TWO

Populations and Political Society

I

The classic moment when the promises of enlightened modernity appeared to come together with the universal political aspirations of citizenship within the nation was, of course, the French Revolution. The moment has been celebrated and canonized in numerous ways in the last two hundred years, perhaps most succinctly in the formula, now almost universally acknowledged, of the identity of the people with the nation and, in turn, the identity of the nation with the state. There is no question that the legitimacy of the modern state is now clearly and firmly grounded in a concept of popular sovereignty. This is, of course, the basis of modern democratic politics, but the idea of popular sovereignty has an influence that is more universal than that of democracy. Even the most undemocratic of modern regimes must claim its legitimacy not from divine right or dynastic succession or the right of conquest but from the will of the people, however expressed. Autocrats, military dictatorships, one-party regimes—all rule, or so they must say, on behalf of the people.

The power of the idea of popular sovereignty and its influence on democratic and national movements in Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century is well known. But the influence extended far wider than what is now known as the modern West. The consequences of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 have been much discussed.[1] Further east, the prince Tipu Sultan, ruler of Mysore, then locked in a ferocious struggle with the English in southern India, opened negotiations with the revolutionary government in France in 1797, of-

fering a treaty of alliance and friendship "founded on Republican principles of sincerity and good faith, to the end that you and your nation and myself and my people may become one family." It is said that the prince was thrilled when he received a reply in which he was addressed as "*Citoyen* Sultan Tipu."[2]

It is, of course, more than likely that Tipu's republican sympathies went no deeper than his invocation, in his letter to "the gentlemen of the Directory," of the tactical principle "that your enemies may be mine and those of my people; and that my enemies may be considered as yours." But no such reservations apply to the sentiments held by the new generation of modernist reformers in nineteenth-century India. At school in Calcutta, we read of the historic voyage to England in 1830 of Rammohun Roy, hailed as the father of Indian modernity. When his boat stopped at Marseilles, we were told, Rammohun was so eager to salute the tricolor, restored to its rightful place by the July monarchy, that in hurrying down the gangway, he fell and broke his leg. I discovered later from more reliable biographies that his injury had occurred earlier, in Cape Town, but the infirmity could not dampen his enthusiasm for liberty, equality, and fraternity. A fellow passenger, I found out, wrote as follows: "Two French frigates, under the revolutionary flag, the glorious tri-colour, were lying in Table Bay; and lame as he was, he would insist on visiting them. The sight of these colours seemed to kindle the flame of his enthusiasm, and to render him insensible to pain." Rammohun was taken around the vessels and he told his hosts "how much he was delighted to be under the banner that waved over their decks—an evidence of the glorious triumph of right over might; and as he left the vessels he repeated emphatically 'Glory, glory, glory to France!' "[3]

On the other side of the globe, in the Caribbean, however, other colonial people had in the meantime found out that there were limits to the promise of universal citizenship, and they suffered more than just a broken leg. The leaders of the Haitian revolution took seriously the message of liberty and equality they heard from Paris and rose up to declare the end of slavery. To their dismay, they were told by the revolutionary government in France that the rights of man and citizen did not extend to Negroes, even though they had declared themselves

free, because they were not, or not yet, citizens.[4] The great Mirabeau asked the National Assembly to remind the colonists that "in proportioning the number of deputies to the population of France, we have taken into consideration neither the number of our horses nor that of our mules."[5] In the end, after the Haitian revolutionaries declared their independence from colonial rule, the French sent an expeditionary force in 1802 to Saint-Domingue to reestablish colonial control as well as slavery. The historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has said that the Haitian revolution occurred before its time. The entire spectrum of Western discourse in the age of Enlightenment had no place for black slaves claiming self-government by taking up arms: the idea was simply unthinkable.[6]

Thus, while creole nationalisms succeeded in proclaiming independent republics in Spanish America in the early nineteenth century, this was denied to the black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue. The world would have to wait for a century and a half before the rights of man and citizen would be allowed to extend that far. By then, however, with the success of democratic and national struggles all over the world, the constraints of class, rank, gender, race, caste, etc. would be gradually lifted from the idea of popular sovereignty, and universal citizenship would be recognized, as it now is, in the general right of self-determination of nations. Along with the modern state, the concept of the people and a discourse of rights have now become generalized within the idea of the nation. But a gulf has also been produced between the advanced democratic nations of the West and the rest of the world.

The modern form of the nation is both universal and particular. The universal dimension is represented, first, by the idea of the people as the original locus of sovereignty in the modern state, and second, by the idea of all humans as bearers of rights. If this was universally true, how was it to be realized? By enshrining the specific rights of *citizens* in a state constituted by a particular people, namely, a *nation.* Thus, the nation-state became the particular, and normal, form of the modern state. The basic framework of rights in the modern state was defined by the twin ideas of freedom and equality. But freedom and equality frequently pulled in opposite directions. The two, there-

fore, had to be mediated, as Étienne Balibar has usefully pointed out, by two further concepts: those of property and community.[7] *Property* sought to resolve the contradictions between freedom and equality at the level of the individual in relation to other individuals. *Community* was where the contradictions were sought to be resolved at the level of the whole fraternity. Along the dimension of property, the particular resolutions might be more or less liberal; along the dimension of community, they might be more or less communitarian. But it was within the specific form of the sovereign and homogeneous nation-state that the universal ideals of modern citizenship were expected to be realized.

