). Nietzsche displays a similar kind of humility in the face of the long history of political thought, arguing that ideas

grow up in connection in relationship with each other.... However suddenly and arbitrarily they seem to appear in the history of thought, they [are] nevertheless...far less a discovery than a recognition, of remembering, a return and a homecoming to a remote, primordial, and inclusive household of the soul, out of which those concepts grew originally: philosophizing is to this extent a kind of atavism of the highest order (Nietzsche, 1989a, p. 27).

So asking the question “What is to be done?” is always an atavistic enterprise in a way, a kind of mining of past political action and thought. It is Lenin’s old question, but it is no less the question Plato and Aristotle were asking, writing as they were in the wake of the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War and living under a pervasive sense that their society was crumbling. Marx was asking the question too, and Lenin, and Gramsci. In the poem that opens the chapter, Bukowski is also searching for an answer, as are we today. And so in taking up the question of what is to be done, I try to be very much aware of this history, of what has already been discovered, and I try to make adequate use of it. I mine the work of thinkers like Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari, Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci, and others, trying to learn what they have to teach us. At the same time, I do not mean only to retrace the steps of others. I intend to use the political wisdom of the past to cut a path toward a possible future, toward a political community we have not yet realized.

My answer to Lenin’s question of “What is to be done?” is: *democracy*. Less concisely, what is to be done, what we all must do together, is to engage in a collective and perpetual struggle to democratize our society and to manage our affairs for ourselves. I do not propose democracy as

the Platonic Form of the good community. It is not some end of history we should expect to reach. Rather, my argument is more restrained: perpetual democratization is the best way forward in the current context and for the foreseeable future. What we need in our time is to move politically from oligarchy to democracy, from passivity to activity, and from heteronomy to autonomy.

The Current Context

To understand what it would mean to democratize society in the current context, it helps to have some sense of what that context is. Over the course of the last seventy-five years or so, capitalist social relations of production were extended (if incompletely) to almost all parts of the globe; the dominance of Keynesian and social-democratic thinking was replaced by a neoliberal common sense; attempts to establish a state-socialist alternative to capitalism collapsed in utter failure; the world's population has not only grown rapidly but become predominantly urban; geopolitics moved from the Cold War to a "war on terror" to the current post-terror landscape; and the environment (both the global climate and localized disasters) came to be seen as a central political question at all scales. Like all periods, the current era has also been greatly shaped by recurrent manifestations of popular power, in the form of both intense eruptions and everyday struggles by people to collectively liberate themselves from the various structures that contain them.

Political economy

The recent processes of globalization, through which capitalist production spread to incorporate almost every part of the globe, have been so extremely well documented that I think recounting them at length here is unnecessary (e.g. Dicken, 1998; Brenner and Theodore, 2003; Harvey, 2005). I will therefore offer only a brief review. Although capitalism has been extending itself geographically since its inception, the globalization processes of the twentieth century have greatly speeded up the process by which the entire globe is being integrated into a single capitalist economic machine. How we orient ourselves to this machine is a central political, economic, and cultural question in the current context. State socialism, of the kind that came to power in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China, among other places, represents a state-led attempt to create a non-capitalist alternative. While these regimes often call themselves communist, they are all more properly socialist societies managed

by the state. Another option, what we might call a welfare-state approach, has been to accept capitalism but use the state to actively manage it with an eye toward stability and material redistribution for social justice. Keynesianism and social democracy are the leading models associated with this second option. A third option, generally known as neoliberalism, wants to unleash the capitalist market by reducing the size of the state and its ability to regulate the economy. I argue that each of these options, in its own way, is nothing other than a form of oligarchy. None offers a properly *democratic* response to the question of what is to be done.

The modern welfare-state model was born in the wake of the Great Depression. It typically followed a national-Keynesian approach to economic policy, which is to say it favored a very strong and active central government that carved out an expansive public sphere: strong state authority and generous provision of public goods and services. It was a model in which the state (usually a liberal-democratic one) acted as the primary representative of the public. This association became so ingrained in the culture as to make the state virtually synonymous with the public or the people. In this role as public, the state closely regulated industries and managed the macro economy. It also standardized currencies and ensured relative monetary stability. Government spending was seen as a primary economic variable, a linchpin for ensuring economic growth. Large government bureaucracies were required to carry out this economic management. They employed many people, generally with good wages and benefits. Labor organization was typically strong, and governments participated centrally in creating broad accords between capital and labor that usually secured high wages and good job security for workers. Beyond those accords, government policies tended to favor material redistribution to the less wealthy. Such policies included national social security, high minimum wages, subsidized health care, and the like. In addition, high tax rates enabled governments to provide well-funded and high-quality infrastructure such as public schools and universities, child care, hospitals and clinics, libraries, parks, public transportation, and so on. In the more fully social-democratic regimes, most of which were in Europe, it was common for the state to assume even greater economic control by owning certain enterprises and even monopolizing entire economic sectors like natural resources, telecommunications, or transportation.

Clearly there is a spectrum of possible policy actions within the welfare-state model, and particular policy combinations vary by place and time. However, for the purposes of this brief account, in broad outline what all such regimes share is a commitment to a large and interventionist state that acts on behalf of citizens, usually to create social

policies whose goal is some amount of material redistribution for greater equality. The welfare-state model thus occupies the broad middle between the hard-left alternative of state socialism and neoliberalism's free-market fundamentalism. It insists that a liberal-democratic state can and should play a large role in regulating capitalist economic activity so that we can have a stable, prosperous, and incrementally more equal society.

During roughly the same period that the welfare state was the dominant model in the capitalist world, a number of revolutions across the globe created an archipelago of state-socialist regimes that offered a stark alternative to capitalism. The Russian Revolution of 1917 created the Soviet Union, and after World War II Soviet insistence helped install state-socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Relatively more independent revolutions in Yugoslavia and Cuba produced state socialism there. The Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 initiated state socialism in the East Asian sphere, and it spread to places like Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Mongolia. As with the welfare state, state socialism varied in its particulars. In basic outline, it took its agenda from the *Communist Manifesto*, which called for workers' parties to seize the state and use its power to expropriate from the bourgeoisie the privately owned means of production. Such collectivization or nationalization was designed to abolish private property and classes, and thus end capitalist relations of production. The idea was that this socialist phase led by a one-party state would be temporary; once classes were abolished, the state would no longer be necessary, since its purpose was to manage the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The state would wither away in due course and lead to a self-managed and egalitarian communist society. Of course, this transition from state-led socialism to stateless communism did not occur in actual practice. In fact, the opposite tended to happen: as the state bureaucracy took over control of the means of production, it became the new ruling class and ruthlessly intensified the power and scope of the state to the very limits of imagination. Stalinist Russia and Maoist China were the largest-scale disasters, but few state-socialist regimes avoided the horrors of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Part of the failure was due to the folly of trying to manage national-scale economies through central-state command, and part of it was the ill-conceived attempt to defeat the capitalist West in a race to industrialize. But perhaps an even more fatal flaw of such states was the brutality and terrorism of their totalitarian political regimes. Extraordinary movements in Hungary, Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, China, and Romania, just to name a few, demonstrated that people will not submit to a totalitarian state indefinitely. They will resist, resolutely and creatively, through both small everyday

acts and large public spectacles, when the state attempts to control virtually every aspect of their lives.