Using theoretical shorthand, we could say that property and community defined the conceptual parameters within which the political discourse of capital, proclaiming liberty and equality, could flourish. The ideas of freedom and equality that gave shape to the universal rights of the citizen were crucial not only for the fight against absolutist political regimes but also for undermining pre-capitalist practices that restricted individual mobility and choice to traditional confines defined by birth and status. But they were also crucial, as the young Karl Marx noted, in separating the abstract domain of Right from the actual domain of life in civil society.[8] In legal-political theory, the rights of the citizen were unrestricted by race, religion, ethnicity, or class (by the early twentieth century, the same rights would also be made available to women), but this did not mean the abolition of actual distinctions between men (and women) in civil society. Rather, the universalism of the theory of rights both presupposed and enabled a new ordering of power relations in society based precisely on those distinctions of class, race, religion, gender, etc. At the same time, the emancipatory promise held out by the idea of universal equal rights also acted as a constant source of theoretical critique of actual civil society. That promise has, in the last two centuries, propelled numerous struggles all over the world to change unequal and unjust social differences of race, religion, caste, class, or gender.

Marxists have, in general, believed that the sway of capital over traditional community was the inevitable sign of historical progress. True, there is a deep sense of ambiguity in this judgment. If community was the social form of the unity of labor with the means of labor, then the destruction of that unity caused by the so-called primitive accumulation of capital produced a new laborer who was free not just to sell his labor as a commodity but free from all encumbrances of property except his labor-power. Marx wrote with bitter irony about this "double freedom" of the wage-laborer freed from the ties of pre-capitalist community.[9] But in 1853, he wrote of British rule in India as accomplishing a necessary social revolution: "whatever may have been the crimes of England," he wrote, "she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution in India."[10] Late in his life, we know, he became far more skeptical of the revolutionary effects of colonial rule in agrarian societies like India and even speculated on the possibility of the Russian peasant community moving directly to a socialist form of collective life without going through the destructive phase of a capitalist transition.[11] Despite the lingering skepticism and irony, however, Marxists of the twentieth century generally welcomed the undermining of pre-capitalist property and the creation of large homogeneous political units such as nation-states. Where capital was seen to be performing the historical task of transition to more developed and modern forms of social production, it received the considered, albeit grudging and ambivalent, approval of Marxist historical theory.

When talking of equality, freedom, property and community in relation to the modern state, we are indeed talking of the political history of capital. The recent debate in Anglo-American political philosophy between liberals and communitarians seems to me to have confirmed the crucial role in this political history of the two mediating concepts of property and community in determining the range of institutional possibilities within the field constituted by freedom and equality. The communitarians could not reject the value of personal freedom, for if they overemphasized the claims of communal identity, they were open to the charge of denying the basic individual right to choose, possess, use and exchange commodities at will. On the other hand, liberals too did not deny that identifying with the community might be an important source of moral meaning for individual lives. Their concern was that by undermining the liberal sys-

tem of rights and the liberal policy of neutrality on questions of the common good, communitarians were opening the door to majoritarian intolerance, the perpetuation of conservative practices, and a potentially tyrannical insistence on conformism. Few denied the empirical fact that most individuals, even in industrially advanced liberal democracies, led their lives within an inherited network of social attachments that could be described as community. But there was a strong feeling that not all communities were worthy of approval in modern political life. In particular, attachments that seemed to emphasize the inherited, the primordial, the parochial, or the traditional were regarded by most theorists as smacking of conservative and intolerant practices and hence as inimical to the values of modern citizenship. The political community that seemed to find the largest measure of approval was the modern nation that grants equality and freedom to all citizens irrespective of biological or cultural difference.[12]

This zone of legitimate political discourse, defined by the parameters of property and community, is emphasized even further by the new philosophical doctrine that calls itself republicanism and that claims to supersede the liberal-communitarian debate. Following upon the historical researches of John Pocock, this doctrine has been advanced most eloquently by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit.[13] Instead of the usual liberal understanding of freedom as negative liberty, i.e. the individual's freedom from interference, the aim of republicanism is to invoke the moment of anti-absolutism and claim that freedom is freedom from domination. This goal would urge the lover of freedom to fight, unlike what liberals would advocate, against all forms of domination, even when they are benign and do not normally involve interference. It would also allow the lover of freedom to support forms of interference that do not amount to domination. Thus, the republican would be in favor of governmental measures to ensure greater equality or to pursue the moral values of community as long as they do not imply an arbitrary power of domination. In this way, the theorists of republicanism argue, both the unattractiveness of a narrowly limited regime of liberal noninterference and the

dangers of rampant communitarian populism can be avoided. The structures of property would not be threatened, while community in its sanitized and palatable forms could flourish.

I do not here wish to enter into the question of whether the republican claim actually leads to conclusions that are substantively different from those of the liberal theory of government. Instead, I would like to turn our attention to the institutional presuppositions that the doctrine of republicanism shares with that of liberalism. Whether individualist or communitarian or republican, all agree that their desired political institutions cannot be made to work effectively merely by legislating them into existence. They must, as Philip Pettit puts it rather cutely, "win a place in the habits of people's hearts."[14] They must, in other words, be nested in a network of norms in civil society that prevail independently of the state and that are consistent with its laws. Only such a civil society would provide, to use an old phraseology, the social base for capitalist democracy.

This was the grand theme of virtually all sociological theory in Europe in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, when the problem was posed of the possibility of capitalist transition in the non-Western world, the same presupposition provided the foundation for modernization theory, whether in its Marxian or Weberian version. The argument, to put it simply, was that without a transformation of the institutions and practices of civil society, whether carried out from the top or from below, it was impossible to create or sustain freedom and equality in the political domain. To have modern and free political communities, one must first have people who were citizens, not subjects. While no one would use any more the stark similes of eighteenth-century liberals, it was understood that horses and mules would not be able to represent themselves in government. For many, this understanding provided the ethical core of a project of modernization of the non-Western world: to transform erstwhile subjects, unfamiliar with the possibilities of equality and freedom, into modern citizens. In the previous chapter I described the dreams and frustrations of one such modernizer, B. R. Ambedkar.