By 1989, the state-socialist model was largely exhausted. The Soviet Bloc began its rapid collapse and entered a “post-socialist” phase. Today, only China, Laos, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba remain as countries with state-socialist regimes.² To be clear, the “utter failure” of this model I mentioned is not at all the failure of communism, which was never achieved in almost any sense. It is rather the failure of state socialism: the central management of a national economy by an authoritarian state controlled by a single party nominally allied to the proletariat.

As we saw, during the era when state socialism was at its height, it faced a capitalist world in which the welfare-state model was dominant. But by the early 1970s, the welfare state’s dominance had begun to erode. Two main forces precipitated its decline. The first was a sustained ideological assault from the right carried out by neoliberal intellectuals. The second was the emergence of economic problems such as unemployment, inflation, and capital flight that began to intensify in and around 1973. The intellectuals’ ideological attacks began to emerge in the late 1940s, when thinkers associated with groups like the Mont Pelerin Society remobilized traditional arguments from liberal economics. Scholars like Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, and Karl Popper opposed state intervention in the economy, and they insisted that society is more efficient, wealthier, and more open when capitalist markets are allowed to operate as freely as possible (Popper, 1945; Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1994). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, they prosecuted a long war of ideas against Keynesianism and the welfare state and for a neoliberal alternative. Then, in the early 1970s, economic events provided neoliberals with an important opportunity: most economies in the developed world underwent simultaneous and acute stagnation and inflation. It was a clear opportunity to press the case that management by a Keynesian welfare state could not provide economic stability and prosperity. At about the same time, it was becoming increasingly feasible for corporations to relocate their operations, to flee the high wages and benefits won by labor in some parts of the industrialized world for areas with weaker labor organization and lower wages. Some of that flight remained within the industrialized economies, but some left for less industrialized places like Korea and Taiwan and then at different times China, Thailand, Brazil, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Mexico, among others. The flight of capital from Keynesian welfare states made

² Of course, there are real differences among these regimes. China’s economy is rapidly becoming integrated into the world capitalist market, while Cuba’s remains much more isolated. But they are all still ruled by an authoritarian state governed by a single communist or socialist party.

such states appear unable to compete effectively in a rapidly globalizing world economy.

The rise of politicians like Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s helped translate these intellectual and economic trends into concrete policy for the global North. Markets were deregulated, ownership and control of economic enterprise was privatized, and social services were aggressively cut. Such policy initiatives spread insistently, though at different rates, to governments in other wealthy economies, so by the mid-1980s neoliberalism was having great success in its struggle to supplant the Keynesian welfare state. This success was only intensified by the fall of most state-socialist regimes in the late 1980s. As the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites collapsed under the weight of their failed totalitarian model, the neoliberalizing West was quick to claim ideological and economic victory, narrating the changes as inevitable, a result of the inherent superiority of free markets and liberal democracy over their “communist” alternative. Francis Fukuyama’s thesis about the “end of history” was perhaps the most memorable example (Fukuyama, 1992).

The dominance of neoliberalism extended very much also to the question of economic development in the global South. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, a line of thinking known as the “Washington Consensus” came to dominate international economic policy, especially with respect to countries in the global South. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) helped produce a pervasive common sense regarding poorer countries, whereby the only possible path to development was austerity and “structural adjustment,” which would drastically reduce state spending and ownership of assets, lower trade barriers, encourage Foreign Direct Investment, and energetically integrate their economies into global commodity flows. The World Bank and IMF induced such policy changes by making them conditions of the loans they offered to developing countries. Throughout this period, more and more Southern countries were integrated into this system whereby the public/state sector was reduced and the economy reoriented toward the production of commodities for the global capitalist market. The fall of the Berlin Wall only accelerated this process, as countries could no longer rely on their position in the Cold War system of satellite or client states to secure resources. They were increasingly forced to participate effectively in the global market.

By the 1990s, neoliberalism had become so taken-for-granted that center-left leaders like Clinton and Blair were unable and/or unwilling to propose either a return to Keynesian welfarism or some other alternative. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that by the 1990s it had become very hard to imagine anything other than neoliberalism. It was only when the great recession of 2007 hit that the neoliberal consensus began

to weaken. The housing sector and its financial markets were widely seen as the leading cause of the crash, and those markets had been subject to the same active deregulation as other markets. It became no longer self-evident that the markets will regulate themselves, that public oversight by the state is superfluous. This new doubt was symbolized by the appearance of Alan Greenspan, a leading light of neoliberal thought, before Congress in October 2008. Greenspan was ashen and penitent. He testified that the crisis had exposed serious flaws in his economic worldview. The Washington Consensus had become open to debate again.

And so we currently occupy a state of uncertainty. The recession of 2007 clearly destabilized neoliberal common sense. But that destabilization was in no way total; much of neoliberalism remains common sense, if only because we have had so few alternatives for thirty years. Recent events only mean that a new battle has been joined over the content of political-economic common sense. There is today an opening, an opportunity, for non-neoliberal alternatives to assert themselves effectively.

One alternative that has already begun to emerge is a reinvigorated Keynesian welfarism. In many ways, President Obama's bailout package in response to the economic crisis in the United States was classically Keynesian, particularly the strategy of government spending as economic stimulus. The US government also took controlling stakes in very large firms crippled by the crisis, such as General Motors and Chrysler (Chang and Gilmore, 2011). The financial regulation bill passed in the United States in 2010 similarly reasserts (albeit weakly) the need for more national-government regulation of market activity. Another alternative is that neoliberalism will stagger on, wounded, but still stronger than any other idea. For example, when Obama took office in the midst of the crisis, one of his first appointments was Laurence Summers as director of the National Economic Council. Summers is an influential neoliberal economist who was Clinton's Treasury Secretary from 1999 to 2001. He was widely thought to have played an important role in deregulating the derivatives market, which helped cause the crash (e.g. Ames, 2008). Yet Obama, even as he explored Keynesian stimulus solutions, also seemed unable (or unwilling) to cast aside the voice of neoliberal orthodoxy, making Summers one of his closest economic advisors in the early days of his presidency.

Since the crash, neoliberals have cast around almost desperately for ways to end the persistent recession. One response, incredibly, has been to remobilize the austerity approach in the global North, which is to say they have tried to solve a crisis precipitated by neoliberal deregulation by pushing neoliberalization still further. Many states in Europe are faced with mounting national debt caused by insufficient tax revenue as

a result of the recession, ineffective tax collection systems, and relatively generous welfare spending. The “troika” of the European Union, the European Central Bank, and the IMF has recently been pressing countries such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Italy to undergo austerity measures, which typically involve cutting all sorts of welfare benefits, reducing the number of public employees, privatizing state-owned assets, and increasing taxes. Architects of austerity claim that reducing the national debt in this way will get economies “back on track” (e.g. Daley, 2011). Austerity for these countries is presented by the Troika and by the mainstream press as the only alternative to their default and the continental economic collapse that would surely follow. Such forced austerity packages have been the stock-in-trade of the Washington Consensus, and they have long been the prevailing wisdom of the World Bank and IMF in dealing with debt-ridden poor countries facing economic crisis. And in fact such austerity measures are not limited to relatively poorer countries. Wealthier governments like the United Kingdom, United States, and Israel are also carrying sovereign debt as a result of the recession and are currently involved in a pitched struggle over how to respond: what public spending to cut and how much, and whether to raise taxes and for whom.

Not surprisingly, coming as they do in the midst of economic recession and high unemployment, austerity measures face vigorous opposition from mobilized populations. Such opposition roiled Greece in 2011–2012, when massive demonstrations destabilized the Greek government to the point of political collapse. Similar uprisings took place in Spain, and there is some indication that something similar is developing in Italy. Even in the United States the Occupy Wall Street movement voiced significant resistance to the current political-economic structure. To some extent, this mobilization is an attempt to defend what remains of the welfare state. Crowds are demanding that the government retain state-sector jobs with good wages and benefits while preserving robust state transfers that support citizens in many different sectors of life. A similar desire can be seen in the anti-cuts movement in the United Kingdom and in the spring 2011 protests in Madison, Wisconsin. Unlike in Greece and Spain, in Wisconsin the attack on state employment and spending was not initiated by supranational monetary institutions but by relatively local political forces. Nevertheless, the mobilized response was similar: massive and strident public demonstrations and occupations to defend established welfare-state goods like public-sector jobs and government service programs. In sum, one important desire that is being expressed in the popular anti-austerity movements is to defend what remains of the welfare state against neoliberal attempts to dismantle it still further.

Each of these uprisings is complex, and the desire to defend the welfare state has been only one among many political demands. I do not want to say we should reject this demand. Defending the welfare state, or even trying to reinvigorate it, is a perfectly understandable way to respond to neoliberalism and austerity (Judt and Snyder, 2012). It is the alternative closest at hand, the non-neoliberal logic we have most recently experienced. Without doubt, a Keynesian welfare state is preferable to its neoliberal alternative. However, I want to argue that we can aim at more; that in terms of democracy, we can do far better than the welfare state. We can aspire to and achieve a much more democratic form of life than the welfare state has to offer.³ The full weight of this argument will become clear throughout the book as I develop my conception of what democracy means, but here let me sketch the outlines of the Keynesian welfare state's democratic deficit.

As we saw, Keynesianism imagines the state to be essentially the same thing as the public, in the sense that the state stands in for, and acts as though it were, the people. But in fact the state is not the people. Nietzsche's Zarathustra had it right: "State is the name of the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly it tells lies too; and this lie crawls from its mouth: 'I, the state, am the people'" (2005, p. 44). The state is only ever a very small subset of the people. Democracy means that the people rule themselves. Oligarchy is the term for a regime in which a small subset of the population rules the whole. Insofar as it imagines the state to be the sole, legitimate, and unchallenged representative of the people, the welfare state is much more an oligarchy than it is a democracy.⁴ In that way, Keynesianism differs little from state socialism: it accepts that in the everyday functioning of the polity a small cadre of rulers (state officials) will govern a large body of ruled subjects (everyone else). To be sure, Keynesian states have been more democratic than state-socialist ones. In state socialism, the state/public sector aspires to encompass all areas of life, while Keynesianism usually

³ And a desire for this democratic something-more is indeed one of the many desires being expressed in the movements against austerity.

⁴ As Aristotle showed, even if we can understand terms like oligarchy and democracy clearly in the abstract, in practice each polity displays some complex mixture of oligarchical, monarchical, and democratic qualities. Polities that we call oligarchies can be relatively more or less democratic depending on their particular institutions and procedures. But the presence of democratic qualities does not mean we cannot still describe a given polity meaningfully as an oligarchy. Therefore, one cannot take the sentence "polity x is an oligarchy" to mean x exhibits *only* oligarchical qualities, that no democratic qualities can be found there. Rather, the sentence must mean something more like "polity x is relatively more oligarchical than it is anything else." It is in that sense that I argue that liberal-democratic states, Keynesian welfare states, and socialist states are oligarchies. Some are more democratic than others, but all are systems in which, in their actual operation, a small subset rules over the many, i.e. an oligarchy.

operates within liberal-democratic governments where the state/public sector is formally limited.⁵ Further attenuating Keynesianism's oligarchy is the fact that citizens in liberal democracies have some say in selecting their governors through majority vote. To a limited extent, therefore, state agents are accountable to the people. While this accountability is typically quite weak, it is nevertheless stronger than in a state-socialist regime. Keynesian welfarism thus offers a relatively more democratic version of state socialism in which the state alone embodies the public and acts for the people, but its control is mitigated somewhat by liberal-democratic structures.

Of course, neoliberals have criticized Keynesian welfarism as well. A central tenet of their argument has always been that Keynesianism endangers the liberal qualities of liberal democracy because it advocates a larger state/public role in economic policy, working to enlarge the authority of the state to manage the behavior of people in the private sphere (and particularly the market economy). That is, neoliberals argue, a strong state-public sector restricts the liberty of citizens in the private sector, and such restriction is precisely what liberal democracy, ever since its original formulation in Locke, is designed to prevent. For Locke, tyranny is the greatest of all political dangers, and many neoliberals are quite sincere when they decry high taxes, state regulation of industry, and redistribution policies as tyrannical. Their argument is that a small cadre of state bureaucrats, rather than the free market, is deciding what to do with a significant portion of each citizen's material fortune. The old Republican Party adage that "you know what to do with your money better than the government does" is very much heir to this anti-tyranny legacy.

I do not mean to suggest that neoliberals are offering a more democratic alternative. Not at all. They propose a market of purportedly free individuals as a substitute for state control. Of course, capitalist markets are also highly oligarchical, dominated as they are by a few large corporations that heavily influence how goods are made and distributed.⁶ Moreover, it is hard to ignore the less idealistic motivations of neoliberalism. It is also a naked power play to free those large corporations from state interference so they can dominate economic markets and maximize their profit. But still, the kernel of the neoliberal objection to Keynesian welfarism is not wrong: state power, even in a liberal democracy, is

⁵ Most of what it means for a regime to be "totalitarian" is for it to work to establish a state/public sphere that is in fact total, that absorbs all areas of private/non-state life.

⁶ Such markets are technically closer to oligarchy as Plato and Aristotle understand the term. For them, oligarchy requires that one have *wealth* to rule (usually there was a property qualification to be a citizen), and so it results in a regime in which the wealthy few rule the many poor, a regime we usually call plutocracy today.

oligarchic by its very nature.⁷ A few state officials must necessarily make decisions for the many. Neoliberalism and the Keynesian welfare state thus offer a choice between one kind of oligarchy and another. We must look elsewhere for a properly democratic alternative.