II

However, while philosophical discussions on the rights of citizens in the modern state hovered around the concepts of liberty and community, the emergence of mass democracies in the advanced industrial countries of the West in the twentieth century produced an entirely new distinction—one between citizens and populations. Citizens inhabit the domain of theory, populations the domain of policy. Unlike the concept of citizen, the concept of population is wholly descriptive and empirical; it does not carry a normative burden. Populations are identifiable, classifiable, and describable by empirical or behavioral criteria and are amenable to statistical techniques such as censuses and sample surveys. Unlike the concept of citizen, which carries the ethical connotation of participation in the sovereignty of the state, the concept of population makes available to government functionaries a set of rationally manipulable instruments for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as the targets of their "policies"—economic policy, administrative policy, law, and even political mobilization. Indeed, as Michel Foucault has pointed out, a major characteristic of the contemporary regime of power is a certain "governmentalization of the state."[15] This regime secures legitimacy not by the participation of citizens in matters of state but by claiming to provide for the well-being of the population. Its mode of reasoning is not deliberative openness but rather an instrumental notion of costs and benefits. Its apparatus is not the republican assembly but an elaborate network of surveillance through which information is collected on every aspect of the life of the population that is to be looked after.

It is not surprising that in the course of the twentieth century, ideas of participatory citizenship that were so much a part of the Enlightenment notion of politics have fast retreated before the triumphant advance of governmental technologies that have promised to deliver more well-being to more people at less cost. Indeed, one might say that the actual political history of capital has long spilled over the normative confines of liberal political theory to go out and conquer the world through its governmental technologies. Much of the emotional charge of the communitarian or republican critique of

contemporary Western political life seems to flow from an awareness that the business of government has been emptied of all serious engagement with politics. This is shown most obviously in the steady fall in electoral participation in all Western democracies and even in the recent panic in left-liberal circles in Europe at the unexpected electoral success of right-wing populists.

How did the enumeration and classification of population groups for the purposes of welfare administration have this effect on the process of democratic politics in advanced capitalist countries? Many writers working in vastly diverse fields have thrown light on this question in recent years, from the philosopher Ian Hacking to the literary historian Mary Poovey.[16] Most relevant for us is the account given by British sociologists such as Nikolas Rose, Peter Miller, or Thomas Osborne of the actual working of governmentality in Britain and the United States.[17] They have surveyed the emergence of what has been called "government from the social point of view," typically in the areas of work, education, and health, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was, for instance, the rise of social insurance systems to minimize the uncertain impact of the economy on various groups and individuals. There was the constitution of the family itself, the subject of numerous pedagogical, medical, economic, and ethical discourses, as a site of governmentality. There was a proliferation of censuses and demographic surveys, making the work of governmentality accountable in terms of numbers, and leading in turn to the idea of representation by numerical proportions. The management of migration, crime, war and disease made personal identity itself an issue of security and therefore subject to record and constant verification. (The issue has suddenly loomed large in the United States and Britain in the wake of the recent panic over terrorism, and yet both countries have had for decades a plethora of agencies, both state and non-state, recording, verifying and validating the biological, social, and cultural details of personal identity.) All of this made governance less a matter of politics and more of administrative policy, a business for experts rather than for political representatives. Moreover, while the political fraternity of citizens had to be constantly affirmed as one and indivisible, there was no one entity of the governed. There was

always a multiplicity of population groups that were the objects of governmentality—multiple targets with multiple characteristics, requiring multiple techniques of administration.

In short, the classical idea of popular sovereignty, expressed in the legal-political facts of equal citizenship, produced the homogeneous construct of the nation, whereas the activities of governmentality required multiple, cross-cutting and shifting classifications of the population as the targets of multiple policies, producing a necessarily heterogeneous construct of the social. Here, then, we have the antinomy between the lofty political imaginary of popular sovereignty and the mundane administrative reality of governmentality: it is the antinomy between the homogeneous national and the heterogeneous social. I might note in passing that when T. H. Marshall made his classic summation in 1949 of the story of the expansion of citizenship from civic to political to social rights, he was guilty of what we can now see was a category confusion. Applauding the progress of the welfare state in Britain, Marshall thought he was seeing the onward march of popular sovereignty and equal citizenship. In fact, it was an unprecedented proliferation of governmentality leading to the emergence of an intricately heterogeneous social.[18]

But in the chronological plotting of his story, Marshall was not wrong. The story of citizenship in the modern West moves from the institution of civic rights in civil society to political rights in the fully developed nation-state. Only then does one enter the relatively recent phase where "government from the social point of view" seems to take over. In countries of Asia and Africa, however, the chronological sequence is quite different. There the career of the modern state has been foreshortened. Technologies of governmentality often predate the nation-state, especially where there has been a relatively long experience of European colonial rule. In South Asia, for instance, the classification, description and enumeration of population groups as the objects of policy relating to land settlement, revenue, recruitment to the army, crime prevention, public health, management of famines and droughts, regulation of religious places, public morality, education, and a host of other governmental functions has a history of at

least a century and a half before the independent nation-states of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon were born. The colonial state was what Nicholas Dirks has called an "ethnographic state."[19] Populations there had the status of subjects, not citizens. Obviously, colonial rule did not recognize popular sovereignty.