The continual recurrence of constituent power

Throughout the current era, indeed throughout history, there has been another kind of power at work, a power very different from the one I have been examining. It is a popular power, a power that arises from below, from within the body of society. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their book *Empire* (2000), offer a useful conceptual framework for understanding this other kind of power. They argue that there is a conflict at the center of modernity. This conflict is “between, on the one hand, the immanent forces of desire and association, the love of community, and on the other, the strong hand of an overarching authority that imposes and enforces an order on the social field” (2000, p. 69). In the Modern age, they argue, the powers of creation that had previously been thought to reside in heaven, in a transcendental sphere, were brought down to earth. The source of all creation is no longer thought to be God, but rather the work of an organized human society. In other words, the power of creation is no longer transcendental, but immanent. This shift resulted in what Hardt and Negri call a crisis of authority: if it is no longer God in heaven that rules the world, if that power is now in the hands of human beings, how can we give form to this immanent authority so that order can be preserved? Hardt and Negri argue that the central project of modern political thought is to imagine this new earthly authority.

Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* was the opening salvo. In a world where authority was no longer transcendental, no longer vested in a king by divine right, Hobbes’ project was to construct an authority that derived from nothing other than people themselves, an authority those same people would accept as legitimate. He constructed this authority to be supremely powerful, such that “there is no power on earth that can compare to it.”⁸ He began from the premise that in the state of nature, which is to say in the human condition without a state, immanent power is all that exists. God

⁷ As I discuss in the chapters to come, the works of Henri Lefebvre (1976–1978; 2009) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) offer an extensive development of this argument.

⁸ This is the meaning of the Latin verse inscribed in the famous frontispiece to the book: “*Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei.*” Alternatively, one could also translate the sentence as “there is no power *above* the earth that can compare to it,” which is consistent with the Modern age’s shift away from transcendental power, but which in Hobbes’ day would have likely subjected him to the serious charge of blasphemy.

does not determine our fate; rather each person has the power to do as he or she pleases. Hobbes thought that in such a state there was nothing to prevent each person from using their own power to make war on everyone else, a situation he famously termed a war of all against all. Hobbes' solution was to invent an originary political contract. This contract had a very specific structure: each person contracts with each of the others individually, and they both agree to give their individual power over to an "artificial person," an entity created by the contract itself. This entity was his Leviathan, or the modern state, an earthly power that serves to overawe the multitude and keep order in society (1996, Chapter 16).

For Hardt and Negri, Hobbes' *Leviathan* initiates the central conflict of modernity, between the power of people to act as they choose, and the power of Leviathan to impose order on them. Hardt and Negri call the power of people to act "constituent power," whereas the power of Leviathan is "constituted power." According to this narrative, constituent power is primary; its origin is in the bodies and minds of all people, in "the multitude" as Hobbes called them. Constituted power is therefore derivative; it is siphoned off from constituent power and turned back onto people in order to control them. This idea of primacy is not Hardt and Negri's invention. It is rather a central tenet of all modern political thought starting with Hobbes: power originates in the bodies of the multitude, and constituted power (Leviathan) is merely an artificial creation, a human contrivance that serves the purpose of establishing societal order.⁹ In other words, constituent power is autonomous, it is self-producing. It does not need constituted power to exist. The mass of people, what Hardt and Negri also call "the multitude," can act, create, and produce life on their own. The constituted power of the state (or of capital), on the other hand, depends on constituent power for its very existence.

Constituent power goes by other names. Marx (1994) calls it our "vital powers"; for Spinoza (1996), it is our *conatus*; Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the term *puissance*; for Nietzsche (1989a) it is our will to power; and Aristotle (1998b) just thought of it as our nature (*physis*), our inner drive to grow into a full-fledged human being. Each retains the idea that this power is somehow our own, that it is different from a power outside ourselves. Thus, the various ideas about constituent power point to the tension between autonomy and heteronomy, between governing oneself and being governed by another.¹⁰ It is the struggle

⁹ Locke, Rousseau, Marx—this starting assumption is nearly universal. And in fact this line of argument predates modernity. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas (1989) argues that the system of human laws (in particular, laws about property and property rights) is not given by God for humans to obey; it is rather a set of practices invented by humans to organize their own power.

¹⁰ *Auto* = self; *Hetero* = other; *Nomos* = law.

between the multitude acting by itself and for itself and the multitude being ruled by an entity outside itself. It is, in short, the struggle between democracy and oligarchy. Hobbes' *Leviathan* is the quintessence of heteronomy. It is when the people give up their own authority to make laws and transfer it to an artificial entity outside of themselves. The modern state is thus founded on the principle of heteronomy, on the multitude being ruled by something beyond them, rather than on autonomy, on the multitude ruling themselves.

The fact that constituent power is the creative force of society, that it produces the world, means that constituent power is always present, always operating, always driving the process of change. We tend to think of this power as weak and fleeting, as fluttering at the margins of society, as reacting meekly to the *real* power, to the structures of constituted power like the Keynesian welfare state, or the capitalist market dominated by large corporations, or the totalitarian societies of state socialism. But if constituent power produces the world, if it is the real engine of history, it must also produce constituted power; it must itself create the structures that contain it. This way of thinking, one very much inspired in Hardt and Negri by Deleuze and Guattari (as we will see), repositions constituent power as original, permanent, and primary. Our habit of seeing it as weak is not so much *its* weakness, but ours. If we understand power in this way, then we need to recondition our way of seeing. We must more carefully attend to and learn to better perceive constituent power. Even if power most often manifests as constituted power, we must try to understand how and why constituent power gave rise to the particular structures of constituted power. Moreover, we must also be attentive to constituent power when it emerges and operates on its own terms, as the power of the multitude reclaiming their agency, resolving to act for themselves again.

The Arab Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Oman in 2010–2011 are perhaps some of the most spectacular manifestations of raw constituent power in recent memory. Although they are extremely important and worthy of close attention, they are only one in a very long line of such events. In 1871, working class residents all over Paris rose up and took control of the city; they governed it themselves for two months. In 1920 in Turin and Milan, in a wave of factory occupations in Northern Italian industrial towns, workers' councils took control of factories and ran them themselves, without bosses, for extended periods (Anonymous, 1921). In the 1940s, Indians rose up against British domination using a variety of tactics that included mass actions of non-violent refusal. In the 1950s and 1960s, people all over Africa struggled insistently for independence and an end to European colonial domination. In 1956 in Hungary, students, workers,

and ordinary people rebelled against a Stalinist bureaucracy and succeeded in controlling the country for several weeks until Soviet troops put down the uprising and reinstalled the former regime. In 1968, again in Paris, students and workers brought off enormous occupations and general strikes that destabilized the government to the point of collapse. Similar upwellings, in Tiananmen in 1989, Chiapas in 1994, Argentina in 2001, Bolivia in 2005, Iran in 2009, and in Portugal, Spain, Greece, the United Kingdom, Chile, Israel, the United States, and Russia in the summer and fall of 2011, teach us that constituent power continues to assert itself, to express its desire, and to shape the course of history. To be sure, a close analysis of each of these events would reveal a complex mixture of constituent and constituted power. The movement for democracy in China, for example, saw a continual struggle between leaders who tried to shape and direct the movement and the mass of participants who repeatedly refused to be ruled (Zhao 2004). All such events are marked by intricate ebbs and flows between constituent and constituted power, between autonomy and heteronomy. All I want to do here is to give a name to constituent power, to understand it as fundamentally different from constituted power, and to make clear that it has been a vibrant and important force in the politics of the current context.

Rapid urbanization

One particularly prominent feature of the political-economic shifts of the last forty years has been the rapid urbanization of the globe, a process driven almost entirely by urbanization in the global South (e.g. Davis, 2006; Roy and Ong, 2011). As cities in the global North deindustrialized, some manufacturing production has moved to other cities and towns in the North, but much of it moved to cities in the global South. Those cities began to attract migrants to the new factories, and rural-to-urban migration intensified. This process has been particularly strong in newly industrializing countries like China, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam, but it is common in other places as well. Often this urbanization develops fitfully, as firms like Nike contract to make products in a certain place for a time, but then move their operations elsewhere in search of cheaper labor. Thus, urbanization as a result of industrialization in the South has been very uneven, and it is often characterized by rapid boom-and-bust cycles.

But industrialization and pull factors are not the only, or even primary, force driving Southern urbanization. Also key have been push factors in the countryside. As the capitalist market has increasingly penetrated all parts of the globe, large sections of the rural areas of the South have been

industrialized, and production has shifted from food for local consumption to cash crops for global markets. This shift has been accompanied by changes in land tenure, as small holdings have been consolidated into large ones that are more able to carry out the mass production of cash crops necessary to compete in the global market. While this process of rural land consolidation and market integration is not new, having begun in most places during the colonial era, it has intensified in recent decades, especially in Africa and Asia, as the global market has become increasingly integrated.¹¹ As we saw, structural adjustment policies actively encouraged countries to integrate themselves into the global market and to encourage Foreign Direct Investment, and so those policies made rural restructuring even more acute. As a result, an increasing number of peasants and small holders have been displaced from their land. While not all have immediately migrated to cities, that has been the most common outcome. In countries with primate cities, like Nigeria, Thailand, or the Philippines, these migrants overwhelmingly flock to just one city, causing astronomical growth. Thus, places like Lagos, Nigeria, and Dhaka, Bangladesh, have taken over the mantle of “shock city” from Manchester and Chicago, whose rapid urbanization in the nineteenth century now seems stately by comparison.

In addition to industrialization, new international free trade agreements have also promoted the consolidation of rural land holdings. Free-trade agreements like NAFTA and ASEAN prohibit national governments from engaging in protectionism for their own agricultural products. As a result, in many places, local markets for agricultural products have been flooded with cheaper replacements from abroad, driving down prices and making it difficult for local small-holder growers to compete. When they are unable to sell their crops, they can go into debt and eventually lose their land. Periodic drought and infestation can of course make this situation worse. Again, the result is the creation of new migrants, many of whom float into cities.

Still another factor causing migration out of rural areas is conflict and civil war that creates large numbers of refugees in places like Sudan, Somalia, Congo, Sri Lanka, Palestine, and Lebanon. Some are resettled in camps, but many end up in cities like Khartoum, Mogadishu, and Kinshasa.

And so many, and sometimes the majority, of rural-to-urban migrants are not being drawn to cities so much by the economic opportunities they offer, but rather because diverse push factors mean they can no

¹¹ As always, such a general account hides much variation. Places with a history of growing cash crops, such as Ghana with cocoa, and places with valuable natural resources, like Nigeria, will be subjected much more intensely to this process.

longer make a living or live securely in the countryside. Thus, frequently there are more migrants to cities than the urban economy can employ. Moreover, because the process is usually so rapid, cities often cannot provide adequate housing, services, or infrastructure for the new migrants either. Thus, we see the well-known phenomenon of informal settlements or “slums” that characterize almost all rapidly growing cities in the global South. Though exact figures are difficult to know reliably, a majority of urban dwellers in the South will soon be slum dwellers, if that is not already the case (Davis, 2006). Informal settlements are of course places of great hardship, poverty, disease, crime, and unemployment, but they are also, in a way, places off the grid, places where people are able to experiment with possible alternatives. They are huge concentrations of people that in large part operate beyond the formal institutions of capital and the state. Houses are often built by people themselves rather than the building industry; services are provided by local arrangements rather than municipal authorities; goods are exchanged in markets not legally sanctioned by the state; public order is sometimes secured by local gangs rather than by the police. By no means should we think of informal settlements as models for future cities and societies. But if democracy means that people manage their affairs for themselves, and informal settlements are the places where people are increasingly living out their daily lives, then we must be keenly aware of efforts in these places to create something different, something other than Fukuyama’s end of history.

Shifting geopolitics

In addition to the broad political-economic trends discussed in the previous sections, the current context has also seen significant geopolitical shifts. Much of this history is well known. The period from World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall was dominated by the Cold War, a conflict between state socialism and liberal-democratic capitalism (in both its welfare-state and neoliberal forms). The “New World Order” ushered in by George H.W. Bush, in which the United States aspired to play the role of global hegemon in a shifting strategic alliance among powerful countries, lasted only about ten years. The attacks of September 11, 2001 began a new era in which the United States prosecuted a “war on terror,” which was in fact a guerrilla war against Islamic radicalism, waged in various places around the globe. Gone were the diplomacy and multilateralism of the New World Order, replaced by the US government’s willingness to act unilaterally in pursuit of its security interests as it understood them.

Two recent events promise to bring great changes to existing arrangements associated with the “war on terror.” The killing of Osama bin Laden and several of his aides by US Special Forces seemed to punctuate the declining geopolitical relevance of *al-Qa’ida*. It was an important symbolic event, in the sense that part of bin Laden’s mystique had always been that the United States couldn’t seem to capture him and bring him to justice. He seemed to have carried off the September 11 attacks with impunity. However, the strategic importance of the killing is less clear. *Al-Qa’ida* is a global and relatively decentered network, and so the operational importance of one leader, even the most important one, is relatively small. There are cells in many different places, such as *al-Qa’ida* in the Arabian Peninsula, and most think these cells operate relatively autonomously. Still another reason is that *al-Qa’ida* is by no means the only radical Islamist organization in the world, and those other organizations figure to operate very much as before.

I think it is important not to dwell on the killing of bin Laden. In fact, I think we should understand the Arab Uprising to have killed bin Laden long before the United States did. That is because a central tenet of bin Laden’s opposition to the United States was always its support for secular dictators in the Islamic world, such as Hosni Mubarak, King Saud, or Bashar al-Assad, who intimidated and humiliated their people. One of *al-Qa’ida*’s primary political goals was to depose those US-backed dictators and replace them with governments based on Islamic law. The Arab Uprising showed that, at least in Tunisia and Egypt, Muslims don’t need *al-Qa’ida* and bin Laden to liberate them from their dictators. They showed the world, and themselves, that they can do it on their own. Moreover, it was all too clear during the uprisings that the United States was in no rush to side with the people in the streets of Tunis and Cairo. It was even less willing to support those in Bahrain, where the Saudis hold greater sway and the uprising was quashed with their assistance. And the US response to the Syrian government shooting its own unarmed people has been inert. As a result, not only did the uprisings teach Arabs that they can depose their own dictators, but that they can do it without any kind of positive support from the United States and other Western governments. What need then for *al-Qa’ida*, which has spent ten years engaging in horrific acts that have done very little to change the everyday political and economic fortunes of people in the Arab and Muslim world? And *al-Qa’ida* looks especially impotent and cruel when compared to the peaceful, joyful, and entirely revolutionary achievements of people in Egypt and Tunisia, or to the great bravery of people in Syria, Bahrain, and Libya in opposing their murderous governments.