That was a concept that fired the imaginations of nationalist revolutionaries. Ideas of republican citizenship often accompanied the politics of national liberation. But without exception—and this is crucial for our story about politics in most of the world—they were overtaken by the developmental state which promised to end poverty and backwardness by adopting appropriate policies of economic growth and social reform. With varying degrees of success, and in some cases with disastrous failure, the postcolonial states deployed the latest governmental technologies to promote the well-being of their populations, often prompted and aided by international and nongovernmental organizations. In adopting these technical strategies of modernization and development, older ethnographic concepts often entered the field of knowledge about populations—as convenient descriptive categories for classifying groups of people into suitable targets for administrative, legal, economic, or electoral policy. In many cases, classificatory criteria used by colonial governmental regimes continued into the postcolonial era, shaping the forms of both political demands and developmental policy. Thus, caste and religion in India, ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, and tribes in Africa remained the dominant criteria for identifying communities among the populations as objects of policy. So much so that a huge ethnographic survey, recently undertaken by a governmental agency in India and published in 43 volumes, has actually claimed to have identified and described a total of exactly 4,635 communities that are supposed to constitute the population of India.[20]

We have therefore described two sets of conceptual connections. One is the line connecting civil society to the nation-state founded on popular sovereignty and granting equal rights to citizens. The other is the line connecting populations to governmental agencies pursuing multiple policies of security and welfare. The first line points

to a domain of politics described in great detail in democratic political theory in the last two centuries. Does the second line point to a different domain of politics? I believe it does. To distinguish it from the classic associational forms of civil society, I am calling it *political society.*

In a series of recent papers, I have attempted to sketch out this conceptual field in the context of democratic politics in India.[21] I have favored retaining the old idea of civil society as bourgeois society, in the sense used by Hegel and Marx, and of using it in the Indian context as an actually existing arena of institutions and practices inhabited by a relatively small section of the people whose social locations can be identified with a fair degree of clarity. In terms of the *formal* structure of the state as given by the constitution and the laws, all of society is civil society; everyone is a citizen with equal rights and therefore to be regarded as a member of civil society. The political process is one where the organs of the state interact with members of civil society in their individual capacities or as members of associations.

This is, however, not how things work. Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state. But it is not as though they are outside the reach of the state or even excluded from the domain of politics. As populations within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, they have to be both looked after and controlled by various governmental agencies. These activities bring these populations into a certain *political* relationship with the state. But this relationship does not always conform to what is envisaged in the constitutional depiction of the relation between the state and members of civil society. Yet these are without doubt political relations that may have acquired, in specific historically defined contexts, a widely recognized systematic character, and perhaps even certain conventionally recognized ethical norms, even if subject to varying degrees of contestation. How are we to begin to understand these processes?

Faced with similar problems, some analysts have favored expanding the idea of civil society to include virtually all existing social institutions that lie outside the strict domain of the state.[22] This practice has become rampant in the recent rhetoric of international financial institutions, aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations among whom the spread of a neoliberal ideology has authorized the consecration of every non-state organization as the precious flower of the associative endeavors of free members of civil society. I have preferred to resist these unscrupulously charitable theoretical gestures, principally because I feel it important not to lose sight of the vital and continually active project that still informs many of the state institutions in countries like India to transform traditional social authorities and practices into the modular forms of bourgeois civil society. Civil society as an *ideal* continues to energize an interventionist political project, but as an *actually existing form* it is demographically limited. Both of these facts must be borne in mind when considering the relation between modernity and democracy in countries such as India.

Some of you may recall a framework used in the early phase of the Subaltern Studies project in which we talked about a split in the domain of politics between an organized elite domain and an unorganized subaltern domain.[23] The idea of the split, of course, was intended to mark a fault line in the arena of nationalist politics in the three decades before independence during which the Indian masses, especially the peasantry, were drawn into organized political movements and yet remained distanced from the evolving forms of the postcolonial state. To say that there was a split in the domain of politics was to reject the notion, common to both liberal and Marxist historiographies, that the peasantry lived in some "pre-political" stage of collective action. It was to say that peasants in their collective actions were also being political, except that they were political in a way different from that of the elite. Since those early experiences of the imbrication of elite and subaltern politics in the context of the anticolonial movements, the democratic process in India has come a long way in bringing under its influence the lives of the subaltern classes. It is to understand these relatively recent forms of the entanglement

of elite and subaltern politics that I am proposing the notion of a *political society.*

In illustrating what I mean by political society and how it works, I will describe in the next chapter several cases studied in recent field work where we can see a politics emerging out of the developmental policies of government aimed at specific population groups. Many of these groups, organized into associations, transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work. They may live in illegal squatter settlements, make illegal use of water or electricity, travel without tickets in public transport. In dealing with them, the authorities cannot treat them on the same footing as other civic associations following more legitimate social pursuits. Yet state agencies and nongovernmental organizations cannot ignore them either, since they are among thousands of similar associations representing groups of population whose very livelihood or habitation involve violation of the law. These agencies therefore deal with these associations not as bodies of citizens but as convenient instruments for the administration of welfare to marginal and underprivileged population groups.

These groups on their part accept that their activities are often illegal and contrary to good civic behavior, but they make a claim to a habitation and a livelihood as a matter of right. They profess a readiness to move out if they are given suitable alternative sites for resettlement, for instance. The state agencies recognize that these population groups do have some claim on the welfare programs of the government, but those claims could not be regarded as justiciable rights since the state did not have the means to deliver those benefits to the entire population of the country. To treat those claims as rights would only invite further violation of public property and civic laws.

What happens then is a negotiation of these claims on a political terrain where, on the one hand, governmental agencies have a public obligation to look after the poor and the underprivileged and, on the other, particular population groups receive attention from those agencies according to calculations of political expediency. Groups in political society have to pick their way through this uncertain terrain by making a large array of connections outside the group—with other groups in similar situations, with more privileged and influential

groups, with government functionaries, perhaps with political parties and leaders. They often make instrumental use of the fact that they can vote in elections, so that it is true to say that the field of citizenship, at certain points, overlaps with that of governmentality. But the instrumental use of the vote is possible only within a field of strategic politics. This is the stuff of democratic politics as it takes place on the ground in India. It involves what appears to be a constantly shifting compromise between the normative values of modernity and the moral assertion of popular demands.

Civil society then, restricted to a small section of culturally equipped citizens, represents in countries like India the high ground of modernity. So does the constitutional model of the state. But in actual practice, governmental agencies must descend from that high ground to the terrain of political society in order to renew their legitimacy as providers of well-being and there to confront whatever is the current configuration of politically mobilized demands. In the process, one is liable to hear complaints from the protagonists of civil society and the constitutional state that modernity is facing an unexpected rival in the form of democracy.

I now turn to the very different, and often contradictory, political significance of civil society and political society. Let me do this by giving you one more story from the domain of popular politics in the Indian city.[24]

III

On May 5, 1993, in the early hours of dawn, a man died in a Calcutta hospital. He had been admitted a few days before and was being treated for diabetes, renal failure and cerebro-vascular accident. His condition had deteriorated rapidly in the previous twenty-four hours and, although the doctors attending him struggled through the night, their efforts were in vain. A senior doctor of the hospital signed the death certificate.

The name of the man who died was Birendra Chakrabarti, but he was better known as Balak Brahmachari, leader of the Santan Dal, a religious sect with a large following in the southern and central districts of West Bengal. The sect itself is no more than fifty years old,

although it probably has its antecedents in earlier sectarian movements among the lower-caste, especially Namasudra, peasants of central Bengal. Its religious doctrines are highly eclectic, consisting entirely of the views of Balak Brahmachari himself as expressed in his sayings, but they are characterized in particular by a curious involvement in political matters. The sect's mouthpiece *Kara Chabuk* [The Strong Whip] regularly published its leader's comments on current political subjects in which there was the recurrent theme of "revolution," a cataclysmic churning that would surgically cleanse a corrupt and putrid social order. The sect, in fact, first came into the public spotlight in the period 1967–1971 when it participated in political demonstrations in support of the Left parties and against Congress rule. The Santan Dal activists, with many women in their ranks, some in saffron clothes, holding aloft their tridents and shouting their slogan "Ram Narayan Ram," were an incongruous element in Leftist demonstrations in Calcutta at the time, and could not but attract attention. But no one accused the sect of opportunistic political ambitions, because it made no claims to electoral representation or recognition as a political party. Since then, many of the followers of the sect have been known to be sympathizers and even activists of the Left, especially of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), leading partner in the Left Front which has ruled West Bengal continuously since 1977.

On this particular morning in May 1993, the followers of Balak Brahmachari refused to accept that their spiritual leader was dead. They recalled that several years ago, in 1967, he had gone into *samadhi* for twenty-two days during which, from all outward appearances, he was dead. But he had woken up from his trance and returned to normal life. Now once more, they said, their Baba had gone into *nirvikalpa samadhi*, a state of suspension of bodily functions that could be achieved only by those with the highest spiritual powers. The members of Santal Dal took the body of Balak Brahmachari from hospital to their ashram in Sukhchar, a northern suburb of Calcutta, and began to keep what they said would be a long vigil.

Soon the matter became a *cause célèbre* in Calcutta. The press picked it up, publishing reports of how the body was being kept on slabs of ice under heavy airconditioning. One Bengali daily, *Ajkal*,

pursued the story with particular vigor, turning it into a fight for rational values in public life and against obscurantist beliefs and practices. It accused the local authorities and the health department of the West Bengal government of failing to implement their own rules regarding the disposal of dead bodies and of conniving in the making of a serious public hazard. Soon the authorities were forced to respond. On the thirteenth day of the vigil, the Panihati municipality made clear that it had served the Santal Dal leaders with a notice asking them to cremate the body immediately, but that under the municipal laws it had no powers to carry out a forcible cremation.[25] On behalf of the Santal Dal, Chitta Sikdar, the secretary, kept up a regular defensive campaign in the press, maintaining that the spiritual phenomenon of *nirvikalpa samadhi* was beyond the understanding of medical science and that Balak Brahmachari would soon resume his normal bodily life.

The standoff continued. *Ajkal* raised the tempo of its campaign, opening its columns to prominent intellectuals and public figures who deplored the persistence of such superstitious and unscientific beliefs among the people. Groups of activists from progressive cultural organizations, the popular science movement and the rationalist society began to hold demonstrations in front of the Santan Dal headquarters in Sukhchar. *Ajkal* spared no efforts to provoke the spokesmen of the Dal and to ridicule their statements, refusing to refer to the dead leader by his sectarian name of Balak Brahmachari and instead calling him "Balak Babu"—a nonsensical "Mr. Balak." There were some heated confrontations at the gate of the Santan Dal ashram, with the Dal activists reportedly stocking arms and preparing for a showdown. One night, some crackers and handmade bombs exploded outside the ashram and a group of Dal activists came out and shouted over their loudspeakers: "The revolution has begun."[26]

Nearly a month after the official death of Balak Brahmachari, his body still lay on ice slabs in an airconditioned room with his followers waiting for him to break his *samadhi*. *Ajkal* claimed that there was an unbearable stench in the entire neighborhood of Sukhchar and that the residents of the area had had enough. Now it began to be openly alleged that the government was reluctant to intervene because

of politics. The elections to the local government bodies in rural West Bengal, the crucial panchayats which had become the backbone of Left Front support, were scheduled for the last week of May. Any action against the Dal could antagonize a lot of Left Front supporters in at least four districts of West Bengal. It was also suggested that some important leaders of the CPI(M) were sympathetic to the Santan Dal and that one minister in particular, Subhas Chakrabarti, minister in charge of tourism and sports, was regarded by Dal members as a fraternal supporter.