It is of course too soon to know precisely what kind of new geopolitical order will emerge from these events. Obviously, radical Islam will

continue to exist, and it will still play an important role in the politics of the region. For example, there is no doubt the Muslim Brotherhood will continue to be an important factor in Egypt. But it seems safe to predict that most people in the region will judge *al-Qa'ida's* violent attacks against civilians to be a means of struggle that is largely exhausted. A whole new option has been opened up: it is now perfectly reasonable for people to believe that they can achieve their political goals themselves. And this belief has spread so quickly through the Arab world, and then through Europe and on to North America as well, that there is no reason to believe it won't continue its momentum. The "war on terror" is waning, and it may well be giving way to a new geopolitical zeitgeist of continual democratic awakening.

Ecological collapse and environmental disasters

In addition to these political-economic and geopolitical factors, the question of the non-human world and our relation to it has become increasingly urgent in recent years. It has become clear that anthropogenic changes to the global climate are real, and they will significantly alter weather systems and climate zones, which will, at the least, require whole societies to undertake an extensive process of "adaptation." These changes also introduce the possibility of global environmental collapse if strong enough positive feedback processes (through which warming causes more warming) bring us to a point of no return (Kolbert, 2006; Foster, Clark and York, 2010; see also Urry, 2011). Climate change is a global process that necessitates global policy solutions, which require the formation of a global political community to discuss and develop those solutions. So far, only an international community exists, made up of nation-states concerned with their local—not global—interests, and that has been one factor preventing the creation of adequate responses to the problem. Also central of course has been the desire for continued economic growth, and this has highlighted the contradiction between the needs of capitalism and the ecological well-being of the planet. While these contradictions have long existed, the emergence of the specter of global ecological collapse has introduced a new urgency to the need to form a functional global community that can invent and implement a sustainable way of life for the entire human population.

In addition to this global problem, the current context has also witnessed what appear to be increasingly frequent and intense instances of more local environmental disasters. The two most recent large events were the near-total devastation of New Orleans in 2005 by hurricane and flood and the ravaging of parts of Japan in 2011 by earthquake,

tsunami, and radiation leaks. As with climate change, such disasters are at least as much a political and social event as they are natural. In New Orleans, the existence and path of Hurricane Katrina was determined by non-human forces (although most now think the number and intensity of hurricanes will be increased by global warming), but the social, ecological, and engineering systems it fell upon were largely anthropogenic. The erosion of the coastal wetlands buffer, the engineering and economics of levee construction, the ongoing sinking of the city due to the river's channelization, the uneven and inadequate response of government emergency management agencies, and an urban geography of poverty and racial segregation were all crucial to producing the disaster. The hurricane on its own would have done relatively little damage. The same kind of analysis can be made in the Japanese case.

Of course, the United States and Japan are two of the world's wealthier countries, and they are relatively well equipped to prepare for and respond to such events. Similar events in less wealthy places—such as Haiti in 2010—produce far more suffering. The stakes are incredibly high. Therefore, even though this book does not focus its attention on issues of environment and ecology, I want to acknowledge that they are an absolutely central feature of the contemporary context. Moreover, I think such issues are no less a question of politics than are more conventionally political-economic or geopolitical issues. As a result, the question of “What is to be done” applies just as much to global warming and Hurricane Katrina as it does to neoliberalism and the “war on terror.” For all these questions, I argue, democracy should figure prominently in any answer.

A Methodology of Thought and Practice: Transduction

Of course, saying democracy is the answer to the question raises some questions of its own. An obvious one is, “What is democracy?” I have already intimated that I understand democracy quite radically, as a way of living together in which people rule themselves. I will develop this radical understanding further in the chapters that follow. Another question, given that radical understanding of democracy, is “How can we achieve it?” This question is less troubling for a liberal democrat, since there are many examples of actually existing liberal democracies to point to. But radical democracy is rarer. Some would even say it is a utopian fantasy, a nice thought but impossible to achieve. And so I think some explanation is in order as to the particular political method by which we might defend democracy as an answer.

Drawing from the work of Henri Lefebvre (1996; 2003b), I want to proceed by a method he called transduction, by which he means a way to cut a path that leads beyond the actual world already realized and toward a possible world yet to come. Perhaps the best way to explain what that involves is to start with Italo Calvino and his novel, *Invisible Cities*. In the book, Kublai Khan sends Marco Polo on numerous expeditions to cities around the world. The book is taken up primarily with Marco's descriptions of those cities. At the end of the book, having listened to all of Marco's descriptions, Kublai Khan realizes that each city is marked by a serious flaw. He despairs of ever finding the perfect city, or even a good one. "It is all useless," he says, "if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us." But in his response, in the words that close the book, Marco offers us both hope and a specific way to approach change in the world. "The inferno of the living," he tells Kublai Khan,

is not something that will be. If there is one, it is that which is already here, the inferno that we inhabit every day, that we create by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for most: accept the inferno and become such a complete part of it that you no longer know it is there. The second is risky and requires vigilance and continuous attention: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, and help them endure, give them space (1993, my translation).

Another author, David Foster Wallace, in articulating his own project as a writer, lays out something very similar to Marco. He says

Look man, we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is?¹² In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it (McCaffrey, 2012, p. 26).

Both Marco and Wallace are saying that there is something already here, something good, breathing in the midst of human society. This good is

¹² Lewis Hyde makes a similar point about poetry and prose. The critical detachment of irony, he says, "has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage" (quoted in Wallace, 1997, p. 67).

not transcendent, or an ideal to come. It is immanent, incipient, coming. Marco Polo calls it that which is “not inferno.” For Wallace, it is those elements of “what’s human and magical” in the world, elements that illuminate the “possibilities for being alive.” Even though we are surrounded by the actual world of the inferno, we can seek out the not-inferno and help it to grow. In a similar way, Lefebvre’s transduction argues that this possible world is not “out there,” beyond our current situation, but rather it is already here, even if it remains inchoate.¹³ Our task as political thinkers and actors, Lefebvre argues, is to discover this good, this other world, to remove the barriers that prevent its growth, and to nurture it as best we can.