On June 25, 1993, fifty-one days after the official death of Balak Brahmachari, the health minister of West Bengal announced that a medical team consisting of leading specialists in medicine, neurology and forensic medicine would examine the body of Balak Brahmachari and submit a report to the government. The Indian Medical Association, the apex professional body of medical practitioners, immediately protested saying that to call for a new examination implied a lack of confidence in the death certificate issued from the hospital. It pointed out that no scientific grounds had been furnished to question the original judgment of the hospital doctors. The government doctors went ahead nevertheless and returned from Sukhchar to say that they had not been allowed to touch the body. They reported that the body had been putrefied and carried signs of mummification and that it had not decayed completely because of the extremely low temperature at which it had been kept.[27]

By this time, Subhas Chakrabarti had been given charge by the CPI(M) leadership to devise a solution to the impasse. Accompanied by the local CPI(M) leaders, he visited the Sukhchar ashram and later told journalists that he was trying to persuade the followers of the Baba to cremate the body. He agreed that there was no scientific reason for doctors to reexamine a body that had been certified as dead, but insisted that this was a necessary part of the process of persuasion. He pointed out that "Babadom" was still prevalent in the country and that thousands of people were followers of these religious leaders. He warned that it was dangerous to take religious fanaticism lightly. It was the government's view, he said, that applying force could

provoke fanaticism. When asked if he was aware of the health hazard that had been created in the neighborhood of Sukhchar, he claimed that he had smelt nothing, but that was probably because he was a habitual inhaler of snuff.[28]

On June 30, in a four-hour operation beginning at two in the morning, a force consisting of 5,000 policemen stormed the Santan Dal headquarters, took charge of the body, and removed it to a nearby crematorium. *The Telegraph* reported that the last rites were performed by the guru's brother "as the security cordon pushed back wailing women who still believed their departed cult leader would be resurrected. The state government, severely criticised for soft-pedalling the issue, heaved a sigh of relief." The police force, which was attacked by Dal activists with acid bulbs, knives, tridents, glass bottles, and chilli powder, used tear gas shells to immobilize the defenders and blowtorches to make its way through window grilles and collapsible gates into the heavily fortified headquarters. But it did not resort to shooting. Many Dal activists as well as policemen were hurt, but, as the official press release put it, "there were no casualties."[29]

The minister Subhas Chakrabarti congratulated the police and the local administration for carrying out a very difficult and sensitive operation. He referred to the popular Hindi film *Jugnu* and said the job was more difficult than what the actor Dharmendra had faced in that film. "Of course," he said to journalists, "you think all that is lumpen culture, but I think it is an apt example." The following day, *Ajkal* in its editorial announced: "We have come to the end of that age in West Bengal when lumpen culture could be called lumpen culture. Progressive West Bengal has seen the end of the age of reason. Now begins the age of *Jugnu*."[30]

Despite the relatively smooth and successful conclusion of the matter, the controversy did not die down. Chitta Sikdar, the secretary of the Santan Dal, protested to the chief minister against what he described as an authoritarian and undemocratic action of the government. He said the treatment received by Balak Brahmachari at the hands of the rulers of society would be remembered in history in the same way as the trials of Jesus Christ, Galileo, and Socrates. On

the other hand, opinions such as that of *Ajkal* condemned as opportunistic the attempt by sections of the government and the ruling party to target the second-rank leaders of the sect for misleading their innocent followers and profiting from their overexcited religious sentiments but not criticizing the sects and the so-called godmen themselves for spreading unreason and superstition. Twelve days after the cremation of Balak Brahmachari, the secretary of the Santan Dal and eighty-two others were arrested and charged with rioting, assault, obstruction of justice, and other offenses.[31]

Members of the Santan Dal continued for several months to write letters to newspapers portraying themselves as victims of an undemocratic and illegal police action. They asked what laws of the land the Baba's followers had broken by believing that he would come back to them. Did a religious belief in extraordinary spiritual powers deserve blows from the policeman's truncheon? And was it not the case that the Dal followers were finally subjected to police action because most of them were low-caste peasants whose marginal political value had evaporated after the local government elections were over? While public memory might be short, one letter warned, the memory of victimhood was merciless. The perpetrators of injustice would one day meet their day of judgment.[32]

The case illustrates, I think, several of the points I have raised so far about the relation between civil society and democracy in a country like India. A modern civil society, consistent with the ideas of freedom and equality, is a project that is located in the historical desires of certain elite sections of Indians. The specific story of the emergence and flowering of those desires and their sources in colonial projects has been much discussed. When the country was under colonial rule, these elites believed the crucial transformative processes that would change the traditional beliefs and practices of the people and fashion a new modern national self must be kept out of the reach of the colonial state apparatus. With the end of colonial rule and the coming to power of these classes in the postcolonial state, that transformative project became firmly located in the dynamic potential of the organs of the new national state. That those organs were now part of a constitutional system of representative democracy made the

modernizing project an expression of the will of the people and thus gloriously consistent with the legitimizing norms of modernity itself.

Although many of the sites and activities characteristic of the arena I have called political society can be shown to have emerged within the spectrum of nationalist political mobilizations in the colonial period, I would say that it has taken on something like a distinct form only since the 1980s. Two conditions have facilitated this process. One is the rise to dominance of a notion of governmental performance that emphasizes the welfare and protection of populations—the "pastoral" functions of government, as Michel Foucault called it—using similar governmental technologies all over the world but largely independent of considerations of active participation by citizens in the sovereignty of the state. This has enabled the mutual recognition by state agencies and population groups that governments are obliged to deliver certain benefits even to people who are not proper members of civil society or of the republican body of true citizens. If the nation-state cannot do this job, it must be done by nongovernmental—if necessary, international—agencies The second condition is the widening of the arena of political mobilization, prompted by electoral considerations and often only for electoral ends, from formally organized structures such as political parties with well-ordered internal constitutions and coherent doctrines and programs to loose and often transient mobilizations, building on communication structures that would not be ordinarily recognized as political (for instance, religious assemblies or cultural festivals, or more curiously, even associations of cinema fans, as in some of the southern Indian states).

The proliferation of activities in this arena of political society has caused much discomfort and apprehension in progressive elite circles in recent years. The comment about "lumpen culture" in the *Ajkal* editorial I cited earlier is typical. The complaint is widespread in middle-class circles today that politics has been taken over by mobs and criminals. The result is the abandonment—or so the complaint goes—of the mission of the modernizing state to change a backward society. Instead, what we see is the importation of the disorderly, corrupt, and irrational practices of unreformed popular culture into the very hallways and chambers of civic life, all because of the cal-

culations of electoral expediency. The noble pursuit of modernity appears to have been seriously compromised because of the compulsions of parliamentary democracy.

Given a history in India of more than a hundred years of modern representative institutions, we can now see a pattern of evolution of this familiar Tocquevillian problem.[33] Early Indian liberals like Dadabhai Naoroji or Gopal Krishna Gokhale or even Mohammad Ali Jinnah in the early phase of his political life were entirely convinced of the inherent value of those institutions, but they were also hugely circumspect about the conditions in which those institutions could function. As good nineteenth-century liberals, they would have been the first to specify requirements such as education and a proved commitment to civic life that would have to be met before a people could be considered fit, in their language, "to receive parliamentary institutions." If we look at it from another angle, we might say that for men like Naoroji or Gokhale, democracy was a good form of government only when it could be adequately controlled by men of status and wisdom. With the rise of the so-called Extremists in nationalist politics, especially with the Khilafat and Noncooperation movements, there came into organized political life in India many forces and many ideas that did not care too much about the niceties of parliamentary politics. It was Gandhi, of course, who in this period, intervened decisively in the political arena created by the new representative institutions of the late colonial order. Even as he claimed to reject parliamentary institutions along with all of the other trappings of modern civilization, he was more instrumental than anyone else in bringing about the mobilization that would in the end make the Indian National Congress the ruling political organization of independent India. As has been shown in many studies, Gandhi's words and actions are shot through by the parallel themes of unleashing popular initiative and controlling it at the same time.[34] With the formalization of Congress rule in the first decade and a half after independence, control became the dominant motif in the close interweaving of state initiative and electoral approval in the so-called Congress system of the Nehru period.

The journey from the Nehru period to the crisis of the mid-1960s to the reestablishment of Congress dominance in the state populism

of the first Indira Gandhi regime is a trajectory that is not unfamiliar to the historical experience of many third-world countries. What was distinctive in the life of Indian democracy is, I think, the defeat of Indira Gandhi's emergency regime in a parliamentary election. It brought about a decisive shift in all subsequent discussion about the essence and appearance of democracy, its form and content, its inner nature and outward appearance. Whatever may be the judgment of historians on the "real" causes of the collapse of the emergency regime, the 1977 elections established in the arena of popular mobilizations in India the capacity of the vote and of representative bodies of government to give voice to popular demands of a kind that had never before been allowed to disturb the order and tranquility of the proverbial corridors of power. One cannot but wonder if this is not the momentous experience that separates the popular understanding of democracy in India from that in neighboring Pakistan where it has been possible in recent times for both elites and subalterns to say in unison that electoral democracy is a fake and that the path to true democracy may have to pass through a spell of military dictatorship.

But lest we in India be too quick to congratulate ourselves, let me restate my argument. The contrary themes of popular legitimacy and elite control—the perennial problem of democratic theory itself as represented by the two mediating concepts of community and property—were embedded in the conception of Indian democracy from the very beginning. They have not gone away, nor have they been resolved or superseded. They have only taken new forms as a result of the ongoing struggles between elite and popular conceptions of democracy. They are being played out once again in the recent debates over democratic modernization in India. On the one hand, the uncertain demands of popular ratification have led committed modernizers to throw up their hands and lament that the age of reason had been brought to an end by the political surrender to the forces of disorder and irrationality. They read the many compromises with electoral compulsions as signs of the abandonment of enlightened politics. Generally less noticed are the transformative effects of these contrary mobilizations among the supposedly unenlightened sections of the population. Since this is an area that is only beginning to be

studied, I can only make certain preliminary observations on it, and will do so in the next chapter. But this constitutes, I believe, the most profound and significant set of social changes that are being produced by the democratic process in countries like India today.

I should also note that one response to these social changes has already evolved among the governing classes in India. I see this as a variant of the colonial strategy of indirect rule. This involves a suspension of the modernization project, walling in the protected zones of bourgeois civil society and dispensing the governmental functions of law and order and welfare through the "natural leaders" of the governed populations. The strategy, in other words, seeks to preserve the civic virtues of bourgeois life from the potential excesses of electoral democracy.

The other response is less cynical, even as it is more pragmatic. It does not abandon the project of enlightenment, but attempts to steer it through the thicket of contestations in what I have called political society. It takes seriously the functions of direction and leadership of a vanguard, but accepts that the legal arm of the state in a country like India cannot reach into a vast range of social practices that continue to be regulated by other beliefs and administered by other authorities. But it also knows that those dark zones are being penetrated by the welfare functions of modern governmental practices, producing those effects on claims and representation that I have called the urge for democratization. This is the zone in which the project of democratic modernity has to operate—slowly, painfully, unsurely.