Lefebvre works out the concept of transduction most fully in *The Urban Revolution* (1970; 2003b), where he says it is a methodology for “research involving a virtual object, which attempts to define and realize that object as part of an ongoing project...[it] reflects an intellectual approach toward a possible object” (2003b, p. 5). To understand what he means by a “virtual object,” we have to begin by understanding his concepts of “the industrial city” and “urban society.” The industrial city for Lefebvre is not the historical industrial city of Fordist factory production. Rather, it is the many manifestations of the capitalist city in the industrial era. It is the Paris he inhabited in 1970, or the Seattle I inhabit today: a city in which private property and exchange value are the dominant ways to organize urban space. It is a city in which the dominant socio-spatial processes separate and segregate people from one another, and those separated parts are homogenized and made equivalent so they can be exchanged on the market (1991, p. 9; 2003b, p. 176). In the industrial city, urban inhabitants are rendered politically passive, and they function primarily as consumers rather than citizens. These inactive inhabitants are warehoused in sterilized urban spaces he calls “habitat.” The industrial city is a city reduced to the narrow function of ensuring economic growth through the production of standardized commodities. It is, in short, an oligarchy, a city managed by an elite few state and corporate administrators. Today we would call this the neoliberal city. Lefebvre’s contemporary, Guy Debord (1983), called it “the society of the spectacle.”

Lefebvre contrasts the industrial city to “urban society.” In urban society, urban space is not controlled by property rights and exchange value but by inhabitants who appropriate space, make it their own, and

¹³ It is worth mentioning that Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* was originally published in 1972, two years after Lefebvre published *The Urban Revolution*. I have not yet found hard evidence that Calvino was specifically influenced by Lefebvre, but it seems very likely.

use it to meet their needs. Urban society draws inhabitants into the center, into vital urban spaces where they encounter each other and engage in collective and meaningful negotiations about what kind of city they desire (1991, p. 149; 2003b, pp. 117–118). These encounters build a shared sense of common purpose and solidarity among inhabitants, but they also cause inhabitants to become aware of the substantive differences among them, and they are forced to confront and manage these differences together (2003b, p. 96). This effective engagement with one's fellows is what Lefebvre calls *l'inhabiter*,¹⁴ an active and fecund life-in-space he contrasts with the sterile space of habitat. The connections inhabitants make with each other nourish their creative potential and encourage them to create *œuvres*, which for Lefebvre are unique works owned by the producer rather than standardized commodities for sale on a market. In urban society, the purpose of the city is the development of human potential¹⁵ rather than capitalist accumulation. Urban society is, in short, a city in which urban inhabitants manage the space of the city for themselves.

It is important to understand that for Lefebvre these two concepts are of different kinds. The industrial city is what he calls “actual”: it is “a clearly defined, definitive object” that has in fact been realized. It is realized both as a concrete, built form and as a set of normalized social relations, habits of action, thought, and common sense. Urban society, on the other hand, has mostly not been realized. It is what he calls a “virtual or possible object” (2003b, p. 16). It is a horizon toward which we can move. It is a possible way of living together. For Lefebvre, a virtual object is *not* a utopia, a no-place, an ideal imagined out of the ether that can never exist. It is rather an extrapolation or amplification in thought of practices and ideas that are *already taking place* in the city, practices and ideas that are inchoate, that have not yet come to full maturity, but are nevertheless being expressed, if only hesitantly, fleetingly, or inarticulately (2003b, p. 17). This act of thought imagines these inchoate practices in their fully realized form, as a whole urban world beyond the industrial city (1996, p. 103). So, the virtual object is in no sense idle daydreaming that ignores the reality on the ground, but

¹⁴ The French literally means “the to inhabit.” The strange noun-infinitive construction is derived from Heidegger’s concept of dwelling (*das Wohnen*) (Lefebvre, 2003b, see translator’s note 2, p. 189). There is also quite a lot of resonance here with Lewis Mumford’s (1937) idea of “effective social intercourse.”

¹⁵ This concept of development is not precisely defined in the book. It can be read as the Aristotelian idea of the full development of each inhabitant’s natural human potential, or it can be read as a Marxist idea of humans flourishing in an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. I think the two interpretations have much more in common than we tend to think (see also Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 137–138).

rather it pays very close attention to that reality and tries to extend existing practices of urban society, to project them out into the future. Urban society as a virtual object therefore always has a direction; it always moves toward a horizon. But a horizon is never an endpoint, never a destination we can arrive at. Though we set out down a path toward a virtual object, it will always recede into the distance as we come near to it.¹⁶

For Lefebvre, virtual objects are not merely philosophical exercises. They are intended to be practical tools for political action. Once a virtual object has been extrapolated from actual practices, it becomes a powerful lens through which we can view the world. This lens helps us better perceive the elements of the virtual object that already exist (2003b, p. 23). In Lefebvre's terms, when we extrapolate urban society as a virtual object, it can help us see incipient elements of urban society that already exist in the body of the industrial city.¹⁷ These elements of urban society are difficult to see because they are emergent and ephemeral; they exist amid the overwhelming light and noise of the industrial city. We can be looking right at urban society,

but we see it with eyes, with concepts, that were shaped by the practices and theories of industrialization, with a fragmentary analytic tool that was designed during the industrial period and is therefore reductive of the emerging reality....It [is] simply that our eye has been shaped (misshaped) by the earlier landscape...(2003b, p. 29).

Urban society thus remains a “kernel and virtuality. What the eyes and analysis perceive on the ground can at best pass for the shadow of a future object in the light of the rising sun” (1996, p. 148).¹⁸ So, a virtual object is a kind of corrective lens for eyes misshapen by life in the industrial city. The industrial city teaches us to see urban space as property, inhabitants as consumers, and the city as a capitalist economic engine (2003b, p. 29). Constructing urban society as a virtual object is a way of retraining ourselves to see urban society. Lefebvre thus sees a

¹⁶ It is important to be clear that a horizon is not a limit. A limit is a fixed edge that we approach asymptotically, such that our movement toward it decreases as we get closer. A horizon always moves away from us as we move toward it, and so while it suggests a direction it does not ever restrict our movement toward it. My thanks to Susmita Rishi and James Thompson for helping me think this difference through.

¹⁷ In *The Production of Space* (1991, p. 52), he articulates this relationship more generally: “differential space” waits, inchoate, to emerge from the dominant “abstract space.”

¹⁸ Iranians have an expression that captures a similar idea. In the context of a polity in which periodic uprisings punctuate a regime of broad repression, they talk of the desire for democracy as an ember that continues to glow underneath the ashes of a fire that seems extinguished (Astor, 2011).

virtual object as a “conceptual instrument” that helps us seek and learn to recognize, in the midst of inferno, that which is not inferno (2003b, p. 68).