In bringing up the example of the negotiations over the disposal of a dead body in Calcutta, I was not trying to provide a narrative of the correct handling of contradictions among the people. Nor was I describing a case of successful governance. Nor am I saying that the specific form in which a local crisis of modernity-versus-democracy was resolved on that occasion flowed out of a conscious political project of social transformation in which the ruling parties in West Bengal are engaged. Rather, my intention was to point out the possibilities that exist in that normatively nebulous zone that I have called political society. When I use that term, I am always reminded that in

the *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci begins by equating political society with the state, but soon slides into a whole range of social and cultural interventions that must take place well beyond the domain of the state. It is clear that in pushing the project of turning subaltern subjects into national citizens, the modernizers have encountered resistances that are facilitated by the activities of political society. But I have tried to emphasize that even in resisting the modernizing project that is imposed on them, the subaltern classes also embark on a path of internal transformation. In the next chapter I provide some examples of this incipient process of change. At the same time, in carrying out their pedagogical mission in political society, the educators—enlightened people like us—might also succeed in educating themselves. That, I submit, would be the most enriching and historically significant result of the encounter between modernity and democracy in most of the world.

11. Cited in Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1994), p. 146.

12. Cited in Omvedt, *Dalits*, pp. 168–9.

13. For accounts of the Poona Pact and the relevant citations, see Ravinder Kumar, "Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Poona Pact, 1932" in Jim Masselos, ed., *Struggling and Ruling: The Indian National Congress, 1885–1985* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1987); Omvedt, *Dalits*, pp. 161–189.

14. Bhabha, "DissemiNation."

15. *Dhorai*, pp. 222–3.

16. B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (2nd ed., Bombay: Thacker, 1945).

17. Except by such exemplars of politically sanctioned ignorance and prejudice as Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts Which Have Been Erased* (New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1997).

18. *Pakistan*, p. vii.

19. *Pakistan*, pp. 55–87.

20. *Pakistan*, p. 105.

21. *Pakistan*, pp. 352–58.

22. Anderson, *Spectre*, p. 44.

23. For the story of the legal provision of opportunities for the depressed castes in independent India, see Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

24. For a recent discussion on Ambedkar's conversion, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 211–39.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

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2. Kabir Kausar, *Secret Correspondence of Tipu Sultan* (New Delhi: Light and Life, 1980), pp. 165, 219.

3. James Sutherland, quoted in Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabhat Chandra Ganguli (1900; reprint, Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1962), p. 308.

4. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

5. Cited in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 79.

6. Trouillot, pp. 70–107.

7. Étienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

8. Especially in Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (1843) in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), pp. 146–74.

9. Chapters on "The So-called Primitive Accumulation" in Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, tr. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), pp. 667–724.

10. Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 12, pp. 125–33.

11. Correspondence with Vera Zasulich, in Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and 'the Peripheries of Capitalism'* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Karl Marx, *The Ethnological Notebooks*, ed. by Lawrence Krader (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974).

12. Two convenient collections that give a fair sampling of these arguments are Michael Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and Its Critics* (New York: New York University Press, 1984) and Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

13. See especially Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

14. Pettit, *Republicanism*, p. 241.

15. See, in particular, Michel Foucault, "Governmentality" in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87–104.

16. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and *A History of the Modern Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

17. See in particular Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Peter

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21. Partha Chatterjee, "Two Poets and Death: On Civil and Political Society in the Non-Christian World," in Tim Mitchell and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); "Beyond the Nation? Or Within?" *Social Text*, Autumn 1998; "Community in the East," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 1998; "The Wages of Freedom" in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *The Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-state* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

22. For arguments of this kind, see Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

23. See in particular Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," *Subaltern Studies I* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 1–8.

24. I am grateful to Ashok Dasgupta and Debashis Bhattacharya of *Ajkal* for their generous help in researching the story of Balak Brahmachari's death.

25. *Ajkal*, May 18, 1993.

26. *Ajkal*, June 21, 1993.

27. *Ajkal*, June 26, 1993.

28. *Ajkal*, June 26, 1993.

29. *The Telegraph*, July 1, 1993; *The Statesman*, July 1, 1993.

30. *Ajkal*, July 2, 1993.

31. *Ajkal*, July 13, 1993.

32. *Dainik Pratibedan*, February 5, 1994.

33. Sudipta Kaviraj has explicitly formulated this as a Tocquevillian problem in "The Culture of Representative Democracy" in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *The Wages of Freedom*, pp. 147–75.

34. The writings of the *Subaltern Studies* group of historians have explored these themes most elaborately. See in particular, Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. Asok Sen, "Life and Labour in a Squatters' Colony," Occasional Paper 138, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, October 1992.

2. The actual names of settlers have been changed in this account.

3. Survey conducted by SAVERA, an NGO for social welfare that runs a non-formal school, health center and vocation training center in the rail colony. I am grateful to Saugata Roy for guiding me to this survey and to the recent situation in the settlement.

4. Asok Sen, "The Bindery Workers of Daftaripara: 1. Forms and Fragments," Occasional Paper 127, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, April 1991.

5. Asok Sen, "The Bindery Workers of Daftaripara: 2. Their Own Life-stories," Occasional Paper 128, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, June 1991.

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8. I am grateful to Akeel Bilgrami for suggesting this point.

9. See, in particular, Michael M. Cernea, *The Economics of Involuntary Resettlement: Questions and Challenges* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1999).

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11. For a sampling of discussions in India on the question of resettlement, see Jean Drèze and Veena Das, compilers, Papers on Displacement and Resettlement, presented at workshop at the Delhi School of Economics, *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 15, 1996), pp. 1453–1540.

12. Partha Chatterjee, "Recent Strategies of Resettlement and Rehabilitation in West Bengal," paper presented at the workshop on Social Development in West Bengal, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, June 2000.

13. The Rajarhat acquisition case has been recently discussed in detail by Sanjay Mitra, one of the officials handling the project, in "Planned Urbanisation through Public Participation: Case of the New Town, Kolkata," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 11 (March 16, 2002): 1048–54