Of course, as we get better at seeing the incipient virtual in the midst of the actual, we begin to see it everywhere. The more we see it, the more experience we gain with it, the more material we have to extrapolate from, to build an even more robust virtual object in thought. Thus, a system of positive feedback can develop, a process of continual mutual strengthening between virtual urban society and its emerging manifestations in the industrial city. Lefebvre insists on the importance of such “incessant feedback” between the virtual object and actual practice (1996, p. 151). His goal is to construct a powerful enough tool with which we chart a course out of the present condition, through the myriad obstacles that the industrial city throws up, and move toward the horizon of urban society. He wants “to open a path to the possible, to explore and delineate a landscape that is not merely part of the ‘real,’ the accomplished, occupied by existing social, political, and economic forces” (2003b, p. 7).¹⁹ He sees this approach as an alternative to both abstract, impractical utopianism, on the one hand, and short-term, visionless pragmatism, on the other (2003b, p. 75). He wants to avoid what Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 190) call “the two extremes represented by the totalitarian myth of the Ideal City, and the positivist pragmatism of reformists without a project.” Lefebvre says that exploring virtual objects through transduction is a way to “step back from the real,” to refuse to accept what already is, but also to never lose sight of that real, to always begin from the activity people are already engaging in.

Transduction therefore offers a practicable approach to political action, a concrete plan for moving forward, even though it also demands significant and rigorous philosophical reflection.²⁰ Lefebvre intends for transduction to cut a path out of the industrial city and toward the virtual object of urban society (2003b, p. 76). As I pursue it, transduction is an attempt to cut a path out of oligarchy and toward the virtual object of democracy. As the following chapters will make clear, our society is dominated by a condition of *passive heteronomous oligarchy*, and the virtual object I develop is something we might call *active democratic autonomy*. My project parallels Lefebvre’s closely; for him,

¹⁹ Murray Bookchin (2002) articulates a similar idea when he argues that a demand that appears reformist, e.g. for public rather than private ownership of railroads, can open “*pathways*, politically, to revolutionary forms of ownership and operation.”

²⁰ For a similar approach to political praxis, inspired instead by the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, see Merrifield (2011, pp. 139–144).

urban society is characterized by active citizens who commit to managing themselves and their space autonomously, which is quite similar to democracy as I understand it.

And so the larger theoretical and practical project that the book proposes is to extrapolate, extend, cultivate, and nourish the democracy that currently exists in the midst of our oligarchic society. This democracy exists in both thought and action, and there is a rich tradition in both. My focus will be mostly on the former, on the intellectual tradition of democracy, rather than on concrete practices for democracy. I don't think this distinction should concern us overly. The theoretical texts that I focus on are themselves deeply shaped by political action and are in constant conversation with it. Gramsci's thought grew out of a life of communist activism in Italy after World War I. Rancière's work tries to make sense of politics in the wake of the promise and failures of the 1968 uprising. Such theoretical writing is always deeply bound up with action. Moreover, action is always inspired and informed by theory. So while this book extrapolates democracy from theoretical texts, matters of everyday life and concrete political struggle are not at all absent from the discussion. They are always present in the body of such theory, even as the theory is always present in the body of action. Moreover, everyday practices and political action will very much play a role in my analysis, especially the democratic uprisings that swept across the Middle East, Europe, and North America in 2011.

Extrapolating democracy as a virtual object requires much effort because we live in a world that equates democracy with a liberal-democratic state, which is a form of oligarchy that sets severe limits on democracy and insists that anything beyond those limits is impossible.²¹ We need to become better at seeing democracy through the haze, to develop the tools to cut a path beyond the present oligarchy and toward the horizon of a possible democracy. My focus in the book will be mostly on this task of extrapolating democracy as a virtual object, on building a new lens. But I will also indicate some ways we might *use* that lens to seek and recognize democracy as it exists, and to help it flourish.

Let me end this section with one last quality of transduction. In the long quotes at the beginning of this section, both Calvino and Wallace imply a very particular way to see political practice, one that I think transduction shares. Calvino enjoins us, once we have found those that

²¹ Consider, for example, the multiple commentators, including Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, who talked about "a transition to democracy" as the next step to be taken after the Arab Uprising, equating democracy with a stable liberal-democratic state and devaluing the uprising as something that is not-yet democracy (see also, e.g. Stepan, 2011).

are not inferno, to “help them endure, give them space.”²² The not-inferno already exists; we need only allow it to flourish. Wallace casts the artist as an emergency medical technician, as one who applies CPR to an injured, but nevertheless alive, human potential. For Wallace, the artist does not *create* life; he only discovers it and helps it survive. Similarly, transduction cannot cause democracy to come into existence. Democracy already lives in the body of our current society. It produces itself. It possesses what Spinoza (1996) calls a *conatus*, the drive to continue living, to grow, to flourish. The project of transduction is merely to give democracy space, to shelter it from threat, to provide it with the nourishment it needs to flourish. There are of course very important implications to this approach to politics. Vanguards, leaderships, parties, organizers, activists, planners, experts: none of these are the agents of politics. None of these make democracy happen. Instead, the agents of democracy are everyone and anyone at all. Anyone at all can choose, is already choosing, to take up the project of governing him- or herself. Anyone at all is qualified to rule (a particular emphasis of Rancière, e.g. 2001). Calvino, Wallace, and Lefebvre are not talking to activists or organizers or party leaders or any subset of the population. They are talking to everyone. Transduction is a project that we all take up together.

Plan of the Book

Given that methodological agenda, the rest of the book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 examines the work of several radical political theorists. They are from different places and different generations and shaped by different political experiences, but I argue that we can understand them all to be aiming at a project of democracy. Moreover, their ideas about what democracy is are far more similar than they are different. Chapter 3 then addresses the question of the end of politics. It is tempting to see democracy as an end point beyond politics, in which people govern themselves in harmony. Instead, the chapter argues for a democracy that is thoroughly political, democracy as a perpetual movement

²² I should note here that I have translated Calvino differently than does William Weaver in the standard edition of the book (Calvino, 1974, p. 209). The Italian is “*farlo durare, e dargli spazio*.” Weaver renders this as “*make them endure, give them space*.” The verb *fare* in Italian, like *faire* in French, has a wide range of meanings. It certainly could mean “make” as Weaver has it. I have rendered it as “help,” which is taking a bit of liberty with the Italian, since “help” is not a standard translation for *fare*. But what I’m trying to capture here is closer to “*make it so that they can endure*,” which is more elegantly phrased as “*help them endure*.” I am trying to get as close as possible in English to the meaning most consistent with what I think Marco is trying to say. I hope that I have not done too much disservice to either language, or to Calvino.

toward the horizon of democracy, as a perpetual struggle by people and communities to become autonomous, active, and democratic. Chapter 4 confronts perhaps the most pressing political question associated with this view of democracy: How can people become active, aware, awake, alive, and how can they take control again of the conditions of their own existence? It is a Herculean task, but it is one everyone can achieve. Chapter 5 then takes up another critical problem: not only must each person become active, but they must do so together with others. The chapter explores the nature of the *connections* among people who have taken up the democratic project of ruling themselves. It also considers how those connections might proliferate to the point where they can create a tipping point, a flood, a generalized explosion of autonomous and democratic practices. This tipping point, this “breakthrough” as Deleuze and Guattari call it, would cast us into a world where democracy pervades the social field, even if it never becomes total. In the conclusion, Chapter 6, I consider some implications for political practice that this understanding of democracy has in the contemporary context. The chapter indicates some ways democracy as a virtual object can serve as a powerful practical tool that helps us seek and learn to recognize democracy, to help it endure, and to give it space.